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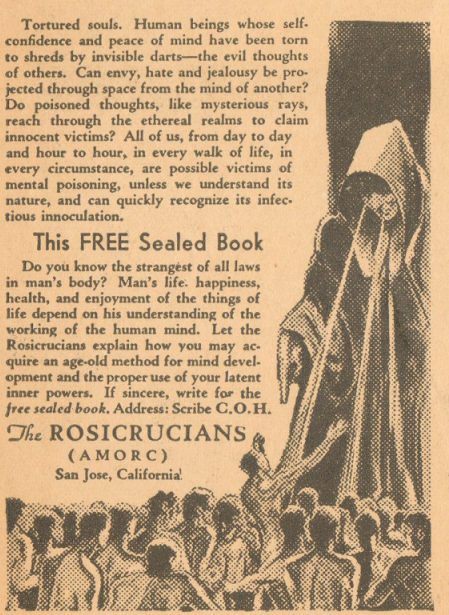

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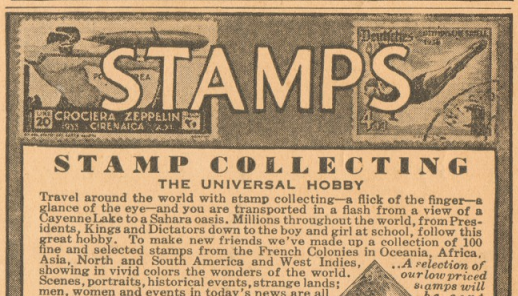

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ARGOSY

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Illustrating Tin Money

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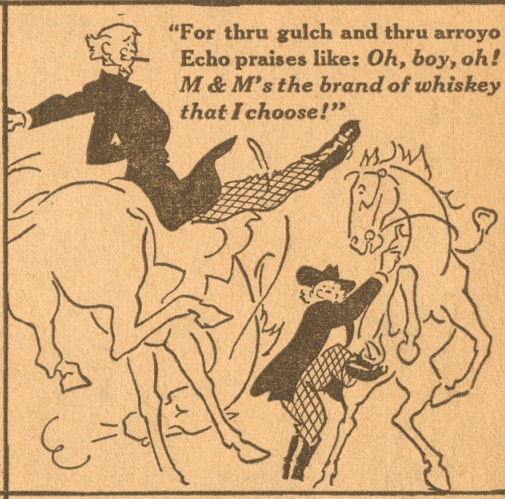

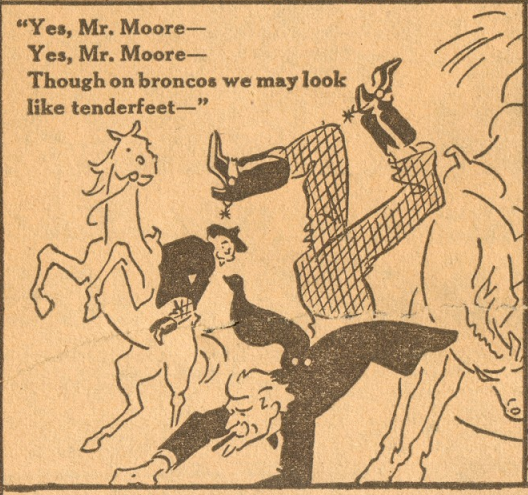

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Tin Money

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Break-up," "No-Shirt McGee's Medicine Show," etc.

In the white wastes of Alaska No-Shirt McGee followed a dead man's footprints to discover a million-dollar fortune—and a neatly executed double-cross. Beginning a new novel

CHAPTER I

RAINBOW'S END

THE temperature is way below zero, the wind is howlin' over the tundra and I'm so cold I'm almost forgettin' that I'm supposed to be huntin' for Rainbow Gleason. Us McGees have several codes and one of 'em is: Fair Lady In Distress Shall Never Appeal To A McGee In Vain.

And I stick by that.

When I was a kid in Dawson a lady in distress asks me to take her to her dyin' mother, who is froze in on a steamer down the Yukon. When the Mounted Police catches up with us, it turns out she's a soiled dove who has just slit her boy friend's throat because he'd stepped out with another wench. I'm found not guilty of aidin' a criminal to escape, but the judge gives me ninety days on the police woodpile for bein' dumb. That's the winter I learned to cut wood.

With this, and other experiences in mind you'd have thought I'd said no when May Gleason comes to me and says she's sure her father is in trouble and will I find him. But she tells me she's the oldest of eleven children. I'm suspicious until I remember Rainbow Gleason spent his winters in Seattle and that he was always sendin' out birthday presents in the late summer and early fall, so the eleven children business sounds reasonable. It develops they're right down to bedrock. The fambly has borrowed money to send May to Nome and commence the search.

I leave it to you, what can I do with a pretty girl in distress and the fambly code ringin' in my ears? You re right—I tell her I'll find her old man if I can. All I've got to do is find him in a hundred and twenty thousand square miles of country.

No trick at all . . .

Two months of hard mushin' are behind me, and I ain't found him. I've talked to plenty of Eskimo reindeer herders, white trappers and miners about Gleason, and I've got a general idea of his location, but I ain't found any of his old camps yet. My dogs are humpin' up with the cold and actin' sullen because they want to get away from the wind that's trying to blow us off'n a saw-tooth ridge. And I know if we get out of the wind we'll be down in a gulch where the snow has blowed until it must be twenty feet deep in spots.

We're makin' about a half mile an hour when the lead dog suddenly stops, turns his nose into the wind and sniffs. That's enough for me. Chances are the dog's scented a reindeer or caribou. Or even an Eskimo. Even a man can scent them at times, so I take a sniff and smell nothin'. Still, the pups may've caught another dog team's scent. I stop, crouch behind the sled to get away from the cuttin' wind, and wait.

My lead dog is plenty tired, but he stands there with his ears pricked, his legs straight and tense and now and again lettin' out low growls. A half hour passes and I have to get up and beat arms against my body to keep warm.

SUDDENLY the wind lets up and the snow which has been blowin' around settles. Overhead it is sullen and gray, but snow ain't fallin' from the clouds—it's just blowin' over the frozen tundra.

I sight along my leader's nose and don't see anything for a minute or two, then I catch sight of a man and dog. They're hardly more'n ghosts. They've been dusted with snow until they look kinda gray. The dog's got a pack on his back, and the man is hangin' onto a chain. Now and again he stumbles, but he never lets go of the chain.

"All in," I mutter. Then I take a long look through my binoculars. He's got his free arm kinda out in front of him, like a man does when he's enterin' a strange place in the dark. "He's snow blind!" I exclaim. "And his fool dog is takin' him straight for that gulch."

The gulch between us is five hundred feet across an' it is almost straight down two hundred feet to the bottom. A dog can descend to the bottom without trouble, but a man will have to pick his way with care or he'll fall. I cup my hands and yell, "Stop! I'll come over! Don't move another step!"

He staggers along behind his dog which is runnin' along the edge now, lookin' down. The wind is against me and he's got a parka hood over his ears besides. He can't hear a word. I unlash my rifle, aim it over his head and fire twice. He half stops and I'm expectin' him to throw his parka hood back to listen, but he don't. The dog's found a spot that suits him and is about to start going down. I aim at a point below, and just ahead of the dog, and fire. A geyser of snow leaps up, the dog turns and jumps down about two feet.

The man can tell by the angle of the chain the dog's below him. He tries to check hisself, but it's too late. The snow gives way under his heels and down he goes. He drops about ten feet, claws at the snow, then pitches head first down the slope. He goes twenty feet through the air without hitting, then he strikes and the snow flies. After that he rolls and when he

hits the bottom only his feet are showin'.

I leg it down my side of the gulch, plow through hip-deep snow and finely reach the spot. I tramp down the snow and pull him out carefully. When I'm down he's flat on his back and fairly comfortable.

His mouth's open and he's gaspin' for air. I can tell by his teeth that he's got the scurvy and is in bad shape. His beard is heavy, black and shot with gray. I push his parka hood back and get a better look. It's Rainbow Gleason. I've found my man.

His dog comes up, snarlin'. It figgers I'm responsible for its master's condition, I suppose. I have to pop it a couple of times with my dog whip—which I don't like to do—and it retreats snarlin'.

After a while Gleason speaks. "Who is it? What happened?"

"You fell into the gulch," I says. "I'm No-Shirt McGee. Your daughter sent me out to hunt for you."

"After your experience with that strawberry blonde in Dawson," he says, "I'm surprised you'd do a favor for any girl."

"She was alone in Nome, a stranger, worried sick over you and frightened," I explain. "Naturally I told her I'd do my best. . . . The first thing is to find out where you're hurt."

"That's the trouble," he says thickly, "I don't hurt. There's no feeling from the waist down. I'm paralyzed!"

"I'll unload my sled," I says, "bring it down, lash you to it and head for the nearest short-wave radio station."

"I'm done for, McGee," he says quietly. I can't tell you how I know, but I know. It's time for planning for my family's future."

"But—" I protest.

"If you argue, McGee," he interrupts, "you'll make it that much harder on me."

"All right," I agree, "you tell me what you want done."

"Reach in that pack I'm carrying," he says, "and you'll find a lump of mineral."

IT'S a small pack, with fifteen pounds of dried fish, a sleepin' bag and some tea. There's a empty bean tin that he boiled tea in, and that's about all, except the hunk of mineral. "Moisten it," he says. "Rub it on your shirt sleeve and smell."

"Moisture would freeze on it," I says. "But I know the test. What is it, tin?"

"Tin," he answers. "Placer tin. Do you know what that means?"

In a way I know what it means—if there's thousands of tons more where that came from. I know that the United States uses around seven thousand tons of pig tin a month. I know that while we use sixty percent of all the tin produced in the world we only produce somethin' less than three percent. I know foreign producers have us by the tail and a downhill pull and it costs us better'n fifty cents a pound. I know the importance, these days, of the United States bein' independent of foreign nations in the matter of mineral. And that isn't all: copper, silver, gold and iron can be reclaimed over and over again, but when you open a can of beans and toss the can away the tin in it is gone forever. Tin is reclaimed, but only a small percentage of it.

"I've a fair idea, Rainbow," I says to Gleason, "what a good tin mine would be worth in this country."

"I doubt it," he answers, "or you'd have been hunting tin instead of gold. You'll go crazy over a gold mine that'll yield a hundred dollars a ton. My tin proposition will run seven hundred dollars a ton at a fair estimate. It's placer, McGee, and the country is littered with nuggets. Some of 'em as big as your head and running ninety percent pure tin."

"Holy K. Smoke!" I exclaim.

"You nicknamed me Rainbow because you fellows always claimed I was chasing rainbows," Gleason continues, "but I wasn't. I was hunting for the pot of tin at the rainbow's end. And I found it. But the fight's just started."

"Sure," I answer, "the wolves will try and jump your ground."

"The wolves are the least of the difficulty," he explains. "Any Alaskan miner knows how to handle claim jumpers. Foreign interests aren't going to let a group of Alaskans smash their monopoly. It's

worth seventy or eighty millions to them in the United States annually. They've got a man planted in Alaska and ready to act if anyone uncovers a big tin mine, or goes at it on a large scale. You've got to watch him."

"I'll do my best, Rainbow," I answer. "You know that."

"Here's my proposition. Go back on my trail and find my pardner. He played out. He'll tell you where the tin valley placers are located. Work with him and we'll cut you in a third. One third to my family and pardner, Shorty Jessup; one third to my grubstaker, Parson Doyle; and the other third to you. Is that fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I agree. "Have you staked the ground?"

"Yes, put up monuments," he answers, "but the claims aren't recorded. So there's nothing to stop you from restaking the whole business and crowding the rest of us out—except you aren't that kind of a buzzard."

"Then why did you mention it?"

"So you won't forget somebody else will do the same thing if they get a chance," he answers. "Now I'm going to give you something else straight from the shoulder. This is no job for soft men. I don't know who the foreign interests are that are backing the plan to kill tin development in Alaska, but I do know they pack a punch. You're going to need men who can not only lick other men, but beat Nature as well."

"I'll find men who can lick their weight in wildcats," I promised.

"It's going to take better men than that," he argues. "Lads who don't give a damn whether they live or die, who'll take any kind of a chance and who'll think more of winning a tough fight than cleaning up thousands of dollars."

"You've got things figgered out, haven't you?" I says.

"I figgered everything but Shorty Jessup playing out and me going snow blind," he said. "Besides human obstacles, you'll have to stack up against Nature. You'll have one hell of a time getting your tin to tidewater. Then you'll have to take it through the surf to some freighter. From there it'll have to be shipped to England or Singapore. There are no smelters equipped to handle tin, inexpensively, in our country. But if we can show people volume, the money to treat our output will come fast enough. I'm wishing a lot of grief on your shoulders, McGee, but your breed seems to thrive on trouble . . . seems . . . seems . . ."

A puzzled expression comes over his face—and then he's dead. Whatever it was struck hard. I looked at his face and it seemed to me there was a sort of peace on it, as if he had won a long, hard fight a few seconds before death struck.

But I figgered the real fight hadn't even started yet. There's a creek nearby, froze down to the gravel. I pack the body to my sled, take everything from the pockets and put in a little burlap bag, then I chop a hole in the ice and bury Rainbow Gleason's remains.

"Well, Rainbow," I says, "you chased rainbows all your life, and folks laughed at you a lot, and kidded you some, but you found a lot of tin money at the rainbow's end, along with your grave. If you weighed one against the other—as you prob'ly done before you died—you prob'ly decided life had been fair enough in the long run." With that I say a prayer. I chop his name in the frozen bank just above the grave then commence back trackin' with the hope of findin' Shorty Jessup before it's too late.

Before the sun swings north again Rainbow Gleason's remains will have to be removed to a permanent grave. Until then, Mrs. McGee's boy, No-Shirt, has got his hands full.

CHAPTER II

MCGEE'S MEN

IT TAKES me a long time to get my team out of the gulch and to the bench where Rainbow Gleason had commenced his fall. I can't get near his dog. The cuss seems to know I took a shot at him to

turn him away from the gulch and he holds it against me. I stay with the trail as long as there's a trace left, then camp for the night.

I feed my team and toss a frozen salmon at Gleason's dog, which same he accepts without thanks. He gnaws at it awhile, then goes to sleep on it, knowin' his body will help thaw it out. My dogs are doin' the same. I wake up bright and early the next mornin' and there's Gleason's dog makin' up with my team. As soon as he finds out which way we're goin' he takes the lead.

Now I've a hunch he'll go back over the trail he'd come with Gleason, but I ain't sure. It's just one of the many gambles I'm goin' to have to take in this business. For all I know he may be headed for some Eskimo village on the rim of the world.

There ain't much real daylight, but we keep at it until six o'clock that night. I'm about to camp when Gleason's dog looks ahead, trots over a ridge and pretty soon comes back, and stands there and looks as if he wondered why we wasn't comin' along.

Smart dog, all right.

I break the sled loose and start the team again. Each dog looks at me like he thought I was a heel. They've had a hard day. We push over the ridge and there's a hummock of snow that makes you think of a man wearin' a white cape that's settled around his feet and knees when he's squatted down. It's so like a human bein' that it gives me the willies. The dog's suddenly turnin' wolf and stalkin' the hummock. Then all at once he leaps back, opens his mouth and plumes of white vapor whip around his gleamin' fangs. The stillness is suddenly broke by the death howl of the wolf.

I walk over to the hummock and brush away the snow. There's a few charred willow roots and a man squattin' over 'em. The fire had gone out and he'd frozen while tryin' to warm his hands. His mitts are off and his hands are like marble.

"It's Shorty Jessup," I muttered. "He's the only other man in the country." I search his pack and find a book with his name in it, some frozen fish and a change in socks. There's a small nugget of tin, in a moosehide poke. He's had a touch of scurvy, too, but he's in better shape than Gleason was. And yet he played out. I can't figger it. Maybe he wasn't as tough as Gleason.

I put in a couple of hours tryin' to find a place for a grave. No luck. So I turn in. When daylight comes I eat a good, hot meal, then swing around the country again. I find footprints, rimmed with ice. Right there I stop dead in my tracks. Only water drippin' down from clothin' makes that kind of a print.

I race back to Jessup's remains and look at his feet. They're glazed with ice. He'd gone through ice into water, which had frozen soon after it hit the air. I got back to the icy footprints and commence to work back. A smooth stretch looks invitin', but I don't take no chances. It's too smooth. I brush away the snow and sure enough there's ice underneath. Jessup's tracks are comin' out of it.

I begin to see light.

My next move is to search beyond the ice, which is nothin' more than a thin skin over a hot spring that's reached the surface. I brush back the snow for a half mile. Them tracks aren't those of a man who's played out. From the space between it's a cinch Jessup was in the best of health and swingin' along at a fine rate when he went through and froze his feet.

"And Rainbow Gleason was sure he'd played out," I reflect. "There's only one answer to this setup. Jessup tricked Gleason into believin' he'd played out, then the coyote doubled back, staked the ground in his own name and was tryin' to beat Gleason out to record the claim when he went through. Who's back of Jessup?"

I find I can chop out a grave in the ice below the spring and that's where I bury Shorty Jessup. I knock loose some rock on the edge of the spring that's only partly frozen, and make a little monument to mark the spot. There's no convenient bank where I can carve his name.

MY OWN grub is runnin' low, but I think it's a pious idea to go through Jessup's things and see if I can find out who's back of him. So I decide to delay a little longer. First I read his note book, then go through some letters that are soiled and rumpled from bein' in his pockets a long time. One reads:

I'm presenting an unusual dog to Gleason. If released, I am confident this dog will make his way back to me. I have trained him to carry messages. His ability to follow old trails and stop at camp sites he once occupied is amazing. In case of emergency, attach a message to his collar, lash him with a whip until you break down his sense of loyalty to you, then tell him to go home. He will come to me. You are in a dangerous game. Never relax your vigilance. I'll take care of this end of the matter. Good luck, and may we soon divide a fortune between us.

When I get through readin' that letter I commence to wonder just how good the dog is, and who wrote the letter. It wasn't signed and it was written on a typewriter. The paragraph plainly speaks of dividing a fortune "between us." It don't say, dividing a fortune between Rainbow Gleason and us. That means Shorty Jessup and the letter writer had planned to freeze out Rainbow and split the tin claims between them. Gleason didn't know how right he was when he warned against outsiders beating me. The forces after control of the tin mines had already reached his pardner.

I let the dog take the lead when we start out, and he drifts steadily toward a new country. Every so often we come to some place where the country is crowded by steep hills, and where traffic in the region would naturally pass. Then I stop and brush away the snow. I find reindeer tracks, wolf and fox tracks, and nearly always Shorty Jessup's track. After awhile I uncover the trail left by the two of 'em. That's proof they're together; proof, too, that Jessup is puttin' on his act. His steps are shorter and he's draggin' his *mukluks*. He's doin' such a good job I ain't surprised Gleason was fooled into believin' the man was playin' out.

I've quit feedin' the dog. When I feed the others I hold out a salmon to him. He comes up pretty close, but not close enough for me to get my hands on him.

This goes on day after day. He don't know it, but he's doin' most of the leadin'. My team follows. We climb a low range and drop into more new country. I see reindeer sign, along with fox and wolf. A snowy owl swings overhead, and in the distance I hear somethin' that makes me stand still and listen. It's the growl and grind of the pack-ice in the Arctic. The wind's just right and I figger the ice can't be more'n ten miles away.

The dog turns away from the ice and moves at a faster clip. Late that afternoon he stops and I know from experience he's come to another of his camps. I prowl around and find a sod dugout and driftwood.

There're no trees in the Arctic, but plenty of 'em come down on the big rivers durin' the highwater season. They drift around in the Arctic and sooner or later strand on the beach. I build a good fire and feed the dogs, then hold a fish out towards Gleason's leader. He's standoffish. I fix a snare of seal-skin line, drop the fish below the loop and stand off and wait. He trots over, sticks his head through the loop and I yank the line.

There's merry hell a-poppin' for awhile. He ain't gettin' any too much air in his lungs, so finely quits. I see the name on his collar is Itkilik. I snap a chain onto him and tie him up. Then I feed the cuss.

THERE'S a hump on a low mound back of the dugout and I look it over the first thing the followin' mornin'. I've a hunch it is a monument markin' the corner of a claim. It is. Now I've seen different kinds of monuments in my time. Often they're piles of scab rock; again they may be livin' trees that happen to be in the right spot. But this is the first time I've ever seen a monument made of placer tin.

I grab one of the hunks and leg it back to the fire, then I rub a smooth spot as hard as I can with a wool shirt. It polishes

like tin does. From head to feet I have that cold feelin' a man has when he sees gold in the bottom of a pan for the first time, kisses his first girl, or sees a soiled dove crookin' a finger at him.

Like many a miner I've taken plenty of money from the ground and put it back in again. Can it be possible that after all these years No-Shirt McGee is goin' to be in the big money? This sample must run ninety percent pure tin, and I hate to think what a ton of it is worth for fear I can't find a ton of it.

I race back to the monument again and tear it apart. There's a location notice inside, signed by Shorty Jessup. No mention made of Rainbow Gleason. More proof of the double-cross. Either Shorty doubled back and destroyed Gleason's location notices and substituted his own, or else the dirty work was done just before they started. Maybe the night before while Gleason, who was a much older man, was sleepin' heavily.

I put in the next two days findin' the monuments. I burn every scrap of paper with Jessup's name on it, and blanket the country in the name of Michael McGee, which is my real name.

This done I set down and do some serious thinkin'. Hard luck lands on the men who've staked the ground so far. Gleason's dead, and Jessup who double-crossed him is dead. Then I remember an old Eskimo legend about the country. Anybody who tried to take anything from it died. For that reason it was good hunting and trapping country. I'd never been in it before, but I'd heard the legend. And I had known of men who had entered it and never returned. I figgered it was a lot of bunk; that there was gold in it, and the natives wanted whites to stay out and not kill off the fur and game. The country served as a sort of reservoir which fed trappin' areas around it.

Gleason had warned me I needed tough and trustworthy men to help me out. Right then and there I decided to get 'em. I'd need a fighter who could handle men and equipment, and the first name that came into my mind was Bulldozer Craig. He could make a tractor talk and haul tons of ore along the ragged edge of nothin'. He was a rough and tumble fighter and we'd helped establish a loggin' camp that fed a new gold diggin's. He'd hauled tons of supplies over river ice without losin' a pound. I happened to know he was almost dead broke.

He'd do on the ground. But I needed somebody to handle things in the air, too. Planes play a big part in minin' life these days. They haul men and supplies thousands of miles and even fly small ore mills to remote claims. I figgered Big Tim Harrison might be interested in fightin', flyin' and tin.

Tim had crashed a transport plane somewhere in the States. Faulty instruments was the real cause, but the company made Tim the goat and fired him. Tim took it pretty much to heart. He'd come to Alaska to try and forget what he'd seen when he regained consciousness and saw his plane and passengers scattered over five acres of mountain valley.

I think he'd have shot hisself right there if he hadn't felt he might save some of the injured. He had a busted leg and when the shattered ends of the bone rubbed, red flashed before his eyes and he passed out, but he did save two of 'em. They don't come any tougher—or braver—than Big Tim Harrison and Bulldozer Craig.

I REMEMBERED what Itkilik's owner had said about the dog returnin' to him with a message and decided to chance it, rather than mush out with a tired team and low grub supply.

I want the dog's owner to think Shorty Jessup wrote the note, so I scrawled the words, like my hands were cold, and I didn't sign it.

Can't make it out by dog sled. Ask Big Tim Harrison to pick me up at Driftwood Cape between the fifteenth and twentieth.

Itkilik is all set to work me over with his fangs when I come up, but I manage

to slip the note into a small moosehide bag which I tie to his collar. I turn him loose, then grab up my dog whip and pop him one. This goes against the grain, but it is necessary. I keep the whip poppin' in the air over his back and it don't take him long to realize he ain't wanted. As I crack the whip I keep yellin', "Go on home!"

My own team needs a rest. In fact I ain't too sure the dogs can make it through, draggin' a sled. Itkilik can take short cuts and make good time if he knows the country. I give my team a rest and put in the days explorin' the valley—quarterin' it like a setter after quail. I'm hopin' to get a line on the amount of tin available. No sense in short changin' myself right at the start. But I don't. There's too much snow. Placer naturally works down into creek beds. And snow drifts downward.

The weather clears the mornin' of the thirteenth, so I hitch up my dogs and light out for Driftwood Cape while the goin' is good. Pack ice has piled along the shore, but there's a stretch of young ice with a light coverin' of snow—the best kind of a landin' place. I cut a pole from driftwood, tie a handkerchief on the end of it and stick it up in the ice for a wind sock.

Then just in case I have to mush back, I put in the next few days huntin' seal. I fatten up the dogs on seal meat and work 'em enough to keep 'em in shape. The twentieth comes and goes and no sign of Big Tim Harrison or his plane. Then a storm howls down from the Arctic and I hole up for a week. As soon as it clears I check over the landin' field. It's in good shape. It seems a good idea to wait another day or two just in case the plane shows up.

The first night after the storm quits is bright moonlight. About midnight the roar of a motor wakes me up. I crawl out of my sleepin' bag, and stir up my driftwood fire just to let 'em know I'm there. Next I take stacks of kindling I've been dryin' for days and race onto the ice with 'em. I light four fires each a quarter of a mile apart. All the time the plane is circling around, with the moonlight splashin' over its silver wings. I'm tellin' you it's some sight.

Pretty soon it roars overhead a couple of hundred feet from the snow. It banks and comes back, its skis stuck out like a duck's feet when it's landin' on the water. They part the snow into two swirling streams, then the plane stops with its motor ploppin' and backfirin'.

The first man out of the cabin is Bulldozer Craig. "Hey, No-Shirt," he yells, "where's the fight?"

"How'd you come to cut in on this?" I ask, surprised. "I didn't mention your name in the note I wrote to Itkilik's owner."

"I'd be a hell of a friend," Bulldozer answers, "if I didn't have brains enough to figger things out. Itkilik shows up, with a note askin' for a plane. I remember Shorty Jessup is afraid of planes so it can't be from him. Also no name was signed, so I says, 'Old No-Shirt McGee is in a jam.' Him, Jessup and Gleason are the only ones in the country. Jessup or Gleason would've signed. Then I cornered Big Tim and asks him to take me along as his mechanic. He asks me if I'm a mechanic and I tell him I'm an expert on gasoline engines. He don't know it's bulldozer engines until we get in the air. Then he cusses me out and I take it meekly."

"Which ain't your disposition at all," I agrees, shakin' the big cuss's hand. "Who'd Itkilik go to when he hit town?'

"He went to Parson Doyle's cabin. The Parson owns him, but Doyle wasn't home," Bulldozer explains. "May Gleason saw him there and she thinks her father's come back. She goes over, pets the dog and takes the note. After she reads it she says, 'Something has happened to Dad, and No-Shirt McGee is in trouble!' Well, here I am."

Big Tim Harrison climbs out of the plane and says some kind words about the landin' field I'd picked and the fires I'd built to mark it. But I'm thinkin' Parson Doyle was backin' Shorty Jessup to frame Gleason. But I'm keepin' my thoughts to

myself for the time bein'. The Parson is a mighty popular man and it's goin' to take a lot of evidence to make folks believe he would knife Gleason in the back.

CHAPTER III

SAY PARSON—AND SMILE

"WHAT'VE you got?" Tim asks as he squatted down near the camp fire I'd built. The plane is anchored to a toggle we'd cut in the ice. The motor is turnin' over slow to keep it warm.

"Gleason is supposed to have found tin in payin' quantities," I explain. "He's dead. So is Jessup." I explain what has happened so far.

"And you've agreed to take a third yourself, give Gleason's heirs a third and cut Parson in on another third?" he asks.

"That's what I promised Gleason," I answer. "I may not keep the promise. It all depends on how much dirty work was done at the cross roads. I'm goin' to need two damned good men to help me out. A ground man and an air man. If you'll come in with me I'll split my share of the tin money with the two of you. In turn, you've got to toss what money you can raise into the pot. If we call in outsiders they'll want the lion's share and control. We may make a fortune or lose our shirts."

"That's a funny one," Bulldozer growls, "No-Shirt McGee losin' his shirt."

"I'm wearin' a shirt these days," I remind him.

"Big Tim is one of the best pilots in the North," Bulldozer says thoughtfully, "he can fly a plane any place one can be flown. He's freighted tons of machinery and grub into mountain pockets that would make a crow worry over landin'. He's transported powder and landed it on wheels, pontoons and skis."

He could've talked all night about Tim's skill. Tim was a strange combination. He didn't give a damn whether he lived or died, yet the airman in him always took control and stopped him from bein' too reckless. It was a sweet combination too for a wild country where there're no aids to navigation, few emergency landin' fields and no radio beams to follow.

Big Tim was six feet two inches tall and powerfully built. He could've carried better'n two hundred pounds, but he weighed a hundred and fifty. His normal weight was a hundred and ninety, but he'd lost the difference worryin' over his passenger crash. This made his cheeks hollow, his blue eyes kinda sunken and his neck skinny. In a business suit his clothes looked as if they'd been hung on a wooden frame. His bones made bulges. His nose was inclined to be hawkish, anyway. But with his face so thin, the resemblance increased. Whenever he was around I always thought of a lean, hungry hawk lookin' for somethin' to pounce on.

"If half what you said about me, Bulldozer, were true," Tim says quietly, "I'd take a bow. As it is . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't give a damn what happens to me any way, but I like May Gleason, and particularly I like the idea of salting away a pile of tin money that'll see her brothers and sisters through school. Count me in, No-Shirt, plane and all. I've got some cash, too."

I happen to be lookin' at Bulldozer when Tim said he liked May Gleason. A funny expression had come to his face. He'd been a tough mug in his time and had fallen in love with Lois Winters. She was prob'ly the first fine girl he'd ever met, and she changed his whole life. She married Highpockets Hurly and Bulldozer had been a fine sport about it. I was wondering' if the big cuss had gone soft on May Gleason.

"I like May Gleason, too," he says in his deep, rumblin' voice. "And with her father dead somebody's got to put the family on its feet. Gleason discovered the tin mine and by golly it's his estate. His heirs are entitled to his share. Count me in, No-Shirt, bulldozers, tractors, bank account and all."

Bulldozer is built like a Kodiak bear and the tougher the fight the better he likes it. I was sure he'd join me, but I wanted to hear him say so. With both Tim and Bulldozer backin' my hand, it was sweet.

THE talk around the camp fire gave the boys a chance to stretch their legs. "It's sure peaceful around here now," Tim observed, "but it'll be a different story when you try shoving tons of tin through the surf to a freighter. You'll have to design a surf tractor, Bulldozer."

"All I see is one hurdle after another in the proposition," Bulldozer said. "I just hope nothin' happens to me until the fight is over."

Big Tim tosses a cigarette butt into the fire and looks at the sky. "Get your pups, No-Shirt," he orders, "it's time to get goin'."

We put the pups in the baggage compartment of the plane and they don't think much of the idea, either. They hump their backs, get hurt expressions in their eyes, and dig in their toe nails. But it's no use.

I get into the plane and Big Tim motions me toward the co-pilot's seat. The plane is an old, ten-place passenger job he picked up Outside. It had twin motors. He had changed some of the passenger space so he could handle more express, such as machinery, furs and gold. There was still room for six passengers.

He guns the motors and pretty soon the ice falls away. Moonlight reflecting against the snow lights up the country below us. I can see a black streak where the ice has opened up a lead in the ocean, and further on the floes are grindin' away at each other. We can see great slabs liftin' up and fallin' back.

The uproar must sound like a battle, but our motors are makin' so much noise I can't hear a thing. We swing inland at a hundred and fifty mile an hour lick, and when I think how long it took me to mush it with dogs, I groan.

Nome is just beginnin' to wake up when we land. Big Tim runs the plane into a hangar and drains off the crankcase oil while it's still hot. Pilots do a lot of queer things to keep their motors turnin' over in the North. Oil left in a motor gets so stiff you can't turn the motor over in Arctic temperatures.

When he gets ready to go again, he'll have to heat the oil, heat the crankcase, pour in the oil and spend a lot of time slowly warmin' up the motor. Even with all the babyin' the northern pilots give their planes, the changes in temperature raise hell with the best of 'em.

Bulldozer helps me harness the dogs and just as we get the job done an automobile comes over the frozen road with skid chains bangin' the fenders. As it stops, May Gleason jumps out and gives a quick look around. Her face is framed in the wolverin' facin' of her squirrel skin parka, and her blue eyes are troubled. Her lips are parted as if she'd asked a question, but the words didn't come out. "Mr. McGee!"

Somethin' in her voice makes me swallow a lump in my throat, and I hear both Bulldozer and Big Tim swearin' softly. "May," I say, "I'm glad you've got your chin up." It's up, but it's tremblin'.

"He's—he's—dead?" she asks. And I blessed her for makin' it so easy for me to tell her.

"Yes," I answers. "Do you want to hear the story now or later on?"

"Later!" she answers. "Right now I—I guess I want to go back home and think. Think what kind of a letter I'll write mother."

"If it'll help some," I tell her, "me, Bulldozer and Big Tim are goin' to develop your father's prospect. You can tell her she'll have enough to keep her goin' for a long time to come if our plans work out."

"And he really struck it?" she asks.

"He claims he did," I answer. "I can't tell until the snow's off of the ground, but I've got so much faith in his judgment I'm goin' ahead. You folks will have a third interest."

"Did you mark his grave?" she asks.

"Yes, and I marked Shorty Jessup's grave, too," I answer. She evidently ain't surprised Jessup's dead. She says somethin' about it bein' too bad, then goes. I don't think it's necessary to tell her Jessup had double-crossed her dad. She's got enough grief without thinkin' of man's cussedness toward his feller men.

She gets into her car and drives away. Bulldozer and I head the dogs for his cabin and Big Tim yells he'll join us as soon as he beds down his plane.

WE NO more'n get the cabin warmed up before a gent built like a brick house hurries up. He's followed by Itkilik and I know the man is Parson Doyle.

"Come in," I says, as soon as he knocks, "and make yourself at home. We just got in."

He sheds his parka and extends his hand. "Glad to know you, Mr. McGee," he says and all the time I know I'm bein' sized up. He's got a pious look and a bone-crushin' handshake and I can just imagine him standin' before a congregation, shakin' his hard, square fist, and yellin', "I shall never compromise with the devil. I shall be satisfied with nothing less than complete victory over the forces of evil."

He's got plenty of chin, and a jaw that's made for a square face. He has a quick, warm smile, but behind it all there're a pair of cold eyes peering steadily from deep sockets and protected by a bulging forehead and high cheek-bones.

"I've just heard of Rainbow Gleason's death. He was one of God's noblemen—an empire builder," he said. "I understand he staked some ground and that you are looking after his interests. Perhaps he told you I grubstaked him. I suggest we organize a company in a few days and develop this tin prospect for our mutual benefit."

"Where do I come in?" I inquire.

"I—we—feel you are entitled to something for your trouble," he continues smoothly, "say ten percent of the stock."

"Plenty of time to talk things over," I interrupt. "You've given me a general idea of how you feel on this and that."

He gives me a keen, penetratin' look, and I can see he's wonderin' just how much I know, but he's too smart to ask questions. "I shall arrange for a court order to take over, and protect the interests of Gleason's widow and children. This is too important a matter to permit delay."

"That's just the way I feel about it," I say. "Give me a breathin' spell and I'll be ready for action."

Late that afternoon I record the claims with the United States commissioner. The commissioner gives me a queer look. "This is a public record, No-Shirt," he says, "and may be inspected. Hell will be popping when this entry is known."

"I'm expectin' it," I answers.

"Then you'd better make your will," he suggests. I'm almost out of the buildin' when I stop dead in my tracks.

"That's a mighty pious idea," I says. Then I set down at his desk and write out my will. The commissioner and his clerk witness it and I put it in his strong box for safe keepin'.

As I leave the commissioner's office Parson Doyle comes briskly across the street, his boots crunchin' the snow in a business-like way. "Hello, McGee," he says in his genial voice. He turns on the warm smile.

"Greetin's and salutations, Parson," I answer, "compliments of the season and all that jolly rot."

I go back to the cabin, knowin' I'm goin' to have visitors before the evenin' is over. The first is my roommate. As he comes through the door I see Big Tim Harrison bearin' down. The wind's flappin' the skirts of his parka about his knees and he's got a gleam in his eyes.

The two of 'em scowl at me. "No-Shirt you're a dirty, double-crossin' . . ." Big Tim roars.

"Fightin' words, son," I say. "You don't know me so well and I'll admit things look bad. But, you, Bulldozer, before you start in, think twice."

Bulldozer gets red in the face. "I'll take back what I thought," he says. "I don't know why you done what you did, but I know you're on the level. I'm backin' your hand."

"How about you, Tim?" I ask. "I've got to have a hundred percent backin' in the air as well as on the ground."

"I'll string with Bulldozer," he answers, "and that means I'm behind you."

I hear the slap of skid chains against

fenders, then Parson Doyle's car stops. Doyle piles out, knocks and comes stormin' in. "McGee," he growls in a dangerous tone, "I've just examined the record. You recorded those claims in your name. Nothing said of Rainbow Gleason, Shorty Jessup or myself. And I grubstaked Gleason."

"Here're the facts in the case," I answer. "I find a dyin' man. I stay with him until he dies. He mentions country where there's placer tin. I go there. I stake the ground—"

"Ground you wouldn't have known existed if it hadn't been for Gleason!"

"Sure," I agree. "But open ground until recorded. Maybe I'm a coyote in the eyes of the world, but legally I had the right to locate that ground. I staked and recorded it. And I don't mind addin' there was somethin' so rotten goin' on that it smells. I'm goin' to make sure of what happened, then I'm goin' to cut in honest parties on the cleanup. The others can twiddle their fingers. This ain't goin' to be drug through the courts—which it would be if I included you, Jessup's and Gleason's heirs. I've got the legal edge by makin' myself sole locater and I ain't goin' to let go of that edge."

"But suppose you should die or . . . ?"

"Or be killed?" I softly suggest when he hesitates. "In that case I've made out a will."

"Who're your heirs?" he hotly demands.

"I didn't say," I answer. "One more thing, Parson, I haven't told you all I know about the deal you made with Jessup when Gleason agreed to take him along as a pardner. But if you crowd me too much I'm goin' to sound off, loud."

Parson Doyle leaves without a word, but the farewell look he gives me couldn't be placed under the headin' of brotherly love.

CHAPTER V

FANCY FLYING OVER JUNEAU

THE mornin' after me and Parson had a verbal clash, Bulldozer brings May Gleason out to the cabin. "Parson Doyle has been workin' on her," he says, "tryin' to get you in wrong, No-Shirt. This poor kid don't know whether she's afoot or on horseback."

"He said you were cheating me out of my share," May says, "and he wanted me to sign some papers, which he said would throw the matter into court and force you to make a settlement on me. He talked a lot about cash money. He said that was what we needed more than promises."

"Did he want to buy your interest?" I ask.

"No," she answers. "He said his only interest was justice and he was willing to spend money to get it for me. I almost believed him."

"But you decided to string with me, instead," I suggests.

"Yes, but what can I do to help?" she asks.

"Just go on havin' faith in me, Bulldozer and Big Tim," I answer, "and that's help enough."

"No, it isn't. Perhaps when you have men working I can do the book work, or even cook meals and wait table," she says. "I've had training in all three lines of work."

"We'll fix you up with a job," I promise. "And I'm sure glad you told us about Parson Doyle. What did he figger your interest should be worth?"

"He said I should get twenty-five thousand dollars," the girl answers. "But I've heard Dad say many a time that if he developed a tin mine it would be worth a million. Twenty-five thousand seems small change after hearing Dad talk."

"It will be if things go right," I tell her.

I put in the day ponderin' on what can be done while we're waitin' for the snow to go off the ground. That night I'm still thinkin' about it, and when I wake up the next day it is almost noon and Bulldozer is just comin' through the door.

"I got some bad news," he says. "Parson chartered a plane last night and nobody knows where he's gone or what he's up to."

"I wish you'd stay in mornin's," I grumble. "Every time you go out you come back with bad news. Yesterday mornin' it was about him tryin' to turn May against us. Now today it's this." Us McGees ain't in our best mood until after we've had our mornin' cup of coffee. But this mornin' two cups don't change me any. I'm worryin' about Parson.

"Will you do me a favor, No-Shirt?" Bulldozer asks.

"Sure!"

"Fix it up so I'll see a lot of May Gleason when we develop the mine next summer," he says. "That gal is somethin' mighty special. Except Lois Winters," he adds kinda wistful, "the only girls I ever met talked out of the side of their mouth and were harder'n the hubs of hell."

"I'll do my best, Bulldozer," I promise. "What's Big Tim doin' this afternoon? We've got to get organized."

"I'll tell him," he says, and pulls on his parka again.

Big Tim shows up about two o'clock. He's in a gloomy mood. The past is preyin' on his mind again. He's seein' scattered wreckage and—scattered people. "I just learned Parson Doyle took his dog along with him on that plane ride. It's something to think about, No-Shirt. He's probably going to look over our ground. You're a miner, what can he do?"

"He might try jumpin' our claims," I answer, "but I don't think he'll try it. Prob'ly he'll try and stake some ground that'll handicap our operations. Maybe he'll tie up the water supply, or block us from gettin' our tin aboard the steamer for shipment. But first he's got to find the spot."

"That's why he took the dog," Big Tim answers. "Itkilik will show him the way."

"No doubt of it," I admit. "I wish you'd set down and relax instead of pacin' the room like a wolf in a cage."

"That's what I am," he says, "a wolf in a cage." He puffs three or four times on a cigarette, then throws it away, like the taste is bitter. But a minute later he lights another. He smokes a third of this and tosses it aside. "Will you do me a favor, No-Shirt?" he asks.

"Sure," I agree.

"Fix it so I won't see much of May Gleason in the months to come," he says.

It's a request that knocks me cold. Bulldozer has just asked me to fix it so he can see her. Now Big Tim wants it fixed so he won't be around her.

"Did I hear you correct?" I ask.

"Yes. I don't want to see her, No-Shirt. She's lovely, brave, chin up. She's hit me pretty hard. I'm damned near in love with her right now. If I let myself go, there'd be a lot of heartaches and grief. I'd worry for fear she wouldn't love me; and for fear I might break her heart if she did. And—well—I can't take any more punishment. Yellow I guess. It isn't a wolf trying to escape. It's a coyote." He lights another cigarette and takes a couple of puffs. "Damn it," he almost screams, "I wish summer would come and the ice would go. I need action."

"Okay, you'll get it," I snap. "Fly me and Bulldozer to Seattle. We're goin' to need equipment. We'll want it to come North on the first boat sailin' for Arctic ports. And not only that, I want to find somebody who'll build a tin smelter for us. There's no percentage in shippin' our cleanup to Singapore or England."

"You shouldn't have much trouble in getting all the money you need," he says thoughtfully. "The banks and many private individuals down below are fairly crying for investment openings that will bring a fair return. We can borrow money to develop the claims."

"Sure," I agree, "but we won't borrow a dime unless our backs are to the wall. That might give the enemy an openin' wedge that would lead to control and then a freeze-out."

THE three of us talk late that night makin' plans. It's a pretty fine meetin'. Bulldozer and Big Tim talk the same language even if one works on the ground and the other in the air. It's nearly midnight when we finish and durin' that time

we hear the plane bringin' mail from the South roar overhead and land.

As Big Tim opens the door and starts for his car, we see a girl comin' toward us. She's on skis and a malemute dog is pullin' her at top speed. "It's May Gleason," Big Tim says. "What's she doin' up this time of night?"

"Waitin' for the mail, like everyone else is," I answer. She's a breath-takin' picture as she comes to a stop. Her parka is covered with frost crystals, her face is glowing, and her eyes are bright with excitement.

"Lord what a girl!" Big Tim says softly. I look at Bulldozer. The big lug's face tells how he feels about her.

"A letter just came," May says, breathless, "it has all of our names on the envelope. I saw a light in your cabin," she adds, turning to Bulldozer, "and knew you must be up, so I mushed right over."

I grinned at him.

"You're goin' to be secretary of any organization we form," I says. "Open it up and read it."

When I said she was going to be secretary—which meant she'd be at the mine most likely all summer long — I thought Bulldozer was goin' to kiss me.

The letter was from a cuss named Morgan Kenworthy and was wrote on paper that cost plenty of dust. It fairly dripped dignity. It said he had just heard we had located some promisin' tin ground and that the setup offered promotional possibilities. Them last two words are his, not mine. I never was much on five dollar phrases. He said he was prepared to offer fifty thousand dollars cash money for our joint and several interests. *Joint* and *several* are his words, too.

"Twelve thousand, five hundred apiece," Bulldozer says.

"Chicken feed," May says. "That's what dad would've called it."

"No dice," Big Tim echoes, tossin' a third-smoked cigarette away. "He'll have to find other ground for sucker bait. But man alive what a good promoter could do with a tin setup, backed by existing conditions. It's made to order for a crooked man."

"Made to order for an honest man, too," I add. "The secretary will tell Mr. Kenworthy we ain't interested."

"He's got a Seattle address," Big Tim says, "what's the matter with telling him when we get there?"

"And have him try and talk us into somethin'," I argue.

"You're going to Seattle?" May asks, excitedly. "I'd love to fly down with you. If there's room."

"Sorry," Big Tim says, "but I'll need the space for extra fuel." Which same was a blasted lie if you ask me.

"Then I'll stay on the job," she says pleasantly, "and write Mr. Kenworthy a nice letter. It should go out air mail in the morning. So I had better do it tonight." And with that she slips on her skis, unchains the dog and starts mushing home.

THE three of us turn in and get some sleep. The first thing in the mornin' Big Tim tells us what we need to take along. The trip as far as Juneau will be made on skis. At Juneau he'll change to pontoons. You can land almost anywhere along the Inland Passage on pontoons—almost nowhere on wheels.

Certain equipment always goes into Alaskan planes makin' even short flights. Sometimes it's hundreds of miles between settlements and in case you're forced down you may have to live off'n the country. You take grub, rifle, sleepin' bag, axe, tent and good footgear along with you.

"We'll need your thirty-thirty rifle," Big Tim says.

"There she is, hangin' on pegs over my bunk," I says.

He looks up and says, "The hell it is! Where'd you leave it?"

I look around the cabin, and the rifle ain't there. I go out to the dog kennels thinkin' I might've left it on the sled, but it isn't in sight. "Chances are," Bulldozer says, "you were in a hurry, leaned it against somethin' and it fell down and the snow drifted over it."

"Maybe so," I admit, "but I ought to be shot if I was that careless after all the years I spent in the North."

We've got plenty of moonlight and that's better for flyin' sometimes than the gray twilight which sorta runs things together and you can't be any too sure what's under your skis. As we leave, I ask one of the airport lads if Parson Doyle's pilot has come back yet.

"No," he answers, "he hasn't. It's kinda queer, too. I talked to the pilot's wife this morning and she said he told her not to worry if he didn't show up for a couple of weeks. The plane was so loaded down with fuel when it left I thought it wouldn't take off. He might've headed for the North Pole or the Mexican border."

"Just the same," Big Tim says, flippin' a fifth-smoked cigarette onto the snow, "he didn't go very far. He's based some place and makin' short hops. Did you find your rifle, No-Shirt?"

"No," I answer. "I borrowed one. Well, let's go!"

I ain't goin' to try and describe the scenery. We stop for gas, grub and rest a couple of times, then are flying over the mountains back of Juneau. Our skis just skim a ragged ridge then we're twistin' down Gold Creek canyon and before we know it the waters of Gastineau Channel are below us. I catch a glimpse of Douglas, the old Treadwell mine and then Tim, the damned fool says, "I'm goin' to land."

"Land on what?" I croak. There's no snow to speak of at sea level. And a warm rain is softenin' up what there is.

He roars back and forth several times, then the skis go skiddin' over the mud. We're plastered from hell to breakfast, but don't turn over. He guns her hard just as we're about to stop and the next thing I know we're on wet salt grass.

"All right, No-Shirt," Big Tim says brightly, "Get up and open the door."

"I can't," I say thickly, "the stren'th has left my laigs."

Bulldozer commences to breathe again. "Sometime, Tim," he says, "I'll get you onto a tractor and then . . ."

CHAPTER V

LESSONS IN STRATEGY

IT TAKES most of the day to change from skis to the pontoons Big Tim Harrison has stored at Juneau. We spend the night at a hotel and take off early the next mornin' on a non-stop flight to Seattle. We land on Lake Union, which is in the heart of the city, taxi through a bunch of deep sea freighters and sailin' craft and tie up at a wharf.

While Big Tim is arrangin' to have the plane serviced, me and Bulldozer register at a hotel, then do a little shoppin'. He picks up a tractor, with bulldozer attachment he thinks will fill the bill, while I poke around lookin' for monitors, pipe and things needed for sluicin' on a large scale.

We're still at it three days later. No McGee was ever caught bein' a cheapskate, but just the same, we ain't suckers for old minin' machinery, either. There's a freighter called the *Westward Trader* that's goin' to follow the ice into the Arctic, and we make a dicker with the skipper to drop our outfit at Driftwood Cape. The agreement has *W. P.* all over it, which means, Weather Permitting. And you'd be surprised and pained to learn how often the weather don't permit in that country.

"Just another obstacle to hurdle," Big Tim says. "I've been doing some shopping, too. I'm equipping the plane with a short-wave radio—two way communication system. The ground station should be at our mine, I suppose. It is costing a little money, but should be worth it."

When we get back to the hotel a desk clerk says a gentleman has called several times. "What kind of a gent?" I ask. "Sourdough? Or somebody tryin' to sell us somethin'."

"May be he is a creditor caught up with us," Big Tim suggests.

"No. This man has engineer stamped all over him," the clerk says. "He's the type you find developing mines in Africa, oil in Mexico and rubber plantations in remote places. His name is Morgan Kenworthy."

"Oh! Oh!" I mutter, "I was afraid of that."

We're no more in our room and washed up when the telephone rings. It is Mr. Kenworthy. He's in the lobby and wants us to have dinner with him. "What'll I tell him?" Bulldozer asks, puttin' a paw over the transmitter.

"Tell him to come up," I answer. "We might as well put this Morgan Kenworthy in his place and get it over with. We ain't sellin' our tin mine for fifty thousand dollars, or twice that. Nor even three times—"

"Come on up, Mr. Kenworthy," Bulldozer says. "We'll promote you a drink and listen to what you have to say. We can give you ten minutes."

When Mr. Kenworthy shows up you can tell by the gleam in his black eyes that he knows he's goin' to stay a danged sight longer than ten minutes.

He shakes hands all around and accepts the drink which I fix up for him.

"First, gentlemen," he says, "I must apologize for my insult in offering you fifty thousand dollars for your tin prospect. I thought perhaps you were miners looking for a quick turn-over and I knew Miss Gleason's family needed money badly. I realize now you are a breed that stakes ground for the fun of development. Men after my own heart."

THAT might be called pourin' on the old oil, but not the way he said it. He said it in the same tone of voice he used when sayin' the whisky was good. "I shall not disclose those behind me, except to say my people are conservative in many respects. They will develop a prospect on the moon if you can prove there is a fair chance of success. Some years ago, on my recommendation, they began a tin development proposition in the Orient. We got a fine old beating. We didn't realize the strength of the tin cartel."

He finishes his whisky and finishes it neat. "To resume, gentlemen. I don't know how you feel about a beating," he says, "but a beating never fails to irk me. When news came you had staked a tin claim, I saw a chance to even up an old score. In a word, I am seeking revenge."

"Amen!" says Bulldozer.

"Let me warm up your drink a little," I says, tiltin' the whisky bottle again.

"Thank you, Mr. McGee," he says. "To continue. Through contacts I learned Parson Doyle was sojourning in Nome. I immediately concluded he had reached you first. Then to my surprise I learn you are buying supplies and planning development. Gentlemen, having had an experience with Parson, and come out second best, I warn you you're in for trouble. He's worse than boils."

"What do you mean—boils?" Big Tim asks.

"You can never tell where a boil will break out," Mr. Kenworthy explains. "Sometimes they break out on the back of your neck when you want to look at a star. Again, they'll appear on your stern when you're tired and want to sit down."

I warm up his glass again, and lift my eyebrows at Bulldozer. He's ready for anything, and nods for more. Big Tim gives me the traffic cop stop sign. I make a bluff at fillin' up my own glass, then say, "If your company wants to make an investment, why don't it build a tin smelter right here on Puget Sound?"

"It does cost plenty to ship tin to Singapore or England for treatment," he agrees, showin' he knows plenty about the subject. "The day you land a hundred tons of tin in Seattle, Mr. McGee, my company will not only build a tin smelter, but it will give you a sufficient advance on the ore to carry you through the following year, and will pay you a hundred percent on your entire output as soon as the smelter is operating."

"Will you put that down in writing?"

He gives me a swift look. "Do I need to?" he asks softly.

"No, you don't," I answer in a hurry. "Sorry if I irked you."

"I don't irk easily," he said, "but when I am irked, the wound haunts and annoys me until it is healed." He's about to say

somethin' more when he holds up his hand. "There's somebody listening at the door," he whispers. "Parson and his men are great door crack listeners and key-hole peakers." Then he raises his voice. "As I was saying, gentlemen, my people will not back any mineral development until their engineers have thoroughly tested the ground."

It's a neat trick to throw the listener off'n the trail, and it ends when somebody knocks on the door. Bulldozer opens the door and there's a quiet cuss standin' there. "I'd like to see Mr. No-Shirt McGee," he says.

Before Bulldozer can answer Mr. Kenworthy says: "And wouldn't we like to see Mr. No-Shirt McGee. He was supposed to show me some ore samples, but for some reason vanished into thin air. Come in and have a drink."

THE stranger comes in. I can tell by the bulge on his coat that he's wearin' a gun in a shoulder holster and when he reaches out to take a drink, I catch the gleam of a deputy United States marshal's shield.

"I suppose you're another sucker Mr. McGee has talked into investing in his tin mine?" Kenworthy says.

The deputy rises to the bait and takes it, hook and all. "I had thought some of putting in a thousand dollars," he said.

"Don't do it," Kenworthy advises. "As for me, I'm staying right here until he returns. These gentlemen," he continues, pointin' to Bulldozer, Big Tim and me, "thought they were his partners, but now they're beginning to wonder."

He empties the bottle, then excuses hisself and goes into the bathroom, which is connected to my room beyond. He's gone several minutes and when he returns he has a bottle that's come from my suitcase. "When this is gone," he says, "one of us will have to go outside and find more. But we'll hope Mr. McGee returns before we kill it."

Neither Big Tim or Bulldozer say much. They're lettin' Kenworthy play his hand out.

I open the window and sniff the fresh, free air, wonderin' what the play is, and how I'm goin' to get away from the marshal. The telephone rings and I jump a foot, but the deputy don't notice it. Kenworthy answers. "Oh yes, No-Shirt," he says. "We're up here in your room waiting now. What? That's no way to treat men. You can't do this to me. Huh? I came here in good faith and—huh? The deal is off, I tell you. Just a minute." He fishes out a pencil. "Give me that address again." He writes down an address in Seattle, and hangs up. Then he cusses.

"What's the trouble?" the deputy asks.

"Aw, the old fool has met some sourdough he was on the trail with back in Ninety-eight," Kenworthy says, "they're having a drinking bout and he's going to stay all night."

"What is that address?" the deputy asks, tryin' to be off-hand about it.

"Here it is," Kenworthy answers, readin' it off, "but you're a sucker if you buy any tin stock from a man like that."

"I'll think it over," the deputy says. He picks up his hat, thanks us for the drink and disappears.

"Damn that McGee," Kenworthy growls as the deputy closes the door. Then he lowers his voice. "I recognized him when Bulldozer admitted him. One of Parson's favorite tricks is to have men arrested on some charge or other. He reasons that when they're in jail they are out of his way. I saw the signs when he asked for you, Mr. McGee."

"So you went into my room and called a friend and asked him to call back and say he was me?" I ask. "That's fast thinkin'," I add when he nods.

"Yes, for the moment, but you'll have to think faster than that to beat Parson Doyle," he says. "What're we going to do with you?"

"Let's find out what I'm wanted for, first," I suggest.

KENWORTHY goes downstairs to a telephone and makes a call he don't want goin' through the hotel switchboard.

He's pretty serious lookin' when he comes back.

"Parson Doyle has sworn out a warrant charging you with murdering Rainbow Gleason and Shorty Jessup," he says. "I called the marshal's office and said I was a newspaper man and heard there was a warrant out for No-Shirt McGee. They said his arrest was expected any moment."

"About the time it'll take 'em to drive to southwest Seattle," I suggest. "What's the evidence?"

"A bullet in Rainbow Gleason's body," Kenworthy answers.

"So that's where Parson Doyle went to," Bulldozer says, "when he chartered a plane and disappeared with Itkilik. He had the dog show him the grave. This is goin' to be tough, No-Shirt. You were the only man in the country at the time. Say, I just remembered. You said you fired ahead of Itkilik to stop him and keep him from draggin' Gleason over the rim of the gulch. You don't suppose by any chance that bullet hit him."

"How could it?" I ask. "Still . . ." The idea made me feel funny in the pit of the stomach, specially when I remembered I'd filed on the ground in my name. I told Kenworthy about it.

He shook his head. "It was a smart thing to do," he admits, "because it gave you control. But leave it to Parson to accuse you of murdering them and jumping their ground. And leave it to Parson to prove it. What're you going to do?"

"I ain't goin' to be arrested and kept in jail here," I answer, "and maybe held until the first boat sails around the first of June. Tim," I says turnin' to the nervous pilot, "at the risk of bein' accused of helpin' a wanted man to escape—if we're caught—will you fly me back to Nome?"

"We'd better start right now," Big Tim answers. "When that deputy finds he's been on a wild goose chase he's going to be—irked."

"Is your plane gassed and ready?" Kenworthy inquiries.

"My plane is always ready and gassed," Big Tim replies. "No-Shirt, go down the stairs, grab a taxi, get off a block from the plane and walk the rest of the way. Bulldozer and I will check out. If we can get away from Seattle without a marshal stopping us, there's a chance we can make it through to Nome. Well, what're you standing there with a vacant look in your eyes for?"

"I just thought of something," I answer. "Remember I couldn't find my rifle just before we hopped off for Seattle? Well, I'm wondering if there's any connection with that, and the discovery of Gleason's body with a bullet in it."

"If there is, No-Shirt, it'll go hard with you," Tim says.

"And you can bet your last dollar there will be a very definite connection if Parson Doyle has anything to do with it," Kenworthy says darkly.

And with that cheerful prediction ringin' in my ears I sneak downstairs and call a cab.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Help 15 Miles Of Kidney Tubes

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Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 Miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. Most people pass about 3 pints a day or about 3 pounds of waste.

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The Flame Tree

By CHARLES T. JACKSON

For Sale Or Rent
Desirable Florida Beach Lots
Apply: R. P. Streeter
—but watch your step!

MR. STREETER was dusting the fiddlercrabs off Imperial Boulevard, Sub-Division Six, in Yocum City, Florida, and the little gray fiddlers had not been so stirred since the boom, the blow and the bust.

"Shoo! Git!" said Mr. Streeter. "Don't you know that Floridy's sure on the up again?"

The fiddlers danced and shuffled along into the hole in the crumbly cement about the base of the ancient—twelve years eight months — street lamppost which slanted its lightless top into the scruffed crown of a cabbage palm. This lamp was almost solid bronze, except that you could peek through the lacy holes which salt storm-spray had eaten out, and it was Neo-Egyptian or Romanesque, something like that. Mr. Streeter's gray brows contracted merrily and his eyes twinkled as he reached to the upper pocket of his denim dungarees for some of the yellowed, forgotten literature which Yocum Properties, Inc., had spread over the world in those grand days when realtors sold the blue sky and the deep sea and platted canals and boulevards until they were crowding the Mexican Gulf right off its own beaches.

"This lamp," said Mr. Streeter, "maybe it was Neo-Chinese. Ed Yocum had just got back from Hongkong or somewhere when we ran the boulevard across 110th Avenue." Mr. Streeter couldn't read the literature because it was all stuck together, and he raised his voice toward the mangrove jungle which robed lost corners.

"Poinciana! Poinciana, bring out Plat Two and let's see what intersection this is. If Tunky would cut the brush down one

side instead of choppin' around all over the boulevard we'd know in a minute what kind of lamppost this is. Big Ed variegated 'em to take in the seven stages o' mankind he said."

Miss Royal Poinciana Streeter came around a sea-grape tangle, a bit vexed because she had just lost the heel of her sandal in a hole of the Italian, or maybe baronial, parquet floor of the Sub-Division Six field office which Mr. Yocum had ordained for customers to smear with muck from their shoes after looking over Yocum City. Mr. Ed Yocum would know, but then Big Ed had jumped off an Atlantic liner one dark night twelve years ago, at a spot where there was no real estate to support him.

"Tunk!" cried Miss Streeter, "will you go see what Dad is yammering about? Maybe this is 118th Avenue. Tunk!"

The black boy dodged out from the wall of the real estate office, gave a despairing wail and dodged back again.

"Grab hold, Mis' Poincie!"

Miss Poincie dodged to the other side of the real estate office. She had a ten-cent tack hammer, and she had been trying to bolster up the inside of the real estate office with ten-penny nails and brand new pressed boarding. While Miss Poincie pounded inside the real estate office Tunk pushed on the outside of the real estate office. They were trying to get the billowy effect out of a wall which curved even as did Poinciana herself.

MISS STREETER shook the west wall of the mean old real estate office. Its top was lost in the tangle of hurricane-scarred oaks and its legs were beginning to waver. Miss Streeter said something quite bad about the real estate business; the royal poinciana tree after which she had been named, was no more fiery than her hair. Poinciana Streeter truly was red-headed as well as cheeked and lipped; and no Neo-Something lamp could have lighted Imperial Boulevard as her wrath did now.

"This rotten old shack is coming down," she shouted. "Grab hold! Everybody grab hold!"

"Look out yo' haid!" The black boy yelled. "Sho come down!"

Tunk's side sagged with a screech of rusty nails and splitting clapboards. And there, beyond him, stood a young man. Even in this crisis Miss Streeter knew he was some kind of promoter come to advise about putting Yocum City on the map again. And was she mad? So mad that she sucked the end of the tack hammer instead of her hammered thumb. Then she hurled the tack hammer at the promoter and yelled. "Grab hold!"

The strange young man rushed to grab the south wall. The real estate office gave a mighty crack through all its sixteen by sixteen expanse. It's cupola, or belfry, or something, to which hung a faded gilt sign-board, longer than the real estate office itself, lurched out and Miss Streeter shouted further orders.

"Let go! The thing's loose at the top!"

"Aren't we all?" smiled the young man. "What's this crawling up my sleeve?"

"Grampus!" Tunk shrieked. "Misteh, 'at bug bite yo' en'yo' swell up lak poison pup! Leggo!"

Miss Streeter smiled royal disdain: "Everybody knows that there are no bad bitin' bugs in Florida. I mean Yocum City. Maybe in Palm Beach and Miami or Jax, but not in Yocum City. We own it, mister, so shouldn't we know? Let go!"

Cold as it was, the light of her smile was on him, so Mr. J. Hamilton Arnold held on, and all the belfries in the world with bugs and bats in their tops wouldn't have stopped him. His smile answered light for light, but Mr. Arnold had more than bugs up his smeared sleeve. Much more. He gazed at her in innocent surprise.

"Yocum City? Then that is Mr. R. P. Streeter, the pioneer developer, and all this—amazing progress, this remarka—"

"Let go of this shanty! Dad, come grab this fella away and sell him something! Quick with the good old abstract or whatever you hit 'em with! Oh, father, move!"

Mr. Streeter came from the boulevard

sedately. "Young man," he beamed, "I am indeed, Mr. Streeter, but my daughter is R. P. Streeter, named after the only royal poinciana tree left in all Yocum City. There was a tropical disturbance once, and our house—"

"We live on that shantyboat at the end of the boulevard—it's ashore high and tight. Something happened to the ocean and it turned to mud. Yes, I'm Royal Poinciana Streeter, known in school as Poincie the Pooch. Hi, the belfry's sinking! Let go!"

Mr. Arnold's lips moved in real surprise this time. In fact he was sunk. "You—R. P. Streeter . . . Shanty boat—" He turned his head to gaze through the mangroves. The Gulf tide was out and he saw shiny mud flats past another lamppost marking the end of the vast dreams which Big Ed Yocum had sold for millions but couldn't collect two percent cash.

Miss Streeter wailed weakly, now: "Oh, he won't let go! The whole smear is coming down! Tunk, let go! Everybody let go!"

The black boy let go of his side. Miss Poincie dashed away from her side. So the sub-division field office came down with a fuzzy little roar but the end of the faded gilt sign charged out from the jungle fairly upon Mr. Arnold's panama and he went down.

Tunk ran around the dust cloud to look at him. Poncie came to lift the end of the signboard which read:

EDWARD YOCUM PROPERTIES, INC.

Mr. Streeter gazed at it with romance in his eyes. "My dear, you've knocked out the only prospect we've had in years. I hope he comes to."

Tunk said: "Mis' Poincie, dis man's brains is leakin' out his ears."

She shook her head.

"They couldn't. Didn't you hear me warn him a dozen times? He wouldn't do in real estate. When everybody yelled 'leggo!' he hung on. So he took it just like Big Ed did with his last million."

MR. J. HAMILTON ARNOLD woke up in the dazzle of a midsummer Florida morning on a wide blue-covered bed. It had hand-painted blue cuckoos with yellow eyes on the posts, and he looked quickly past them over a shining floor through a doorway beyond which high white tropic heat smoked over still blue water.

"This," mused Mr. Arnold, "is a shantyboat lying in mud. Now, let's see? A shack fell down on me. Who else escaped? Hey, there!"

He was alone here at the edge of the mangrove jungle, and when he had felt of the blue bump on his temple, avoiding the gaze of the four blue cuckoos, he was glad to be alone. Mr. Arnold needed solitude to fan the fog out of the old bean. Let's see now. . . . He'd left his car back as far as he could drive it in from Tamiami Trail and then hoofed along a crumbled asphalt avenue grown with palmettoes till they gave way to mangrove swamp and the tide flats.

"The big fella," murmured Mr. Arnold, "hung one on me. I was to find a cracker family named Streeter, and— Oh, yes, I found 'em!"

He sat up on the cuckoo bed and looked around the room. A nice room as shantyboats go. The walls were unfinished wood but like the floor they had been cleanly polished, and among the bracing two by four's were watercolors and some flimsy but gay Indian spreads were hung about, and others ballooned down from the pine rafters giving the place rather the aspect of a tea shoppe or waffle joint, Mr. Arnold thought, though he knew little about exclusively feminine joints. The blue cuckoo bed was out in the middle of the big room where it found breezes from any of the windowed sides, and there were periwinkles along these open windows, smart and clean as the sea itself.

Mr. Arnold looked all about dubiously. He seemed to have been half rolled in a sheet, laid out and left for a wake later. He spoke loudly and firmly, for he wished to be heard.

"Where are my clothes. Especially my trousers, I mean?"

Complete silence. Outside the glitter of Gulf Bay waters and the sinister green choke of the mangroves. Mr. Arnold spoke to himself next. "I had one grand of Butsy Peralti's dough and about sixty dollars of my own in those pants, and I came out to razzle a bunch of simple crackers in the big grass. Butsy, we're licked before we got started. These saps have everything except my shirt. Where are these Streeters? They're off grabbing another slick one and going to sell him real estate."

Mr. Arnold quit mumbling and stretched out. He didn't want any real estate. Mr. Peralti, top man of the Detroit handbook syndicate, had come down with some of his fast-working young men, in midsummer, to get all set for the coming winter races. Not only races; there were any number of things to be arranged with politicos and commissioners and so on. Peralti had one sweet little night club in Miami Beach with all kinds of gadgets to amuse tourists in the season. The Club Peralti had had a most profitable last season what with roulette, birdcage, blackjack, and so on, though the spread of his handbooks, in the hands of his bright young men, was by far the pleasantest if you could keep the racetrack owners from growing envious about gambling that should go in their gates.

Young Mr. Arnold had quit college last year to be a picker for the football-pool cards, and when the pigskin gambling was over, he had just drifted naturally to the handbook and poolroom rackets. Mr. Peralti always said that a pleasing youth in collegiate clothes and a charming smile made the best front man.

He said, in fact:

"Now, lissen, Hammy, a guy like you is hot. I plant you around one o' the big hotels, I mean where dames wit' the big dough hang out, and in no time ain't you got 'em playin' around the club or pickin' winners off your card? Always we can use a good collitch man for front. Nuttin' rough for you, understand?"

MR. ARNOLD compared the blue bump on his head with the blue cuckoos as he remembered more of Peralti's sage advice.

"Now, Hammy, you got a way that'll be good with kids an' rubes, too. So I'm sendin' you out, where, I dunno, a spot called Yocum City, where you scare some suckers with some tax title deeds, some kind o' junk my attorney fellas got hold of. It ain't robbin' 'em. It's just takin' off 'em. Y' see some old party, named R. P. Streeter, owns a lot on the Beach that taxes ain't been paid on since Man o' War first paid off. I don't want it, but that Chicago mob that's puttin' over the Hotsy Club is after it. If them Hotsies get that corner they'll put a hundred grand into their joint. It's right across from the Club Peralti, and if the Hotsies open there and have a commissioner in on the cut—heh-heh! You think mebbe just get some of our business? No, they'll close us up, that's what they'll do. They'll get the commissioners or somebody to find somethin' wrong with our licenses. A fella'll get crazy in the head about licenses. Health and garbage and marble machines, and liquor, all that junk you gotta have. You know the old razz, Hammy, even if you are a new man from collitch. Them politicians'll find something wrong, and before I get it fixed next season the big dough is all in. So you and me, Hammy, we fix first—see? If the Hotsies don't get that lot they won't start workin' on us."

"You want to buy a lot off this R. P. Streeter, out in the jungle?" Mr. Arnold had said, "All right, Butsy, why not?"

"I don't want to buy no lot. Y' know, mebbe, in a year or so we all get jammed out, so I don't want no real estate. I want you to get a lease for five or ten years, and you pay this farmer one grand down and tie him up. You scare him with them tax titles and tell him we'll pay 'em out for him. Of course if the sap would sell his Beach lot for a thousand, take him on. But even a 'Glades cracker wouldn't fall for that. So you jump out

there and clean these suckers, Hammy, and fetch me their hides, see?"

"Where's this Yocum City?"

"I dunno. You go out the Trail somewhere. Better take an axe along to get your car in, mebbe. Frany said once he seen a sign on a busted post and it read Yocum City. Get there first. I unnerstand them Hotsies have a real estate fella on the job. I don't want to send no hard-guy mouthpiece out to see old Streeter. But you, Hammy, you can kiss all his kids and mebbe plant one on grandpa's bald spot. I leave it to you; tell 'em anything just so's we control the Hotsies' corner. Don't be rough."

Now Mr. Arnold addressed the blue cuckoo on the starboard side of the bed. "Was I rough? Kiss 'em—Hey—"

Someone came noiselessly—very likely in sneakers—from around the head of the bed. He saw Miss Poinciana Streeter but she had changed from purple slacks to white slacks. She said:

"What's the matter with you? Delirious? Of course not."

"Certainly not. Who washed my ears? I can feel soap crackle and crinkle in 'em."

"I washed your ears and your face and your neck. Tunk and Dad rolled you in this sheet after I cleaned the mud off you."

"Cleaned?" said Arnold. "Oh, yes—um—cleaned!"

"Why didn't you let go when we all yelled let go? No, like a sucker, you hang on."

"I was looking at you. Let hurricanes roar and earthquakes yawn, I was looking at you."

"Yes, I saw you." Poinciana put down a pitcher of papaya juice on the pine table. "Business man, eh—full of business."

"Cleaned out," said J. Ham, "anyhow I got my smile left."

She looked and grew fiercely silent. That smile had gone places and she knew it. He was trying it on her. "You're no real-estate man, you haven't any business in the world."

"Oh, yes! Where's Mr. Streeter? Where—my—my clothes?"

"I sent 'em out to the garage on the Trail. You struck nails and cactus and everything when you let that sign hit you."

"To a garage? Lady, that's no place to fix pants!"

"Willy's wife will sew and clean everything. You lie here. Two miles in the sun and the rest of your brains will ooze out. Now, your money—I stuck it in that clock—one thousand and sixty-eight dollars. It stopped the clock."

Ham Arnold looked at the glass-faced wooden clock on a high shelf. It had had its great moments during the Spanish-American War he decided. You saw the works through the worn gilt.

"One grand stuck way up in that clock where I can't reach it without a chair," he said. "Sure it stopped—too much prosperity. If I had my trousers back I could buy a lot in Yocum City. A duck pond with pollywogs."

Miss Streeter sat down and gazed at the hot blue sea out the front or fo'cas'le end of the shantyboat. "You're not here for real estate. You don't know the lingo to be a promoter. What's a bird dog?"

"Well," J. Ham smiled, "everybody knows it's a mutt that chases your chickens. Or—in Yocum City—your ducks."

Miss Poinciana smiled toward the dazzling sea. "Big Ed Yocum, twelve years ago—said I'd be a wonderful bird dog. Big Ed said I'd sit in the windows of his Miami offices, in beautiful clothes—the only baby bird dog in the business. He said, when I was seven, the suckers would mob the place to get their money down."

"Yes," said J. Ham, "then you grew up—and look at me now? I want my papers and clothes, everything you took off of me. Please."

"What's a binder?" said Poinciana suddenly.

"Kind of stickum you put on books," smiled J. Ham.

"Never mind. What's a debenture?"

"I know that one. You wind a lot of thin wire around an iron post and it makes

electricity go. But I'm no good in science—"

"All right! All right!" Miss Poinciana got up. "I must get lunch for dad and Mr. Shuster. He arrived right after the shack fell on you. He took one look at you and hurried dad right out to his car to get to a telephone."

"Oh, no!" Mr. Arnold felt himself getting pale all around the blue lump on his face. "Oh, please get me up out of here. That feller—Shuster—the Chicago mob, the Hotsies—Oh, Mr. Streeter mustn't deal with him. He's a—a—crook!"

"I don't care. We'll sell him Yocum City—except Lots Eight and Nine, Block Ten. Of course he's a crook. A lot of crooks come out here."

"Oh, Miss Streeter—don't sign or sell anything with that Hotsy agent! Oh, listen to me—it's what I came to tell your dad! You folks own a lot on Miami Beach, don't you?"

"If we get the tax-title thing cleared up—yes. Want to buy it?"

"N-nn-o. Well, yes—that is, of course." J. Ham was feeling under the sheet where his pockets ought to be and gazing at the Victorian clock. "Oh, I must get out! Where are my—my papers, all that?"

MISS POINCIANA smiled and there was danger in it. "I read your—papers. All that junk in your pockets. It'll stay up there in the clock. Now, you're no real-estate promoter, or anything. Your papers had nothing to do with lots. You bet race-horses, that's what you do. And dogs. You had a little book with a lot of figures in it, and some telegrams that made no sense for a business man. You're one of those smart townies that hang around poolrooms. Now, Mr. Shuster, he's crooked but he's a business man. He knows his stuff. Took one look at you lying in the mud and told dad not to trust a face like that. Shuster's been to school."

"Yes." J. Ham moaned slightly. "You've been there yourself."

"In Virginia," said Poinciana. "Just been back to the jungle since June. We live on coon oysters and cabbage-palm salad. Floridy's sure on the boom ag'in! Have some papaya juice, will you?"

Mr. Arnold tasted and didn't like the stuff. Even the Detroit mob wasn't wise to everything; he had thought papaya was the name of that bug that started up his sleeve when the house fell on him. So he started to complain again:

"I wish you wouldn't be so tough. I'm not tough. Butsy Peralti says that's why I'm useful. I'm not a bit tough."

"Well," said Poinciana, "You won't last long so what's the difference? I'll send Tunk out this evening to get your clothes from Willy's wife at the garage. Then go back to the dogs."

"No," retorted J. Ham, and he tried to speak firmly. "I've business here with Mr. Streeter. Must stop Shuster—don't sign a thing with Shuster. Tell your father to lay off Shuster."

"Dad can sign all he wants. He and Mr. Shuster are down at the Trail now, drinking beer. Dad is talking millions, the happiest old thing in the world. Let dad alone, will you?"

"But Shuster—he's a crook!"

"I told him he could have the Miami Beach lot if he'd invest in Yocum City, and he jumped right to it."

Young Mr. Arnold was suffering. He tried to touch her hand on the papaya pitcher. "Oh, Miss Poinciana! Just think of you, little Poincie, trying to act hard! If it wasn't for real estate you'd be the sweetest thing! Even if you are redheaded, the worst—I mean the first red head who made me think of sunset; I mean, you know what I mean—thundrous fiery, red, that is—"

Poincie laughed at last. "Better quit. But look at that sky, will you? A flame! Did you notice our poinciana tree?"

"I never saw one. Never saw anything but you. I was trying to decide, were your eyes blue, or was it the shadow of the jungle that made 'em so deep—then your real-estate office fell on me."

"That reminds me," said Poincie, and ceased to look at the sunset over the Gulf, the white clouds like glaciers sitting on the sea rim and the water smoky gold. "Do you want that Beach lot? Twenty thousand—cash. I told Shuster ten thousand but it's gone up since. You take so long to make up your mind." She went to the back, or stern door, of the shantyboat and looked at the mangrove hemming the mud flat under its bottom. There was a white shell path leading to the higher land, the hammock, where cocoplum and seagrape and a few oaks grew; and beyond and over these, J. Hamilton Arnold saw a spread of soft red. It was like the roof of a house only he knew it was an immense tree, and the color came from hanging plumes with a thin lace of green to show that there really were branches upholding this glory. Miss Streeter turned back to Ham Arnold and she was quite changed. A bit pensive and he knew something had happened.

"Poincie Streeter," he said slowly, "I didn't come to buy in Yocum City. Neither did Shuster. We're a couple of—well, I do wish your father wouldn't sign anything with Shuster."

"Let him sign all he wants. Dad doesn't own Yocum City nor the Beach lot either. He couldn't. Shuster's burning gas for nothing. Mother left that lot to me, and Big Ed gave me the six hundred acres of Yocum City. It wasn't worth a darn but it was all he had. What fooled you gyps was that I am R. P. Streeter. Well, I'll sell the whole works except Lots 8 and 9, Block 10. That's the flame tree—you couldn't get it for a million."

MR. ARNOLD looked at the stopped clock, choked on one grand. A dime would have stopped him now. That, and the mystery in her eyes. But he had a glimmer of business too; a business man would get the owner of that Beach lot right away before Mr. Shuster could try to tempt her.

"Miss Poinciana Streeter," he said and smiled quietly, "I'd like to see that flame tree for which you were named. Not to buy a thing, mind you—not even to intrude where you don't wish."

"I never take people there, but—" she hesitated so long that Hammy Arnold said: "Thank you, Poincie," and she looked at him with the same quiet seriousness.

She went to another room and came out, undoing a package. Then she did laugh again. "These are brand new dungarees. For father. I don't suppose they'll fit you, a rather tall fella."

"Who cares if they fit or not? We're going, aren't we?"

She sat on the lower steps which led up to the ancient scow deck that had been made into the houseboat, her feet among the periwinkles and ferns by the narrow shell walk. He was hauling on bright brass buckles over his shoulders, and true enough, Mr. Streeter's new denims ended in angular slants midway upon Mr. Arnold's shin bones. So they both laughed, and for the first time together. "You're so funny," said Poinciana, leading the way.

Ten yards back in the hammock jungle, leading off the path to the broken boulevard, they came upon a way of fitted coral slabs and the joints had been kept clipped of weeds.

"Big Ed Yocum built this walk," Poinciana said. "With his own hands. Alone here, night after night, after the crash and the hurricane. Dad and I were both hurt when our house washed into the Gulf and Ed Yocum sent us to a hospital. I was seven."

"Yocum? I thought he was the big plunger, the millionaire—"

"Yes, and he kneeled here, putting down these slabs. . . . I think, at times, he must have been crying as he worked."

"His boom city—a dream—crashed—ruined—"

"No," said Poincie, "he wouldn't cry for that. Come on."

The slabs led to a low coral wall, lichened between the delicate traceries of the living things that had built the stone

millions of years ago. Poincie Streeter stopped as if here, hidden from all the gaud and newness of Florida on the boom again, was some other thing so ancient that it caught her breath.

Young Mr. Arnold felt it and was still. Then he looked at the girl and said: "It's peace."

"It's love. That's a very old thing too."

He did not answer, so they stood outside the low wall to which there was no gate. It enclosed a cleared space about the mighty royal poinciana which lifted its soft scarlet arms high and far above the hammock jungle. Its trunk was a gray-green tower of strength, and before this was a white shell mound. But upon the shell-gleam, and over all the space between the walls, was a red robe. You could not see the ground because of the fallen blossoms. The top of the walls marked a square as of blood. Yet not the bright terror of blood; perhaps very ancient blood softened to beauty.

"Mother's buried here," said Poinciana Streeter.

"Yes," said J. Hamilton Arnold. "I knew. You didn't need to say."

She smiled gravely. "Why not? It doesn't hurt. It's beautiful."

THERE was a vast reach of sunset behind the mangroves; white and gold and black edging the shield of faintly quivering sky. J. Ham did not put foot upon the red carpet before him. He said again:

"It's peace." Then looked at her and knew there was no grief. There was a bright ghost haunting this hidden spot; a spirit that had loved color and the changeful winds of the sea. A spirit that smiled with them, and slowly Arnold knew that there were things he would care for no more in his world. But really it had never been his world; he had merely gone along watching it curiously.

Life had been a lunatic scramble of jocks and odds and tips and touts, figuring dope sheets; buy, bribe, swindle or kill. Crack down on the Hotsies before they could chisel on you; and then all this other scramble of Miami Beach, lots and blocks and avenues all smeared up with shiny new walls that glared across the synthetic cuteness of the landscape men. J. Ham knew he didn't want to see it again. He murmured: "Peace," in the midst of beauty wild and lost.

The girl burst out suddenly as if an old, old curiosity was upon her. "I wonder who my mother was?"

"Beautiful," said Hammy. "I know she was."

"She was a Russian dancer," said Poincie Streeter, "that's about all I know. Poor little dad never told me much. Yes—beautiful. I remember that. She was killed in the '26 hurricane, and she loved the flame tree. Big Ed Yocum buried her here alone."

"Loved her—of course. The big plunger—now I see. He threw his last million into this jungle for her."

"Lost it all," said Poincie quietly. Then she flamed up: "Just think—maybe she was a Russian princess? Only they shot them all, didn't they?"

"No," said J. Ham, "a few got away." And he felt very large and wise and comforting, not at all the slick of Peralti's mob. R. P. Streeter now seemed to be a child guessing at wonders, and J. Ham must comfort her and let her dream.

Poincie smiled: "Or maybe a Russian spy who betrayed them!"

"Wish we knew. Beautiful, and a dancer, and married little dad. Buried by the flame tree . . . just look at the sunset now!"

"Of all the dreary jungle this was the one spot she loved."

"I guess we understand Big Ed, don't we?"

"He was a Californian and he followed her all around the China stations. Oh, a plunging, mining man! Maybe he frightened her. Anyhow she married dad when he was trying to dig gold in Alaska—of course, when everyone else was through and there wasn't any. Well, dad brought

her to Florida and put her money into real estate—this jungle, do you understand? They built a house where she could see the flame tree, but that was where the ocean could get it. So she sank her hundred thousand into the swamp, and Big Ed Yocum heard it was lost. He came here and threw his fortune after it—streets, sidewalks—miles and miles lost and hidden now. He built canals and was going to have Venetian gondolas on them—gondoliers dressed in red and gold. Do you understand?"

"Yes. For her. And then the hurricane." Ham Arnold pointed at the flaming tree and its mighty trunk. "There is Big Ed now, guarding her."

"I've thought that too." Poincie seemed a little frightened. "Big Ed who gave a child diamonds—his baby bird-dog to sell lots in a Miami show window! Wasn't it wonderful?"

"Wasn't it? Wish I'd seen it. Big Ed fighting the jungle."

"Mother insisted on naming the place after him. Little dad didn't mind. He was living in the midst of a great dream. Just as now. I don't, except when I come here, always alone."

MR. ARNOLD took the girl by the shoulders and turned her so that the red glow of tree and sunset was on her face. On that flaming hair and in her eyes.

"Listen, Poincie," Ham muttered. "Leave it that way. No slicks and wisecracks out here with plats and estimates. Big Ed's lost city. Tear up the boulevard lamps and let the jungle cover every corner and pavement. Burn that shanty-boat and destroy the trail in forever. Leave them alone—those two."

"I'd want to come again—"

"I'd find a way for you. Kind of a secret way that we would remember. We would. No one else but you and I. We would know."

"We?" she said, and stared at him in the dusk. "How?"

"Oh, well!" Mr. Arnold turned away, trying to have a business voice. "Let's fight. Those tax-title deeds to your beach lot and this hammock. Got to get 'em paid out—got to keep the chiselers away. Oh, I know what we'll do; Poincie, you got a thousand in your busted clock! Old Butsy Peralti's one grand. We'll tell the world that I got hit on the head and woke up frisked. Who knows who got it?"

"You would." She smiled at his ardor. "And old Butsy—whoever he is—he thinks you're honest."

"Oh, my!" Ham grinned. "Think of that! The big crook thinkin' I'm honest? Handing me one grand and telling me to go off and rook some people! No receipt, no anything—just believing I'm on the level."

"He trusts you, of course."

"Think of that? The old wolf trusting me! Fighting the other wolves off his neck, he trusts me to play square!"

"Of course he would. I do too."

"You!" shouted J. Ham, and took her by the shoulder again. "Sure, a kid like you! But Butsy—damn his crooked soul! Thinking I'm square. You know what, Poincie? I'm going out to the Trail, soon as I get my clothes, and telephone the Club Peralti and tell Butsy his one grand is on its way back, registered!"

"Butsy?" said Poinciana. "Who is he—and what are you raving about?"

Mr. Arnold stopped and smiled. "Butsy told me to go find R. P. Streeter, and then kiss his old bald head. I bet I'd burn my lips, Poincie?" Hammy Arnold laughed again; he wanted to confess but he was no good as a confessor. So he looked at her red head again and kept on laughing. "Butsy thought R. P. Streeter was a simple old cracker, and, my dear, it's you! Oh, you're such a child, you'll never understand!"

"Am I?" said Poincie and liked being told so after all. "Go on!"

"Well, it's this way. The Detroit mob—that is, I mean a—syndicate of—er—business men—want to stop the Hotsies from getting your Miami Beach lot to build the hottest spot on the Beach. But

Mr. Butsy Peralti has got hold of some old tax-titles and he thinks he can scare you into letting him control your lot so the Hotsies don't get it. Oh, you'll never understand!"

His face was hot and he was breathing sort of heavily. And besides, he knew she was smiling.

"Go on," said Poincie, "I bet I do! Only I see you're all cracked up trying to tell me. Are you afraid of these Hotsies?"

"No." Mr. Arnold grinned. "I'm through with the rackets. I'm going into real estate! I'm going to sell that Beach lot for you! That guy, Shuster, came out here to make a real bid for it, but I'm going to beat him. Twenty-thousand? How did you know it was worth twenty thousand?"

"Twenty thousand," Poincie gasped. "I didn't! I don't know a thing about real estate! I said twenty thousand just to bluff you. Oh, sell it quick! Twenty thousand—can you?"

She swung around and her hand grasped Mr. Arnold's arm tightly; she was very close to him now. Mr. Arnold looked down into her eyes soberly an instant; then he grinned again.

"Sure I'll sell it—and not to any night-club mob either. Then I—then we—say, I wonder what Big Ed Yocum would advise us to do?"

"I wonder?" said Poinciana, and looked back to where the flame tree glimmered against the blue with one faint star behind. "But Big Ed didn't know all the answers, jumping from a ship a thousand miles off Sandy Hook—only I guess he thought mother was waiting for him."

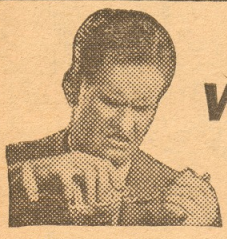
His voice almost a whisper, Mr. Arnold said slowly:

"I think Big Ed found a piece of real estate all his own at last. A lot two miles down, but his very own. I bet he landed with his chin up and his soul a-burnin'."

He stopped, and turned his head a little to study the red gold of Poincie's hair. She was not looking at him; her eyes were still on the flame tree, and for a moment then neither of them spoke.

"He'd tell us to take a chance," whispered Poincie, and then laughed once more. "How can you bid twenty thousand for my lot when you really haven't a dime of your own?"

"That's it," said Mr. Arnold. He pulled her red head down upon the new brass buckle of Mr. Streeter's dungarees, and they both began laughing. "Haven't a dime but I've got you!"



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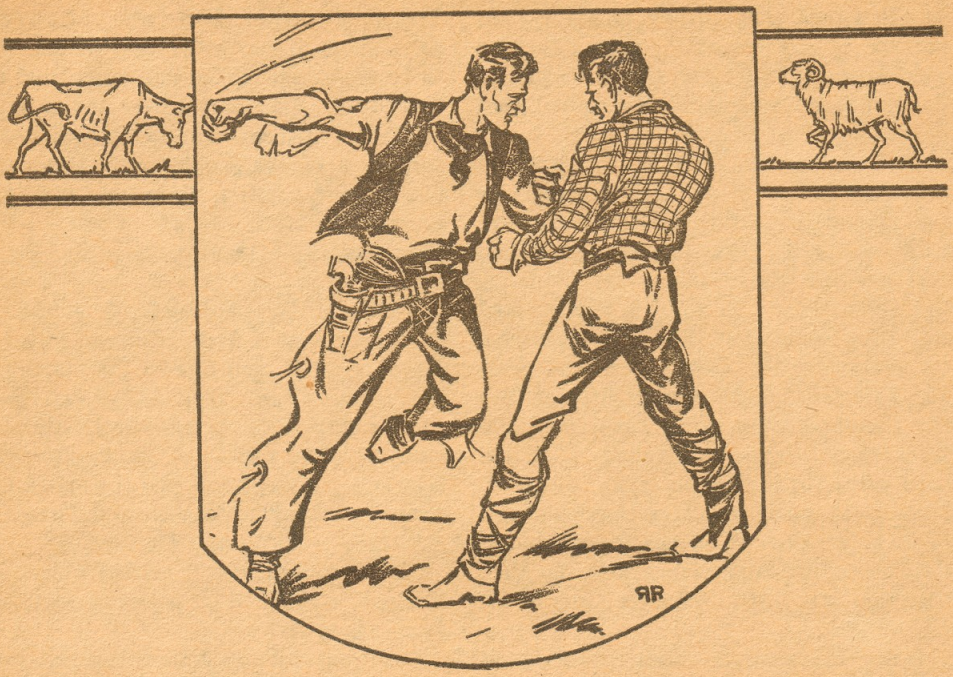


Moo Moo, Black Sheep

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Cut Loose Your Wolf," "The Old Breed," etc.

Sheepmen and Cowmen always fight, but Andy's feud with Vick Seagrue made range history

THERE was no other way out of it: Andy Clinton had to move his cattle to Calico Flats. Drought had cleaned his own country, grass and water were gone. The bank would not lend him money to ship to Kansas, and he had fought too long and too hard to go to market with his cows. He knew what they were worth and he wanted to keep them. So when he heard of a lease on the Flats, not a hundred miles away, he rode over to see it.

The lease had not been touched for two years. There was grass enough, old grass, to see Andy's bunch through, and on the five thousand acres there were three wells that shot silver streams of water out into the galvanized iron tanks. Andy signed up.

He knew that he was getting into a tough spot. He knew that the Calico Flats was a sheep country. He knew that a cowman is not welcome in a sheep country, that he would be in hot water from the time he hit until he left, that he would be an outcast, disliked and distrusted, but just the same he moved. It was not desperation entirely, that made him go. It was that good grass and that never failing water and, deep in his heart, the conviction that one cowman was worth ten sheepmen and could whip them in a pinch.

There was a road through the lease, a winding, twisting thing, and the first thing Andy did after the men who had helped him move were gone, was to kick two clean boards from an Arbuckle coffee box and paint two signs. Those signs were no stroke of diplomacy. They read: "Close the gate

or I'll wire it shut." Andy took the signs out and hung them on the gates. Then he went about the fifty-one chores he had to do, grinning as he rode. He figured that he had declared himself.

In a way he had. Vick Seagrue who ran sheep to the south of Andy's lease, saw the sign on the lower gate and scowled. Vick was a big, slow-moving fellow and everyone in the Calico Flats country thought a heap of him. Vick had coveted the lease for himself; not that he needed the grass and the water, there was grass and water all over the Flats that year. But five thousand acres would have given him a chance to increase his holdings. Vick had been just a little slow in trying to get it. Handling a bunch of sheep does not tend to make a man fast on the trigger, but it does make him mighty tenacious. To Vick that sign was just a defiance, flung in his face.

Down in Cotswold, taking a drink at the Home Pen Saloon, Vick spoke of the signs to his neighbors. "I see we got a cowman with us," Vick commented. "He's leased the old Lafferty place an' hung signs on the gates."

"I thought you had that place, Vick," Tom Summerford said.

"So did I," Vick grunted. Nothing more was said and Vick sipped his beer and Summerford looked out the window.

"He's right across the street," Summerford announced. "Ain't that him?"

Vick went to the window. There, across the street, standing under the tin awning of a store, was a cowboy sure enough. There was no mistaking the tipped-back hat or the open vest with the Bull Durham tag dangling from a pocket. The boots, heels two inches tall and with spurs clamped to them, the sleeve garters on the faded blue shirt, even the pants, worn away down low on the hips so that a shirt tail could come out easily, said "Cowman" plain as day.

Should the man be mistaken, there was another sign. A horse stood at the hitchrail in front of the store, a yellow horse that loafed with all his weight on one hind leg. The saddle on that horse was put there to stay, clamped on with two cinches, and there was a rope coiled and hung from the rope strap. Other horses were at the hitchrail. Some of them were pretty good horses and some of the saddles were good, too, but there was no mistaking that dun. Just the way he stood seemed to say, "I'm a cowhorse, I am. Look me over and get an eyeful!"

Vick and Tom Summerford looked out of the window. Andy Clinton rolled a cigarette, lit it, and flipped the match out in the dust. Right then Andy was thinking: "Lousy little sheeptown. It stinks of mutton." The trickle of smoke from his nose and the way he flipped the match disclosed his thoughts to Vick and Tom.

"Yeah," said Vick. "That's him."

"Darn cowpuncher!" snarled Tom. "He thinks he's just hell on wheels. Lookit him walk away. Why—!"

Lord, but a man's actions can gall, even when he doesn't say a word and you don't know him!

SOME little time elapsed before Andy met his neighbors. He rode his fenceline and watched the three wells he had on the place and looked after his cattle. He began the gentling process on two green horses that he had brought with him. He watched his gates and saw that they were closed. He cooked and ate and slept, but he did not go visiting. And no one visited Andy, which suited him right from the ground up.

Sheepmen—they ruined the grass and fouled the water holes. They had wool in their teeth and tallow in their ears and they could just let him alone.

So Andy worked and watched his cattle get fat and hoped that the winter would bring plenty of moisture so that he could get back to his own country in the spring.

With the coming of fall, traffic picked up on the road through Andy's place. Men that lived north of him hauled supplies out to their camps. Andy watched his gates. Once he made a teamster climb down and close a gate, and once he found one open.

It was on this occasion that he met Vick Seagrue.

Just on a hunch, Andy, having seen dust on the road, loped over to his south gate. Before he reached the gate he saw that it was down. He saw something else. There was a band of sheep by the gate, some of them through it. Those sheep were on his good grass, grass that he had paid for, and Andy, taking down his rope, went over to put them out.

He was riding the dun, a cutting horse Andy called Jackstraw. Jackstraw could turn on a dime and give a nickel change. Jackstraw could be behind a bunch of cows and when one broke to run he would be ahead of her, turning her. Jackstraw was Andy's pride and the boast of his outfit.

But neither Andy nor Jackstraw had ever tried to handle sheep. In that they were even, for these sheep, part of Vick Seagrue's band, had never been handled by a man on horseback. You just naturally don't handle sheep with a horse. Horses and cows, sheep and dogs and a man rattling rocks in a tin can; those things go together and they don't mix. Jackstraw went into those sheep and the sheep scattered with their little, stiff-legged run and stopped and looked at Andy and blatted. Of all the maddening performances!

Andy cut Jackstraw back and swung his rope. He cracked the rope over wooly backs. He swore and he turned Jackstraw back, and the sheep looked at him with their slitted, foolish eyes and scattered far and wide. Andy drew deeply on the sources of a well-oiled vocabulary. Jackstraw sweated on the shoulders and did his level best, and never a sheep went back through the gate.

Andy got nowhere, and gradually he began to realize it. He was just at the point of changing his tactics when a black and white mongrel dog came through the gate and right at him. From the dog's actions it was plain that he thought that he owned those sheep and that this fellow on the horse was trying to steal them. The dog, barking and snarling and snapping, made for Jackstraw's heels.

Jackstraw, already spooky, with trying to handle these strange creatures that would neither drive nor turn, humped his back and came unbuttoned. For about five jumps Andy had to ride. When he did get Jackstraw down so that the run kept two feet on the ground at the same time, Andy popped his rope. His aim was good and the black and white dog went kioodling for the gate. Andy took after him. Just at the gate the dog stopped and so did Andy. Vick Seagrue was at the gate, his tanned face scowling, his big feet widespread and firmly planted.

"Get your sheep out of my pasture!" Andy yelled.

"Any man that'll hit a dog is a skunk," stated Seagrue plainly. "Come down off that horse an' I'll prove it."

ANDY accepted the invitation. Here was an object that he could vent his wrath upon, and best of all, that could fight back! It never entered Andy Clinton's head that he could not whip the big sheepman. He came piling off Jackstraw swinging his fists and breathing fire and profanity. A big knuckled fist connected with his mouth and stopped the profanity, and another fist, sinking into Andy's belly blew out the fire. Andy, gathering his forces, set about repelling the attack.

He had his hands full and then some. Vick Seagrue was slow but when he landed, his blows jarred Andy clear back to his ancestors. The fight raged along the fence and out from it and back to the gate while Jackstraw cropped grass and the foolish sheep watched with their yellow eyes, and occasionally ran from the men. Andy's spurs played him false. A spur hung in the cuff of his Levis, and just at that moment Vick landed and Andy went down hard. His head hit the ground and the stars made a pretty procession. Andy was content to watch them.

When he did straighten and sit up, Seagrue and the dog were doing a nice job of rounding up the sheep and putting them back through the gate. Andy got to his feet just as the last of them went through,

a fat ewe wagging her button of a tail insultingly.

"You," said Andy, "you think you licked me, don't you?"

"I *know* I licked you," Seagrue answered.

Andy put his hand to his ringing head. "I'll get even. See if I don't."

"You're welcome to try," Vick returned. "My name's Seagrue and I live down below you. Come around. An' any time you need a licking just hit my dog!"

With that Vick closed the gate and went off after his sheep. Andy stood a little while and then caught Jackstraw and, mounting, rode to camp. His nose was bleeding and needed attention.

When Andy was out of sight, Vick sat down and let the pup take the sheep along. Tenderly he felt of a lump on his jaw and with his big thumb and forefinger waggled two front teeth. They were loose all right!

Word of the fight got around. Andy said nothing and Vick Seagrue very little, but that was enough. In a sheep country the victory of a sheepman over a cowpuncher was something to talk about and the tale was embossed and embroidered. Andy, going in to Cotswold, saw sly grins and heard the snickers. He bristled all along the back of his neck and walked around with an invisible chip on his shoulder, bootheels thumping, spurs jingling, bow legs swaggering.

"You'd think he'd licked you, Vick," said Tom Summerford to his big friend.

Vick Seagrue, feeling his teeth with his tongue, nodded. "He dang near did."

Andy rode out of town without getting into a fight and somehow felt cheated. Vick Seagrue, perched on his loaded wagon, went out following Andy. Vick was mighty well content.

The fall grew old. Wool was shipped, the lambs had long since gone, the sheepmen prepared for winter. Andy, too, made ready for the hard season. His horses were shod all around, the green broncs were getting to be worth their grass, the soddy was banked with dirt clear up to the roof and there was a pile of wood in the yard.

THEN Winter came. Winter never disappoints a cowman or a sheepman. Given an open winter, it is tough because there is no moisture to make grass in the spring. Given a winter with wind and snow and the cattle and the sheep can't get to the grass. Cowmen and sheepmen look for the worst from winter, and winter never fails them.

The first storms were mild enough. The snow fell straight down and then enough wind came to blow the ridges clear so that there was grazing. Andy rode and cut ice in the tanks and saw that the cows were coming through all right. Vick took supplies to his sheep camps and saw that the hay he had so laboriously cut from the vegas was holding out and that the sheep were in good shape. November, December drifted by. On Christmas Andy made himself a Tom and Jerry without any eggs and cooked a big steak dinner and enjoyed himself. On Christmas Vick Seagrue drank an egg nogg, having borrowed an egg from Mrs. Witherspoon, and cooked a leg of mutton and had a good time. Neither of them went to town on Christmas and they did not go on New Year's, either. On New Year's Eve Vick Seagrue and Andy Clinton were up to their necks in plenty of trouble.

December the thirty-first dawned clear and cold. By noon the weather had warmed and snow was falling. By four o'clock the wind was taking its sixty-five mile run, and jumping on Andy's soddy with a whoop and a howl. Andy was in the saddle. Vick was out with his sheep, seeing that the band that kept around the ranch was under shelter. Vick had some long rambling sheds at the ranch and the sheep went into those sheds.

He knew that the other two bands of sheep were in shelter. He had good men with them and they would see that the flocks were in the breaks. Still he could not keep from worrying, so Vick set out to reassure himself. Being a sheepman Vick had no confidence in a horse. He was big as a horse and stout as a mule, and he went afoot. It was just two miles from

Vick's ranch house to Andy's fence and the band he wanted to visit was half a mile along that fence. Vick buttoned up his coat, put on his overshoes, and pulled his cap down tight, then went out into the storm.

Andy Clinton, up above Vick's place, had his hands full. There was a little canyon and a rim, just the trace of a depression, at the north end of his lease. That was all the shelter he had, and Andy put his cattle in that shelter. He rode and fought cattle and got them located. He changed horses and rode again. He had most of his cattle cared for but there was one little bunch, perhaps thirty head, down by the south fence. Andy missed them, and just at dark, saddling his third mount, he went to get them.

He had ridden Jackstraw down and Blaze was in no better shape. Andy needed a strong horse and a good one, but in the dark he could not choose. He draped his rope over the first thing that was handy and swore when he found that he had snagged out a green horse. Still there was nothing for it but use what he had, and so Andy changed his saddle and mounted and started south, the wind at his back.

He reached the fence and rode along it and finally, in a fence corner, found his cows. They were bunched tight against the wire, the snow blowing over them, drifting up on them. Andy had seen things like that before. If he left those cattle there he would find them again, piled up in a heap in the fence corner, stiff and cold and too dead to care. Andy swung his horse into the bunch, whipping with his doubled rope and yelling hoarsely.

The cattle were too tired, too cold, too stiff, to move easily. They stirred under the doubled rope and the hoarse shouts, but they moved slowly. With Jackstraw or with Blaze, Andy might have accomplished something, but the green horse just did not know what it was all about. Andy fought cattle and he fought the horse. He battled and worked, never giving up, and then on a turn the bronc slipped and fell. When he got up Andy just lay there.

VICK SEAGRUE, coming back along the Lafferty fence, plodded steadily across the wind. All he had to do was follow the fence until he reached the gate and then turning his back to the wind, go with it. The wind had died a little and made it possible to keep alive a lantern that Vick had taken from Pasqual's wagon. Going down wind he was sure to hit his place, either the barn or the house or the lambing sheds that stretched out to a fence. Strike one of those and he was all right. His sheep were safe. Pasqual had them under Little Rim, and Pasqual himself was snug and warm in his wagon with his two dogs, three weak ewes and a stench that only a sheep-wagon could have. No need to worry about Pasqual. No need to worry about the sheep. No need to . . . What was that?

Over across the fence was a black mass that heaved and stirred. The lantern showed an anxious white face and a pair of rolling eyes. Cows! What was Clinton doing? Why hadn't he picked up these cattle and driven them to shelter? Called himself a cowman, Clinton did! Swaggered around in a ten gallon hat and a pair of boots and spurs! Cowman, and he let his cattle go like this. Serve him right if they froze, if they piled up against the fence and were killed. Serve him right! Everybody knew that the Calico flats was sheep-country. What business did a man have bringing a bunch of cows into the Calico Flats?

But they were poor dumb things. A cow didn't know anything. A cow was not to blame for what a man did. After all a cow wasn't like a sheep. Sheep were all right. Sheep had a thick coat of wool to protect them and—well . . . Vick Seagrue, holding his lantern, crawled through the fence. His big right foot kicked against wire and a staple gave way.

Deliberately, strand at a time, Vick kicked down that fence, kicked it down and fastened it so that the cattle could go across. The ones in front began to drift with the wind and Vick circled out to start the laggards. Behind the bunch of cows he

saw a horse standing. Vick lifted his lantern high. There was a saddle on the horse and the animal stepped away and rolled its eyes as Vick came up. Andy Clinton lay on the ground, the snow drifting up against him. The light from the lantern showed that Andy's eyes were closed but he still held one rein, held it in a death grip.

So he had come out to get his cattle! This was what a man got for trusting to a horse. Vick Seagrue put the lantern on the ground. The snow hissed against the chimney. Vick bent down and his big arms scooped Andy up, lifting him. Vick put Andy across the saddle, holding the horse tight and managing Andy's bulk and the rein and the horse all together. Then, leading the bronc, Vick started after the drifting cattle.

Andy came to in a warm bunk. His feet hurt like fire because they were thawing out. His nose and cheeks hurt, too, and when he opened his eyes he saw a big snow filled hand hovering over him. The hand came down and the snow stung against his cheeks, and Andy spluttered and tried to sit up. Vick Seagrue gave up his doubtful treatment for frost bite, and stepped back.

"How you feelin'?" asked Vick.

Andy took his time answering. He was undressed. He could smell the little indescribable, sheepy smell that goes with a sheepman's camp. The last thing he remembered was a green bronc and a bunch of cows that would not move.

"How'd I get here?" he demanded.

"I brought you in," Vick answered. "Found you at the south end of your pasture with a bunch of cows. Your horse had throwed you an'—"

"He never!" Andy rose to the insult. "He slipped an' fell an' I must of hit my head on a rock. He never throwed me!"

"You was there anyhow," soothed Vick. "You had hold of a rein. I brought you in. Closer to my place than to yours, an' anyhow we come down wind."

"The cows?"

Vick grinned. "They're all right," he assured. "I brought them along too. They're out in the lambin' sheds, out of the wind."

Lambing sheds! Those good Herefords in a lambing shed. Andy Clinton sat bolt upright in Vick's bunk. Nor would he lie down. He insisted upon getting dressed and then stood unsteadily upon his feet and commanded to be led to his livestock. Unwillingly Vick obeyed. He lit a lantern and helped Andy on with his coat and walked with him through the storm to the lambing sheds. There, in the lantern light, Andy saw that the cattle were in shelter. The big, red and white Herefords seemed oddly incongruous, mixed with sheep. To Andy it seemed as though his cattle were knee deep in sheep. They were out of place. The cows seemed to know it, too. They looked anxiously at the two men.

Vick took Andy back to the soddy. There was nothing for Andy to do but go. He could not drive those cows back, and he knew it. Not that night, against that storm and with the green bronc that, so Vick said, was in the barn. The soddy was mighty warm and good. Vick had a pot on the stove and to Andy the odor that came from the pot was sweet and tempting. Back in Vick Seagrue's soddy Andy pulled off his boots and took the plate of beans and mutton and chili that Vick dished up for him. That mutton stew was good eating, too. Andy was comfortable, warm and full of food, and even his frost bites were not so painful when Vick Seagrue finally blew out the lamp and turned in.

IN THE morning the storm was moderating. Andy helped Vick cook breakfast and wash the dishes and they went out together to look after the horses in the barn. Andy looked reproachfully at the bronc. Vick saw the look and interpreted it.

"Horses," said Vick Seagrue. "I never had much use for a horse. You can't trust 'em. Mostly I go on foot or in the wagon." This to Andy who did everything that he could do on horseback, and let the rest of what was to be done, go.

Andy opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. Vick Seagrue had saved his cattle and, probably, his life. Suddenly it dawned upon Andy Clinton that he was beholden to Vick Seagrue and with that thought came another: The whipping that he owed Vick was postponed. Vick Seagrue had definitely put Andy in debt. Andy stood there, looking at the bay bronc, and thoughts raced through his head. "First he whips me and then he saves my life and saves my cows. There's not a thing I can do about it."

It was like taking a piece of candy from a little kid. It was like stealing a girl's hair ribbon. Andy Clinton had saved up that whipping for Vick Seagrue. Andy had looked forward to the time when he could try his luck again. And here he was, his little feud blown higher than a kite and all the backbone taken out of it.

"Let's go look at the sheep," Vick said. "Your cows are in the shed with 'em yet, I guess."

Meekly Andy trailed along.

That afternoon Andy took his cattle back home. The storm had blown itself out and he had some other cattle up in the break to see to; and he had to feed his horses, besides a lot of other chores that needed to be attended to. So he saddled the bronc and collected his cattle and went back home.

"You come down to see me," Vick invited before Andy left. "Come down an' I'll give you a couple of sheep pelts to wrap around your boots. I reckon they must be cold, weather like this."

"I'll come down," Andy promised. "An' —an' say—thanks . . ."

Oddly enough he did go back. He was lonesome on the lease and—well, Vick had saved his life. Andy dropped in and ate some mutton and found that his first impression had been right. It was good. He played cribbage with Vick. He invited Vick to come and see him, and Vick did. Andy fed Vic steaks and they played draw pitch. They did not make a practice of calling, but now and then, perhaps once in two weeks, they saw each other.

And every visit was strained. Andy would sit, counting his crib, and look up and see Vick watching him. Andy would peg his count and watch Vick shuffle and through his mind would go the recollection that this big man across the table had whipped him and had saved his life and saved his cattle. Andy would see Vick's little smile as he dealt the cards and Andy's ears would redden.

As for Vick, he could not help but remember the fight at the gate and the fact that he had saved the cowman's life. It was a nice, comfortable feeling Vick had, a sort of superior feeling. Sometimes it showed in his talk and sometimes it showed in his actions. Sometimes there was just a little contempt for Andy Clinton in Vick Seagrue's mind.

The winter had done its worst on New Year's. And in April and early May Andy's lease showed a lot of little white-faced calves and Vick Seagrue's sheep were lambing. Andy and Vick did not see much of each other; they were busy.

At the end of May Vick was through with his lambing and Andy was looking for a hand to help him brand. Andy had received word from home: There was grass in his own country now and when his lease was up in August he could go back. Branding was going to be a problem though, for he needed help. Just on a chance he rode down to Cotswold to see if he could hire a hand.

He had no luck in Cotswold. None at all. Andy, disgruntled, started home. As he neared Seagrue's he saw that the windmill tower behind the soddy was canted at an odd angle. Andy rode over to investigate.

VICK SEAGRUE had been at his east camp when Andy rode past on his way to Cotswold. He had hauled a load of salt to the camp and helped his herder distribute it in the troughs. Returning to his soddy about mid-afternoon, Vick saw that the windmill was not pumping. The fan was going but there was no water coming from the pipe. Vick unhitched and took care of his team, then went to the mill.

The nester who had first taken Vick's place had dug the well. It was about twenty-five feet deep, six feet across the top, and the water stood at seven feet in it. Vick, when he bought out the nester, had put two big eight by eight timbers across the top of the well, planted his windmill tower on them and then placed loose boards across to form a platform. The well was the one unfailing source of water that he had. When he got to the well Vick saw that the pump rod was going up and down and knew that there was something wrong under the platform.

Vick took off a plank, tried to look in, and then removed another plank to give more light. Kneeling on the platform he peered into the well and as he looked the board that he rested on, broke sharp in two and Vick went down.

In falling Vick threw out his hands and caught the pipe that led down into the well. The pipe slipped, then stopped, but Vick could not get a full grip on it. There was slime on the pipe and the slick surface slid through his fingers. Vick went down, holding to that pipe. His hands struck a union which gave him a grip, and he stopped falling.

For an instant Vick hung there, his face white and his breath coming in gasps. Then, recovering from the shock, he looked up. He could see the opening above him; the broken plank had fallen and the planks he had laid aside gave him plenty of light. One of the eight by eight timbers rested its very edge on the dirt. Vick knew now what was the matter with his well. The well had been caving and no doubt was sanded. Vick slid down about six feet. Looking down he could see the dark water glinting below him, seven feet of it.

Vick took a deep breath, let it go, and grasping the pipe tried to pull himself up hand over hand. His hand slipped on the slimy pipe, the pipe trembled and under the pull and the shake, the last of the dirt beneath the eight by eight slipped and the tower lurched. For an instant Vick thought that he was all done. Then the tower stopped, the eight by eight hung, one end free in the air and beneath Vick's hands clamped tight just above the union, the pipe trembled and vibrated.

Vick hung on. If he tried again to climb he knew what would happen. That eight by eight would swing further, the tower would lurch again, the pipe and rod would break and he would go down. There he was, right there. He had to get out. And he could not. Vick closed his eyes.

How long he hung there Vick did not know. He tried to climb, desperate over his circumstances. The tower canted a little further and he made no progress up the slippery pipe. Then, plain to his ears came the thump—thump—thump of a horse's feet hitting the ground. Vick let out a yell, an inarticulate, wordless cry of relief. Andy Clinton's voice came to him as the echo of that yell died.

"Vick!"

Vick almost lost his grip.

"I'm in the well. Careful, Andy. She's caving!"

There was silence following that. Vick could hear Andy moving about. Then more of the planks that covered the well were moved away and Vick had a worm's eye view of Andy peering down. Andy's big gray hat looked mighty good to Vick Seagrue.

"Hang on, Vick," said Andy. "I'll throw you down a rope."

Vick's hands were without feeling. He knew that he could not hold on much longer. "Hurry," he said.

Andy disappeared. A rope came slithering down into the well. Vick let go with one hand and reached for it. The fingers of his left had touched the rope and the grip of his right hand, that right hand that had no feeling, gave way. Vick hit the water with a splash.

Instantly terror struck him. He fought the water, screaming and choking as it entered his mouth and went into his lungs. His arms flailed out, striking the pipe and the dirt sides of the well. From above, a plank came hurtling down. Vick did not see the plank, did not feel it when it struck his head.

UP ON top Andy saw what had happened. Andy had lowered the rope, leaving the end of it fastened tight and strong to Jackstraw's saddle horn. Now Andy wasted no time. Snatching the rope out of the well he opened the loop and slipping it under his arms pulled it tight. Jackstraw was watching proceedings, ears pointed alertly toward the well. Andy cast a glance at Jackstraw and then, with the rope about his chest, lowered himself, hand over hand, into the well. Dirt rattled down and the tower leaned a little and the eight by eight vibrated. Andy went down. He had to grope in the water, had to feel and reach. His hands touched cloth and he took a grip. Holding to Vick Seagrue's vest with one hand and to the rope with the other, Andy lifted his voice.

"Jackstraw! Back up!"

Jackstraw had held many a calf, many a cow. Jackstraw knew that command. Jackstraw flung his head and pricked his ears and mincingly, step at a time, Jackstraw backed. The rope slipped through Andy's hand. When the loop came tight about his chest Andy got a good, two-handed grip on Vick and hauled him up until his head was out of water. Vick's mouth was open and he looked to Andy as though he were dead, real dead. Andy yelled to his horse.

"Back, Jack! Back up!"

Jackstraw, obedient to that imperative voice, backed. Andy's saddle was clamped on to stay, a stock saddle put on by a stockman. Andy's thirty-five foot whale-line had held many an eight-hundred or thousand pound cow. The pebbles splashed into the water and the tower shook and the rope rasped through dirt and gravel and Andy and Vick Seagrue went up toward the top of the well, went a little at a time as Jackstraw backed.

Jackstraw hauled them out. Jackstraw stopped when Andy, prone and sliding on the ground and still holding to Vick Seagrue, yelled, "Whoa!" Jackstraw gave slack unwillingly at Andy's command. Andy, almost cut in two by the rope about his chest, pulled off that rope and labored to his feet. Vick Seagrue lay motionless and white and with water running from his clothes. Andy bent down and picking up Vick, staggered toward the soddy.

Somewhere Andy had heard that the thing to do with a man full of water was to roll him over a barrel. Andy got a staple keg from the barn and rolled Vick over it. Vick was not full of water; he had been knocked out by the falling plank. He came to life during the barrel-rolling process. When Vick groaned Andy stopped his rolling, and lifting Vick took him to the bunk. Vick was lying there when he opened his eyes.

"How do you feel?" asked Andy, looking down at Vick.

Vick thought it over. Gradually he sorted things out. "What happened?" demanded Vick Seagrue.

"Plank fell on you, I guess," Andy said. "I went down after you an' Jackstraw pulled us out."

"Jackstraw?"

"My dun horse."

"Oh," said Vick.

"You got any whisky?"

"In the cupboard."

Andy bustled away.

With two big drinks in him Vick felt better. He tried to sit up on the bunk but his head rang like a church bell and he could not make it. Andy knew how Vick felt; he had been there himself.

"I'll stick around awhile," said Andy. "Stay for supper, I guess."

"Yeah," agreed Vick.

"You know," Andy looked at the man on the bunk, "if it hadn't been for Jackstraw we'd both been out of luck. He's a good horse, Jack is, a good rope-horse. You can trust him."

Vick was silent.

ANDY CLINTON not only stayed for supper at Seagrue's, he cooked it. He made biscuits and coffee and fried some salt pork and heated up the beans. By the time supper was over Vick was feeling a little weak, but much better. He said that there was no need for Andy to stay the night, that he could make it all right, and

so Andy, with chores to do at home, tightened the cinches on Jackstraw and rode on north. He reached the lease about eight o'clock and when he unsaddled and turned Jackstraw out, he slapped the dun's hip. Jackstraw looked around inquiringly and then, seeing that it was a friendly slap, went on out from the corral and rolled.

Andy fully intended to ride down the next day and see how Vick was, but somehow he did not. Work stacked up on him and what with the riding and the labor entailed when he decided to brand by himself, he did not go. The day slipped away, and the next and the next, until a full two weeks had gone by.

Andy thought about Vick but he did not see him. Somehow there was a weight taken from Andy's mind. For the first time since the New Year he felt free and untrammeled.

A full two weeks after the episode of the well Andy was branding a calf in the middle of his pasture. He had the calf down and tied and his fire built when he saw a wagon going by on the road. The wagon was headed north. Right then Andy made a resolve. He would finish with this calf and then he would ride down to Vick's. He heated his running iron and burned an A C on the calf and turned the little fellow loose. He put out his fire and mounted Jackstraw.

Just at the end of his lease Andy saw something. He saw a little dust cloud and knew that under the dust were sheep. Andy put Jackstraw to a lope. The teamster had left the gate open and Vick's sheep were through. He would have to put the sheep out. Anger welled up in Andy Clinton. Those sheep were on his grass, the good grass that he had paid for. Andy took down his rope.

Andy reached the sheep and popped his rope. The sheep ran with their little, stiff legged run, and scattered, blatting. Andy cut Jackstraw back. He was mad and he had not learned that a man cannot herd sheep ahorseback. Andy went through the sheep again and had turned his horse when a black and white mongrel dog came streaking through the gate and snarling and snapping, came for him. Jackstraw jumped away from the dog and Andy popped his rope. As once before, his aim was good and the dog turned tail, yelped, and made for home. Andy took after him.

Right at the gate he reined in. Vick Seagrue was at the gate, big feet firmly planted, a scowl on his face. Andy stared down at Vick. Suddenly he was at peace. Here was Vick Seagrue and Andy owed Vick Seagrue nothing, not a thing except a blame' good licking.

"Keep your sheep off my grass!" snapped Andy Clinton.

Vick's scowl deepened. "Any man that will hit a dog is a skunk!" stated Vick. "Climb down an' I'll prove it."

Andy got off Jackstraw. He stopped and unbuckled his spurs and put them aside, and then, determinedly, he advanced. Vick met him halfway.

The battle raged up and down the fence. The sheep scattered and ran and Jackstraw grazed, occasionally stopping to lift his head and, ears pointed, survey the fight. Vick Seagrue, swinging his big fists, and with his lip cut, stumbled over a rock. At that moment Andy got home with a good one. Vick went down. Andy, nose bleeding, panting, stood over him.

"There!" said Andy Clinton.

"Think you licked me, don't you?" mumbled Seagrue from the ground.

"I *know* I licked you," Andy answered. "You take your dang' sheep an' get off my grass. An' be sure an' close the gate."

Andy stalked off toward his horse, stopping to retrieve his spurs and his hat. There was a swagger in his every movement. Vick watched him, watched him mount, watched him ride away. Then, getting to his feet, Vick called his dog. They rounded up the sheep and put them out, and Vick closed the gate. Andy was out of sight and Vick sat down and let the pup take the sheep along. Vick felt of his teeth with his tongue. There was a tooth gone. Vick was battered and bruised, but he did not feel licked.

"Dang' cowpuncher!" muttered Vick

Seagrue, and then, very slowly because his face was sore, he grinned. After all they were even now.

Andy Clinton, riding back to his lease, held his handkerchief to his nose to stop the bleeding. Andy was well pleased. Jackstraw racked along and Andy sat easy. He was stiff and sore. He had been in a fight, a good one. The bleeding checked. Andy's nose was sore. He removed his handkerchief. Very slowly, because of the stiffness of his face, Andy Clinton grinned.

Then he almost laughed.

"Lousy sheepman," said Andy Clinton. "Get along, Jack."

Jackstraw increased his pace a little. Things were normal on the Calico Flats, everybody even and nobody ahead. With that sort of a basis, neighbors ought to get along. Even a cowman and a sheepman.

Gold is Where You Wear It

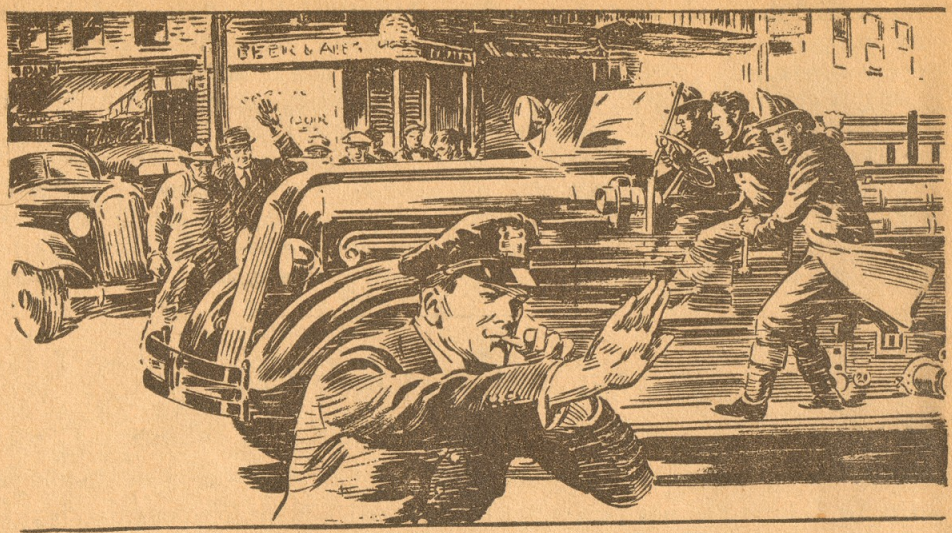
DOCTOR CHARLES S. GIBSON of London is certainly a Corrigan among scientists—and that casts no disrespect on either gentleman. Doctor Gibson has not gone anywhere or had himself festooned with ticker tape; but in the quiet laboratories of Guy's Hospital he has performed a masterly non sequitur. He set out to discover a treatment for arthritis; he ended up by inventing a solid gold evening gown.

Actually, the process was not nearly as madly illogical as it sounds. Medical men have known for some time that gold is extremely valuable in the treatment of arthritis, but unfortunately the metal is also poisonous to the human system. What Doctor Gibson was after was a mixture of gold and organic molecules that would not poison the arthritis patient. What he got, of course, was this gold evening dress—light as silk, and cheap.

Doctor Gibson had mixed his compound—called trialkylphosphineaurous halide—and he dipped a gossamer fabric into it. The fabric came out literally dyed gold, but the gossamer itself was so thin that to anyone but a quibbler the cloth was pure gold. Now Doctor Gibson estimates that this gold fabric can be turned out at a cost of about $2.50 a yard, and an ordinary evening dress would require around six yards. Cheap, you see; you will be able to pick up a gold dress much cheaper than you could get one of those things the boys turn out in Paris—made out of silk or some such humdrum material. In the future the typist and the sales-girl can all glitter—and it will all be gold.

The report is that Doctor Gibson hasn't stopped with evening dresses. He has produced gold goblets—ordinary glasses coated with gold—and he specializes in golden mirrors. Gold dinner sets, he thinks would be entirely practical and inexpensive. Then of course there would be . . . but this thing has gone far enough. Let Doctor Charles S. Gibson remember that Cleopatra had a golden mirror, that Nero's plumbing was made of gold. Let him ponder well. And then—how about that arthritis cure?

—John St. John



The Beginnings of Michael Costello

By KARL DETZER

Author of "Backfire," "The World's Fair Mystery," etc.

He was Wednesday's child; the Fates put a jinx in his cradle. But somehow, in the jungle that Chicago's Valley District in the '20's was, the kid with smoke in his blood and the sound of gongs dinging in his head, scrambled to young manhood; for firemen, he knew, are born, not made

Complete Novelet

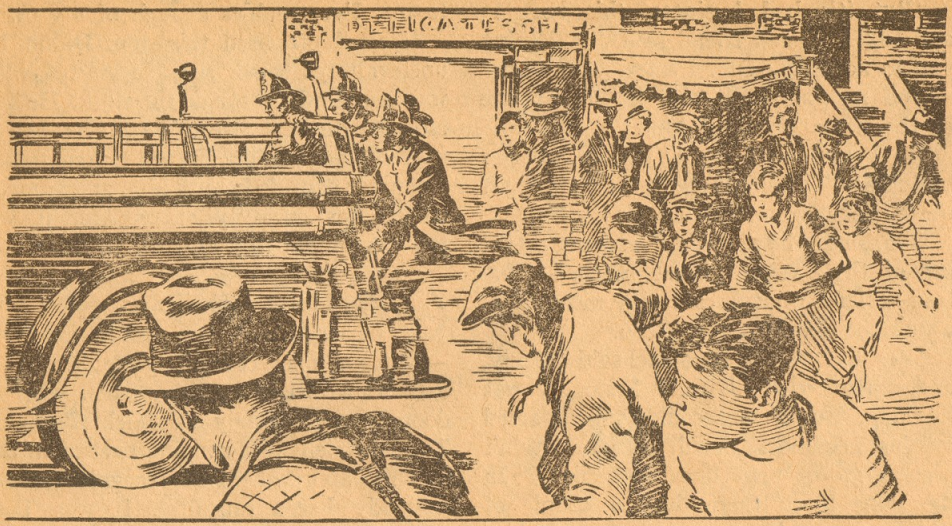
I

TO UNDERSTAND the story of Michael Costello, you must know this much: His father was Captain Jim Costello of Engine 32, when it was located on the Avenue, before it moved into the Marshall Field barn on old South Water Street.

And it was his grandfather, old Hell-snorting Patrick, who, so the story goes, set off with his own steady hands the charges of dynamite with which General Phil Sheridan stopped the Great Fire, those many years ago. Patrick died the next day, trying to rescue a horse that had broken its halter and was racing back to its burned barn.

So you see there was smoke in Michael Costello's blood, and also a bit of old-sod rebellion, and a taste for doing precisely the wrong thing at precisely the right time. Small wonder, that from his short-pants day, he would slip over to the quarters of Engine 5 in Blue Island avenue, and listen to tales of fire, and smell the horses, and feast his eyes on polished brass, and hope that some day he, too, might put on a helmet and claim his birthright in the fire game.

He'd have done it, probably, on his



Every time he sees one of those scarlet, streamlined sweethearts clanging down the street today, Michael remembers the old fire-snorting dragons he used to ride

nineteenth birthday; had it not been for the alarm that banged in, back in December, 1904, calling Engine 59 to the burning sheep pen in a packing plant in the stock yards. For Engine 32, his father's company, rolled on the third special, and old Jim Costello, for all his wits, died under a wall like the fireman he was.

Michael's mother was a pious woman, of course, but when they brought her Jim's body home that cold day, the heart went out of her. Young Michael was a baby, just able to toddle. What could he know of the morning soon after, when she put on her shawl and started down to the Italian grocer's on the corner and never came back? It had been the tears in her eyes, the neighbors said, that kept her from seeing the street car.

So you understand now why Michael was brought up hit-or-miss; tossed about from cousins to uncle and aunts, until by the time he was sixteen there he was, living down in that part of the town known as the "Valley." A hard-bitten uncle was his guardian, and the world that he knew wasn't pleasant. The streets of the Valley in those days were uglier even than they are now, and there was dirt everywhere, and despair on most faces, and a breath of wickedness in the air.

Oh, sure, he had gone to school some; as far as he need. And what boy can go farther, if it's himself must keep his own stomach filled and the shoes on his feet? So he worked. Sixteen birthdays, and working hard.

THE night of the third of July was hot that year, and Michael was tired, what with eleven hours of hauling packing cases on the loading platform of the Illinois Central freight house. No, it wasn't the best job in the world. But it paid good money, men being scarce. Just that evening, on the way home from work, he had met Father Maloney, of All Saints' church, as he turned the corner from Halstead street, and the good father had halted him.

Michael took off his cap respectfully

"And what are you doing with yourself, my son?" the Father asked, and he listened, while Michael told him about the job.

"That's fine," agreed the Father. "But your evenings. Your leisure time."

"Why," said Michael, "I hang around."

"But it's bad business, this hanging around," his good friend said. "It'll bring you to no happy end. I knew your father —God rest his soul—and he wasn't one of the hanging-around kind."

"If I could get me a job in the fire business—" Michael started to say, but the priest began nodding.

"Oh, sure," he agreed, "I've been thinking of that. When you've reached nineteen. I'll do what I can. But meanwhile, watch the company you keep."

"Yes, sir, yes, sir," Michael said quickly, and knew what Father Maloney was thinking. But a boy couldn't be blamed for his neighbors, could he? And didn't even a grown man like companions? In the same block there lived a couple of other young fellows, not so much older than he. Tony DeLouis, one of them was named, and the other was Paddy Breen. They didn't like to work and they did like to have full pockets, which even Michael knew was a dangerous combination.

It was true, he'd been seen with them often of late, walking back from the Star and Garter Theater, at Halstead and Madison, or hanging around the corner of Twelfth Street, as it was called then, before someone thought to name it Roosevelt Road.

"I'll be careful," Michael promised, and went on home.

But the night grew hotter. There was little to amuse a young fellow in the neighborhood, except down in the direction of Halstead street, the popping of fire crackers, where the Italians and Greeks were being patriotic in their way. Listening to it, and the other noises of a city, Michael heard, breaking through, now and again, the enticing voices of fire department sirens, on the new motor trucks, and the clatter of bells as the old horse-drawn outfits went out to their work.

"Going over to Engine 5 for a while," he told his uncle at last.

"Be in early," the uncle said, "and if you get in trouble, don't come yammering to me. I've troubles enough of my own."

Michael promised this, too. Didn't the uncle always speak so? He started west, walking slowly through the dusk. He had crossed Bunker Street, when he saw a man running rapidly toward him, and then a second, panting behind him, and Michael halted, his curiosity stirred, for it was too hot a night to walk fast, let alone run.

OLD Mother Holligan's soft drink parlor—those were prohibition times —where a man could buy liquid barbed wire at a nickel a throw, stood with its door open invitingly at Michael's hand. The two men were running toward it, and as they approached, he recognized them.

Paddy Breen ran first. It was Tony DeLouis behind him.

"What's up?" Michael asked, and Paddy stopped, and looked both surprised and uneasy.

"Nothing except my thirst," he said. "Come in, will you, Mike, and have a drink."

"Me, I stick to soda pop, as you know," Michael answered, "but I'll buy what you need for you."

So they walked, the three of them together, into the back room, and old Mother Holligan hobbled in and swiped off the table with a rag and complained of the heat, and asked, "And what'll it be tonight, boys?"

When she had gone, Paddy said, "Listen, Mike. We're in a bit of a jam, Tony and me."

"How's that?" Michael asked.

"A case of mistaken identity," Paddy answered. "Tonight we was walking past Gold's restaurant, Tony and me, when somebody stuck the place up, and the cops come running from the Maxwell Street precinct. We was innocent, wasn't we, Tony?"

"Yeah," Tony nodded, and swallowed his drink. "Innocent as hell, or more so."

"But the cops," Paddy went on, "they allus want somebody to hang it on, don't they?"

"Yeah," Tony agreed again.

"And somebody points our way and says, 'There's the guys that did it,' and we got to run."

Michael answered, "But if you didn't do it, you've got nothing to worry about."

"You don't know very much," Tony charged. "Doin' it has got nothin' to do with it. Any shamus wants to make an arrest, don't he? Does it make any difference to him if he's got the right party or not?"

"So you can help us, Mike," Paddy went on. "You can say the three of us has been sitting here since seven o'clock without leaving the place, in case anybody gets nosey. See? Hey, Mother!" he called the old woman again from the other room, and she hobbled in, blinking, and he said: "We come in here at seven o'clock tonight, didn't we, Mother?"

"Why, do you?" she answered, starting to hedge.

Paddy stood up. "Did we or didn't we?" he demanded.

"Oh, surest thing in the world you did," the woman agreed. "The three of you."

"That's right, the three of us," Paddy said. "And we didn't set foot outside, any of us, from then to now. That's right, is it?"

"That's right," Mother Holligan decided.

So Paddy peeled a bill from a roll and threw it across the table.

"Okay, then," he told her. "Another drink, Mother, and keep the change."

But he had no chance to touch that other drink. There was a small commotion at the front door, and a voice speaking sharply at the rear.

"Don't move, any of you," it commanded. "We've got you covered."

Then the place was full of cops, and Michael found himself backed against the wall with his hands up, and a sergeant from the Maxwell Street station looking him straight in the eye.

Another policeman was stooping down at the table Michael just had left. He was pulling out Michael's chair. "Who sat here?" he asked.

Someone pointed to Michael, and Michael admitted. "That's right. It was me sitting there."

"So you park your gat when you get up, eh?" the policeman asked him.

Then Michael saw it, the small dark revolver in the officer's hand. The sergeant reached for it and sniffed. "It's been fired in the past half hour, all right," he said, and he looked at Michael again. "That cashier you shot is dead," he told him.

II

MICHAEL rode in a patrol wagon to the Maxwell Street station house and the handcuffs cut his wrists all the way. Across him on the ride sat Paddy and Tony, chained together, sullen and boastful by turns.

"We'll get out of it, Mike," Tony promised him, "don't you worry. We'll get out. Just keep your mouth shut, that's all."

Michael did not answer. The policeman next to him said, "Plenty of time to talk when we get there," and Michael swallowed, and let well enough alone.

At a back room in the station house he sat on a hard, wooden stool with a cruel white light beating into his face, and he tried to reply to the questions that the cops threw at him, but whenever he turned his head to escape one pair of hostile, unbelieving eyes, another pair met him, just as unfriendly, just as unwilling to accept his story.

There wasn't a smile in the place, not so much as a decent understanding voice. Couldn't they tell that he was trying to be truthful? What good would it do for him to lie, when he had nothing to hide?

No, sir, that wasn't his gun the officers had found under the table. No, sir, he had no idea how it got there; certainly *he* had not dropped in. Faith and he never had laid eyes on it, till he saw it there on Mother Holligan's floor. He had never owned a gun in his life. Never, never, never!

It was hard making the truth sound

reasonable, what with all the cruel questions they asked. Certainly Tony or Paddy, wherever they were waiting now, could tell them that he hadn't been near Twelfth and Halstead streets tonight. Or, he began to wonder, did they think that by keeping their own mouths shut and letting him get dragged into this dirty business, they were helping themselves?

Well, he could prove where he had been. He was still at home, at the moment those shots were fired, eight blocks away.

"My uncle will tell you," he began, and stopped.

What would his uncle tell? Hadn't that hard man said, just this evening, not to come home whimpering, if he got into trouble? A man of his word, his uncle, with an icy set of principles, no matter what they cost, and indeed it was true, he had troubles enough of his own.

"I tell you, officer, I came straight home from work," Michael repeated. "I had my supper and I started to the firehouse and in front of Mother Holligan's—"

"You hang out there considerable, eh?" a sergeant put in.

"Oh, but not enough to mention," Michael protested. "To be sure, sometimes of a Saturday night . . ." Couldn't he tell by their faces they weren't believing him again?

"Go on," one bade.

"It was in front of her very door that I met the boys. It is the truth, so help me, officer. We went right in and sat us at a table and ordered a drink."

"What time was that?"

"Around half after eight," Michael stammered, trying to remember for sure. "Maybe a wee bit later. Maybe ten minutes later."

"Then the three of you wasn't all a-sittin' in the female hell-hound's joint ever since seven o'clock, like she claims you was?"

"No," Michael replied. "At seven o'clock—why, I was on my way home from work. It's eleven hours I do today! I stopped, the bell on All Saints was striking—and I went straight home."

There was no reason to drag Father Maloney into this. No reason at all. He would have no trouble, proving that he, at least, was not at the restaurant when the place was held up.

But the sergeant only grunted.

"Going home at seven—you had plenty of time to get back then and shoot the cashier and steal eighty dollars out of the cash drawer at the restaurant."

This time, Michael decided, he would keep his mouth shut.

"And seventy six dollars we find in the pockets of them other two," his accuser went on, "and the gun on your chair."

Michael yelled, "I tell you I know nothing about that gun! I tell you, I never—" And wasn't that light terrible, beating so into his face!

"Who had the gun then?"

A policeman with a face like a brick wall was leaning over him.

"You wouldn't lie to us, would you? For if you would—"

He had a large hard fist and he slowly tightened it. Then the sergeant said, "Cut it out, Murphy. Lock him up. We'll talk to them other young tramps."

As the turnkey put Michael in a cell, he warned, "Now you keep your mouth shut. They's honest drunks all 'round you that's needin' their sleep."

HE SLAMMED the door and Michael thought, "That's what the boys said, too. 'Keep your mouth shut.' " Alone he sat an hour in the darkness. The smell of the place was fearful and it was hot as the attic of hell at high noon. The noise was an endless thing; the bothersome noise of too many sweating men moving uneasily in too small a space.

If he only could get word to Father Maloney, he thought now, the priest would fix matters right off, he would. Get him out of this vile place, out of the hands of these cops who would refuse to believe even a blessed saint under oath.

But would the Father help? Wouldn't

he have the right to say, "I warned you, my son," and let it go at that, without the soiling of his decent hands with such a filthy business? Would he say, as Michael's uncle was bound to say, that if Michael made himself an uneasy bed, he'd have to learn to lie in it?

Michael still was wondering, hot and cold, about it, when after an hour—a vile, breathless, hot, crawling hour—two very large men in civilian clothes marched toward him through the corridor at the turnkey's shuffling heels, then stood aside till the iron bars swung open. They were strangers to Michael; cops they were, but they didn't belong in this precinct. Men from detective bureau, down in La-Salle street, more than likely, he decided, and when they ordered him out of the cell, he obeyed.

They, too, pounded questions at him, the same ones the sergeant had asked and plenty more, and he replied, but little good it did. He repeated his name, and where he lived and worked, but each time he went for to say that it wasn't his gun the police had found, they only laughed.

"We've met innocents before," they said, and went asking him about something else.

"If you'll just call Father Maloney—" Michael pleaded at last. There was no help for it, it seemed.

One of them turned. "Father Maloney?" he repeated, astonished. "*You* go to All Saints? Then you're a disgrace to a decent parish, you are. Father Maloney wouldn't wipe his feet on the likes of you."

"Call him," Michael urged desperately. "Tell him I'm in jail. Tell him for the sake of my father . . ."

"Oh, you have a father, too," an officer said, "and why didn't you think before how he'd feel about this?"

"And who might he be, whose name you're disgracing?" another asked.

"He was Captain James Costello, sir," Michael said. Surely even these men wouldn't have forgotten that name?

Ah, they *were* listening, even coming back toward him.

"Poor Captain Jim of the fire department!" one exclaimed. "Don't tell me *he* had a offspring the likes of you? He'll be rolling in his grave this night, will Captain Jim, God rest his soul!"

"If that's true," another said, and two of them put their heads together.

"I'm owin' a debt to Captain Jim these many years," said one whose name was Hawkins, Michael was to discover later. "When I was a ree-cruit, an' poundin' my first beat in harness, he pulled me out of a blazin' livery barn, where I was tryin' to help. Saved my life, he did. It's because o' him—not you, understand—but him, I'll see what I can do."

His mate added, "Think of the likes of Captain Jim, a fine gentleman, an' all, havin' a killer for a boy! And him scarce out of short pants! How old are you, Costello?"

Michael told them. But what good did that do, either?

"Just try tellin' the truth to Father Maloney, if you've the good luck to see him," Hawkins said.

IT WAS another full hour before Michael stood facing the priest in the room behind the sergeant's office, but even now he was not alone with him. Paddy Breen and Tony DeLouis, who had backslid from All Saints parish years ago, were there too, now, and lying as glibly as if the good Father was only a cop! Policemen were standing around on their large feet, speaking polite to the Father, and the precinct captain himself came in, with his badge pinned to his black suspenders.

"Tell the truth, my son," the priest bade. "It never hurt any man in the long run. Tell all of it, and you'll feel a weight off your chest."

So that's what Michael did, tell all of it, but who could imagine how Paddy Breen would start swearing, to hear it? Not that Michael said a word that could hurt Paddy or Tony, either, he thought.

He did not even mention what he was beginning to suspect, that they'd been running from the direction of the shooting because they'd had a hand in it.

On and on they fumed, and not until Father Maloney remembered that the bell on the church had been ringing for seven o'clock while he talked to Michael this evening would they be silenced, even on that point.

But when Michael was done, the captain still said, "It's a good story he tells, Father, but it's got one thing wrong with it. It ain't the truth."

The priest shook his head, as if the wickedness of the whole world was unbelievable. "If you'll release him to me," he began unhappily, but the captain had to laugh at that idea.

"He stays locked up, Father," he said, "and it will do him no harm. Do him good, in fact, it will. Go on, Murphy, take him away. His hearing will be day after tomorrow, the fifth."

III

AT NINE o'clock on the morning of the fifth the cell doors opened and Michael stepped into the corridor.

"Move lively," a voice said, and in a moment Michael found himself in the police court room.

Paddy and Tony were there ahead of him, surrounded by cops, and a policeman said, "Go stand with them. It's lucky you've got a good lawyer."

"I've got no lawyer," Michael denied.

"You've got the best in town," the policeman said. "But how and why I don't know, and it's none of my business. Not everybody can afford the hire of a man like Counsellor James G. Dunne."

Dunne? Michael tried to make sense of that. Had the two nights and a day in the hot cell baked all the sense out of his brain? Who was he, a poor boy from the Valley, to have a great man like Dunne defending him? Surely, there was some mistake!

The whole city knew all about Dunne and the way he could pick up the law like a piece of string and twist it around his finger. It was the devil's own personal hard luck to be born too soon, folk said, or else he'd have hired this lawyer when he got into his first jam, and spent the rest of his days at ease in Paradise.

That being the case, it wasn't Dunne's habit to trouble himself with riffraff. It was the big boys he helped, Michael knew, aldermen who had got a bit careless on how much city money stuck to their fingers, and the top-flight bosses of the gangs, and the bootleggers who lived like kings, men like Dave Boyle, czar of the Valley. Boyle was a wicked one any way you looked at it, but this very day he was walking free, in spite of all his devilment, because he had the sense, and the money, to hire as his lawyer this same James G. Dunne.

Michael glanced quickly around the room. There Dunne stood, with an elbow on the clerk's desk and a smile on his red face and in his eyes a look that said, "To hell and be damned to all this fuss over nothing." But when the judge happened to see him there, Michael noticed, his expression was surprised and a little distant, as he said good morning, then quickly he went back to shuffling the papers on the bench.

Father Maloney was at the bottom of this somehow, Michael thought. Who else could be? Yet Michael, craning his neck, could not see the Father's white head anywhere in the courtroom. How would the priest have money enough to hire such a lawyer? He was poor as the bats in the belfry of his church; no expensive attorney could possibly be working for him! Yet folks often did things for the Father, without thinking of their pay. Maybe that was it.

The bailiff called the case and a small nervous man got up from the lawyers' table and put on his glasses, then dropped them off his nose and put them on again.

Michael heard Paddy whisper to Tony, "That's Harvey, assistant state's attorney. He's a sap."

Harvey swung around, almost as if he had heard the whisper and pointed toward Michael first, and then toward the other two, and said, "Your Honor, I'm going to ask that these men be held in ten thousand dollars cash bond. Each to that amount, Your Honor. We've got to break up this killing . . ."

It was as informal as that. He might have been passing the time of day, so easy he was.

But James G. Dunne interrupted. He looked seriously at Michael, even more seriously at Tony and Paddy, then cleared his throat.

"I agree with the energetic young gentleman from the state's attorney's office," he said, in a well-buttered voice, and smiled at the other lawyer. "We must stamp out lawlessness in our city. By all means. Lawlessness of the—shall we call it, underworld? And lawlessness of the police."

There was a great deal more to it, which Michael could not understand. Dunne was saying that he had no doubt there was a gun in one of the chairs at that table in Mother Holligan's. There might have been two guns. Or a dozen. Who was he, to dispute the word of the sergeant? But what did that gun prove?

"That these clients of mine brought them there? Did anyone see them with the weapon in their possession?"

"If Your Honor please," the state's attorney said, and it was his turn to smile, "I intend to introduce the testimony of witnesses who saw these men attempting to hold up that restaurant. I have one witness who will state, under oath, that he recognized one of them, the defendant DeLouis, and actually saw him point the weapon at the cashier, and pull the trigger."

"We'll hear your witnesses," the judge said.

Mr. Dunne sat down. And sitting, agreed, "Of course. By all means. I am anxious to hear these witnesses."

The bailiff cried out a name and repeated it three times, and then another name, and then another, but no one answered him.

THE little prosecutor was sweating, and moistening his lips, and darting quick looks around the crowded room, like a robin afraid for its nest. Once he looked at James G. Dunne, and Michael thought he saw something else in his face, not exactly terror, but desperation.

Dunne for his part had opened a newspaper and was glancing over the headlines with a calm expression, as if a prosecutor's hard luck was none of his dilemma. And Paddy and Tony, Michael noticed, were nudging one another and seemed to have a joke of their own.

The prosecutor turned toward the bench, apologizing, "I'm afraid my witnesses have not yet appeared." He hemmed and hawed and said, "If I may have a little time, Your Honor, to produce them. . . ."

"I'll give you till noon," the judge said. "Continued. Next case."

But at noon, when Michael was led back into the stuffy court room, James G. Dunne was sitting unperturbed at his table, wearing a fresh pink carnation and reading another newspaper. Opposite him, the little prosecutor was pacing up and down.

"My witnesses," he told the judge, "have disappeared."

"When can you produce them?" the judge scowled through his rimless glasses.

"I cannot promise, Your Honor. I only can try—"

The judge shook his finger. "It would pay you to prepare your cases, sir," he said. "Taking up valuable time—coming in half-ready—expecting me to be lenient. Oh, what's the use. Dismissed!"

Michael walked out a free man—or was it now as his uncle always was saying, that unless you look smart other materials than iron bars would be penning you in? He tried at the door to speak to James G. Dunne, but the lawyer seemed to have forgotten already who he was, so Michael went on alone.

But hurrying up the steps—why, bless his eyes, there came Father Maloney now, his face all pinched up with worry.

"My son!" he cried at sight of Michael. "Ah, but could I get here at all, with the funeral of good Patrick Logan havin' to be held? But you're free, I hear." He was slapping Michael on the back, and saying, "Now you'll know not to keep such company next time, mayhap! I hate to remind you . . ."

"I'm needing no reminding, sir," Michael promised. "From now on . . ."

A voice said heartily, "Good afternoon, Father," and James G. Dunne walked past.

"Who was that?" Father Maloney asked.

"Why, the lawyer you hired for me!" Michael replied, and a small cold chill ran through him, for no reason at all. "The lawyer you hired."

"I hired no lawyer," the father was saying, in an astonished voice. "If you were innocent—if honest-living and faith mean what I know they mean—"

"You didn't hire him? Then who did?

Father Maloney could not answer. He walked with Michael as far as DeKoven Street, puzzling over it, then turned toward All Saints church, and there they stood half an hour, talking further.

"If I could get into the fire business," Michael said, "I'd have me a fine bunkroom in some engine house to pass the evenings in, and decent men around me, and plenty of work for my hands and my head, too."

"I'll try," the priest promised. "There's friends of mine at the City Hall that I've not asked too many favors of, and the son of old Captain Jim. My faith, you'd have no trouble getting the job."

"The lists are full," Michael pointed out. "There's a thousand names ahead of me, and it's not old enough I am by eleven months, sir. Next year, they keep telling me . . ."

"We'll see," the priest said. "Come and call on me in a day or two, and I'll tell you what I hear."

He turned toward the little brown house where he lived behind the church and Michael hurried toward home. Now what would uncle be saying, he wondered?

A strange car was standing at the gate. A man sat at the wheel but he did not look at Michael. The front door of his uncle's house stood open and Michael stepped in, wondering who this might be now, and whether his uncle would have sense enough to let company be on its way before he started hollering.

A voice said, "Mike Costello."

It was a stranger in the doorway. A well-got-up stranger, with a slick haircut and a couple of gold teeth and small dark eyes.

"Who are you and what do you want with me now?" Michael demanded, his suspicion suddenly bubbling up.

"Name's Harry," the stranger said. "I got a message for you. See, I was passin', and I think I'll deliver it now an' save myself the trouble of a special trip."

"Who's the message from?"

'It's from Mr. David Boyle."

For a moment, Michael stood silent, hearing his own heart pound. Wasn't it this very morning, there in the court room, while Attorney Dunne was carrying on so easy and sure of himself, that he'd thought of Czar Boyle? Why, he'd never even seen the man, except at a distance! He was the sort you kept away from, if you had the chance. Kept from owing anything to. For Dave Boyle always insisted on being repaid and in exactly the way he wanted to be repaid.

"I don't know Mr. Boyle," Michael managed to say.

"Oh, don't leave that bother you, kid," the man Harry said, grinning and showing his gold teeth again. "You'll know him soon enough. He wants to talk to you. Might run down to his office tonight."

"I am busy," Michael said quickly, with terror snapping at him. He'd not get mixed up with Boyle's crookedness! He'd have nothing to do with the scoundrel. "I can't go tonight."

"Can't?" Harry repeated, astonished.

"Won't, then. I'll have none of him. I don't owe him anything and I don't intend to."

Harry laughed. He tipped back his head and let out a sound like a cackle and Michael liked him even less.

"That's a hot one!" he exclaimed. "Owe him nothin'! Who you think got you out of your jam? Who was it paid for your lawyer, you little punk? Who was it got rid of the witnesses that was goin' to testify they seen you boys—"

"Not Boyle!" Michael cried, horrified.

"Who else?" the stranger shot back at him. "You owe it to nobody else you're not in jail, with a noose waitin' for you, up on North Dearborn street, one of these fine mornings!"

Michael caught the side of the door. "I'll—not—" he started to say, but the other cut in.

"You'd better. Maybe Mr. Boyle could find those witnesses. Maybe it wasn't the other two that stuck up the restaurant. Maybe it was you and you alone. Ever think of that, smart guy?"

Michael stammered, "But what can he want to speak to me about?"

"At eight o'clock," Harry said.

"I'll be there," Michael heard himself agree.

IV

DAVE BOYLE was a small bit of a man, younger than Michael had expected, with a habit of laughing at very little, and a nervous way of lighting one cigarette on another in an endless chain.

"Ah, it's you," he said, when Michael had been sent in to his office on the second floor of one of those buildings, old, even then, along Twelfth street near Halstead. "I've a proposition to deal to you," he said. "Make yourself comfortable."

But Michael was far from comfortable. He had stopped twice on the way and nearly turned back; once bethought himself of going to Father Maloney and letting him decide. But hadn't that good, tired man had enough of one worthless young parishioner for one miserable week? So he went on, thinking to himself, as he picked his way among the little Italian children on the sidewalk, that it was a wretched state this country was getting into, what with all these foreigners.

It had got so a good brogue was almost a rare thing in the Valley, except where cops and firemen were concerned, and what's more, there were plenty of Irish girls marrying these Italians, and Italian girls with bright black eyes, marrying the Irish lads, too. Still, maybe it wasn't the race that mattered. It was the people in it, the David Boyles and the Paddys and the Tonys and the Mother Holligans that made the Valley such a bad place to live.

Boyle was signing some papers; and a very fat man, middle aged, with three chins, stood beside him respectfully until he was done, then pointed to one of them; and said, "I'll warm up that precinct leader's pants. This fellow has six votes in his family, and in spite of that he had to stay three days in jail."

"Warm it," Boyle answered, and shoved the papers aside. "I'll be busy five minutes. Let nobody in."

Then he laughed again as the door closed and said, "It was a narrow squeak you had, my lad, over there in Maxwell street. There's a thing you must learn. When you're done with a job, get rid of the gun—without fingerprints, of course—and get rid of it quick."

Then he sat back and looked at Michael, with an I-dare-you-to-contradict-me air.

Michael dared, all right, for he wasn't going to get into another lot of trouble, right off, and again through no fault of his own.

"It was not my gun and you know it," he said.

"Still quibblin'?" Boyle asked. "Very well. Maybe I can make you see. You know who I am? Very good. You know my business. Well, I'll tell you. I run this end of the town. It's a big business, my lad. A very big business, and it takes

more than a wad of cotton in a head to do it. I'm smart," he said, "that's why they let me run it."

"What's that got to do with me?" Michael asked stubbornly.

"In a roundabout way," Boyle said, "it's got plenty to do with you. I'm a good citizen, understand that to begin with. The reformers—ah, there's a pretty lot of tripe—the reformers are forever meddling with me and getting their fingers burned. Me, I'm law-abidin', in my own way, and I've no relish for reformers, any moren't I have for boiled cabbage. I don't like the smell of them."

The telephone rang and he picked it up.

"Who wants me?" he asked. "Oh, he does! Then tell him if he don't want his newsstand to get into trouble, he knows what he can do!" He hung up and asked Michael, "And where was I? Sure, I remember. You made a very bad mistake, trying to hold up a restaurant. Now, don't interrupt. What you say has little to do with it, one way or another. There's witnesses, you know—"

"The prosecutor couldn't find them," Michael dared to put in.

DAVE BOYLE laughed, that nervous easy laugh of his. "And why? What's between your ears, lad? Why couldn't he find 'em? I'll tell you why. Because I decided he shouldn't. It's as simple as that. If I decide later they's to turn up—"

Michael was sweating. He had heard talk of such goings-on as this, and always he had blamed it on jealousy, or some such thing, but to stand here now in front of this old mahogany desk and let his own ears take such dishonesty in! He cleared his throat, and then said nothing.

"It'll not be necessary, I'm sure." Boyle went on in his easy way. "You look like a reasonable young lad. Surely my nephew Paddy wouldn't have taken up with you—"

"Is Paddy Breen—" Michael started to say, and thought, with his heart in his boots: "So that's how it happened, and I was thinking it was Father—"

"Paddy's a sort of nephew by marriage to my sister's husband," Boyle was saying. "Oh, let nobody say David Boyle don't take care of his own! Or his friends, either. It pays to be friends to me. We're going to be friends. And it's about that nosey priest I'm talking to you."

"If it's Father Maloney you mean, I'm a friend of his!" Michael flared.

"Oh, sure thing. Good enough friend to keep him out of trouble, I hope, and it's into trouble he's headed. I want you should go to him and say that maybe he better lay off the business he started last week, that he claims is a cleanup. Cleanup," he repeated the word as though it were amusing. "If it's a cleanup, I'm a Chinaman."

"I don't know anything about it," Michael managed to assert. "What Father Maloney does is his affair."

"That's where you're wrong, my lad," Boyle said. "What he does is my affair, too, for I'm after running this end of the town, as I say, and I'll do it without his help. A week ago last night, what does he do but call together ten or twelve of his head men in the parish and tell them something's got to be done. About me, understand."

Michael's ears were ringing and his cheeks burned. To the bottom of his heart, he wished that he had not come here. Why had he been such a coward? Let Dave Boyle do his worst! He said "You want me to interfere?"

"Exactly. Now the father wouldn't have gone to the trouble he did this week, if he hadn't thought a lot of you. It's unfortunate for him he doesn't think as much of several of my boys, instead of closing the door flat in their faces when they go to make a nice business proposition to him. But with you, maybe it'll be different."

The telephone rang again, and when Boyle had got through barking into it, he turned back to Michael.

"Tell this priest of yours that I'll not

stand any such business as he wants to try. If he don't like gambling, he don't need to set foot in a single gambling house, and I'll send him the addresses of all of 'em, so's he'll not get into any by mistake. If it's liquor he don't like, then he can drink water, and mind his own business, and let me mind mine. Am I clear?"

"You are clear," Michael heard himself say. "And I'll give the Father your message."

"I thought we'd see eye to eye, my lad," Boyle said, lighting another cigarette. "That's fine, and the witnesses to that holdup, who saw you shoot the poor cashier—they'll remain lost from now on. I'm glad Paddy thought to tell me about you. You were the lad I needed."

Michael said, "I'll tell Father Maloney, yes; and I'll tell him what I think, too."

Boyle stopped smiling. "You'd better think smart," he warned, "or else . . ."

WHEN he looked back on that evening from a distance of a week, Michael was able to think of a number of things that he might have said or done with wisdom. But he was in no shape for clear thinking as he left Boyle's office, and he was lucky enough to find his way down the smoky stair and past the three men at the bottom.

One of them he recognized. It was the slick-haired fellow who called himself Harry, who had brought the message this afternoon. What was he, a bodyguard? It was known through the Valley that David Boyle, for all his talk, was a bit of a coward, and never felt safe without a handful of rascals around about him.

Michael did not speak to them, only hurried away from the place as fast as he could, and as he was turning into DeKoven Street, he heard the clock on the spire of All-Saints Church striking the hour of nine. That meant it was too late this night to go knocking at Father Maloney's door. The good man retired early, and why should he not, so aging and so needing of rest?

Nor was it late enough to go back to his uncle's house and to bed, Michael knew, for a long night it would be, lying there awake and looking at the ceiling and listening to the distant rumble of the trains on the VanBuren Street elevated, and the all-night clatter of Halsted Street, and perhaps a fire alarm or two.

A phonograph in one of the Greek coffee houses in Little Athens on the west edge of the Valley, was playing *Narcissus,* and a little farther on, a drunken man on the curb sang *Long, Long Trail* lustily, and somewhat off key.

Michael hurried past. He found himself at last in the neighborhood of the church as the tower clock struck eleven. The church was an old brick building, with a short heavy spire, and Father Maloney lived in that brown frame house overladen with soot.

As he rounded the corner, to Michael's surprise, lights shone out of the cracks in the curtained windows of the priest's office, and on the narrow porch another light burned. So the old man was not abed? He was up, and entertaining company, perhaps?

Michael hesitated, wondering whether to go to him now with the story he had to tell, or to wait till tomorrow night after work. As he dawdled under the shadows of the trees beside the church, he brought up suddenly.

That was a man standing there, just inside the low stone wall by the side entrance. He was concealed from the street by a clump of shrubbery, but as luck would have it, from where Michael paused, the light on Father Maloney's porch brought him out sharply in silhouette.

Michael ducked low and waited. Now who would be spying on the Father? After what he had heard this evening, he had small doubt as to who this might be. Not David Boyle, for sure; the boss wouldn't go spying himself. He had too much fear for his skin for that. But it was one of his hoodlums, of course, and indeed he would be watching for no decent purpose!

It wasn't a minute before Michael's uneasy ears picked up the sound of an opening door, then voices talking unguardedly as four men came out to the porch and stopped there to say goodnight. The man behind the shrubbery stood up. Michael could tell from the tense attitude of him that he was watching with both his eyes, and his head was cocked, listening.

What he heard was Father Maloney saying, "I'm sure we can do it, my friends. Certainly with the good people of the district working together, we can clean up the worst of these plague spots."

"That we can," another answered. A third was putting on his hat, and at sight of him Michael bent forward, astounded.

That was . . . but it couldn't be. But it was, and no doubt.

It was Detective-sergeant Hawkins from the downtown bureau, who night before last had questioned Michael about the shooting on Halsted Street. The man who related how Captain Jim Costello, years ago, had saved him from a burning barn, and who, in repayment, had notified Father Maloney of Michael's deep trouble. What was he doing here? He did not live in this ward.

The four were walking down the steps now, tipping their hats politely, and Father Maloney was backing into the house and closing the door.

The man in the bushes ducked low as the group passed him, but when they approached Michael, he stood up suddenly and walked toward them. Only the detective, Hawkins, took the trouble even to glance at him, but it was too dark here to recognize your own blood brother, so he merely walked by.

One of them was saying, "The Father has the right idea. Get rid of David Boyle and we'll be breaking the back of crime in this district."

Another agreed, and Michael realized that not only his ears were picking this up, but the ears of that scoundrel hidden in the bushes there. Michael walked fast. The light snapped off on the priest's front porch, and immediately afterward the curtained windows went dark. It was too late to do anything tonight.

HE SLOWED his pace a bit when he came again to the tawdry glitter of Halsted Street. Doors of Greek coffee houses and Italian cafés stood open, and the sound of foreign voices filled them. Electric lights sparkled; one, with three globes burned out, hung over the door of a flop-house, and spelled out the word *Sleep*.

At the corner of Harrison Street, where Blue Island Avenue, too, cuts off at an angle toward the southwest, Michael followed the sidewalk, past the Greek bookseller's, to the quarters of Engine 5.

The wide front doors stood open and as he approached he heard the staccato chatter of the joker alarm key, reporting a fire in the far south side. Only the man on watch, a rawboned fireman named Bernstein, was up, to all appearances; and he sat with his chair tipped back against the oaken alarm stand, a discarded evening newspaper on his knees.

"Oh, hello, kid," he said. "Come in. Haven't seen you for a month of Sundays." He looked sharply at Michael. "Hear you had a close shave."

"Yes," Michael agreed, and wanted to talk about something else.

"We boys was talking about it just tonight," Bernstein went on. "We said maybe it was a put-up job on you. That Paddy Breen—well, I wouldn't want to go trusting him too far. But you—well, us boys agreed, maybe you wasn't mixed up in that shooting business after all."

"I wasn't," Michael said. He was about to go on, when the joker alarm sounded again. This time it called a company not far away, over in the west side.

"Lots of rolling tonight," Bernstein complained. "Every outfit in the battalion except us has rolled. There, listen to that!" the joker was speaking again. "Truck 5, over at Twelfth and May. I tell you them boys get a workout!"

He set the alarm locations down on

the blackboard and turned to Michael again.

"Why don't you go into the fire business?" he asked.

Michael's heart leaped. "I'm eleven months under age," he said.

"Oh, don't leave that worry you!" Bernstein laughed. "You know what to do about that? Go to David Boyle. He'll fix eleven months in ten minutes. No difference whether you're sixteen years old or sixty! See Dave, if you want a job, any job in this town. There. Listen to that!"

The joker was sounding again. Two taps, two more, another two. "Use telephone," that code meant. Five taps in a row. The fireman was jabbing his finger against a button under the alarm board. Bells began to ring and lights flashed on everywhere. The key still was tapping, two . . . one . . . two: the signature of fire alarm office.

Bernstein yelled into the telephone mouthpiece, then said distinctly, "Forquer and Polk. Polk Street and Forquer. Okay, we're on our way."

He slapped the receiver back on its hook. Firemen in bunkers were sliding the poles. The big new motor pumper roared. The brass bell over the hood started to chatter. The men leaped to their places and the wheels turned. With a thundering sweep, Engine 5 rolled out to its alarm.

In the doorway of the house Michael felt suddenly lonely and helpless. He was thinking of Bernstein's words:

"Go to David Boyle."

V

THE next night Michael must work overtime at the freight house, so it was past seven before he walked up the three steps to Father Maloney's door; and in spite of himself he glanced over his shoulder at the churchyard. There, just last evening, he had seen the man hiding in the shrubs.

"Father," he said, when the old man had let him in, "I've something bad to tell you. And understand, Father, I'm just bringing a message."

"It's agitated you are," the Father said. "Sit down, my son. Here, in this chair."

He pulled it around, Michael was smart enough to notice, so that the light was out of his own eyes and full upon Michael's. But that didn't matter, even though certainly he must have learned it from the police, for wasn't it to be the truth he told tonight?

He spoke rapidly, nor did the priest interrupt him, more than once or twice with a cluck of the tongue, until he was nearly through. Then Father Maloney said, "So that is the message the scoundrel asks you to bring me? I'm grateful to you, Michael. And what do you expect me to do?"

It took Michael a moment to collect his wits. "Dave Boyle's a bad one and a dangerous one, Father," he began.

But the priest silenced him. "Hold your tongue!" he bade. "Are you such a coward you'd let that bully frighten you? Keep your seat. I'll be back."

Michael heard him calling a number on the telephone in the next room, but the old man had shut the door firmly behind him, and it was only the voice that came through it, and not the words.

When he returned, he sat down and said, "Go on. What else?"

Michael finished, telling about the man in the shrubs, just as a car halted at the gate, and he heard a quick step on the porch, and Father Maloney got up, with a surprising spryness to his old legs, and went to answer the door.

"He's still here, yes," he said in the hallway, and then he came back in, and the man walking behind him was Detective-sergeant Hawkins.

"Well, well," Hawkins said. "And we meet again. The Father's cursed by you whether he will or not."

"It's no curse," the priest interrupted, and Hawkins put his hat on the floor at his feet and leaned back in a rocker and lighted a cigar. "I'm grateful for the warning he's brought me."

Hawkins listened, while Michael repeated the story, and when he came to the part about the man spying on the priest's guests, the detective exclaimed, "And to think how I walked right past him!"

When Michael finished, Hawkins asked, "And what now do you intend to do, Father?"

Michael spoke up without meaning it. He heard his own voice, and it surprised him no end, as much as it surprised Father Maloney, too. "I'd tell Dave Boyle to go to Hell," Michael heard himself shout. "I'd say, 'Be damned to him and his whole crew.' "

There was silence after that, then the priest said, "You took the words out of my mouth, my son. Not the words, perhaps, but the thought straight out of my head."

"May I go out the back door?" Hawkins asked. "If there was somebody spying on your visitors last night, Father, there's likely somebody tonight."

"I'll show you," the priest said.

"Turn on no lights," Hawkins warned. "I'll let myself out gentle and quiet and try to come up on this party from the rear."

AFTER a moment, Father Maloney came back alone. His face was tied up with worry, and the lines, deep enough from his long years of other peoples' troubles, seemed deeper than ever as he sat down.

"I think I've convinced Hawkins," he said, "that you're what he calls on the level. He was not for trusting you. But he's taken my word. He's a good man. A fine upstanding citizen."

Then he told Michael, in a very few words, about the meeting last night. The best people from the Valley. To be sure, to be sure, he exclaimed, there were good people here! They and good people from other parts of the city were gathering their strength to put up a fight on crime.

"Honest lawyers and honest industrialists and honest teachers and ministers are flocking to our cause," he said. "We asked the police commissioner for a man we could talk to and trust, who had better knowledge than we of who is responsible for all this wickedness. He sent Sergeant Hawkins. I've become fond of the man. He's ingenious, if a bit on the suspicious side. What's that?"

He uttered these last words with a start. Outside, in the yard of the church, a voice had shouted, "Halt, you! Halt!"

Then there were two shots, close together, and a cry of pain, and then two more shots, a little widely spaced. And Father Maloney was picking up his skirts and running toward the front door, with Michael at his heels.

The darkness blinded Michael for a moment, then he made out the figure of a man running, with an awkward, side-wheel gait, down by the street light on the corner; and closer at hand, walking very slowly, as slowly as the ghost of a dead man might walk, Detective-sergeant Hawkins, with his hat gone and both hands across his stomach.

He got to the foot of the stones and then without so much as a word, he keeled over and lay upon his side, kicking his right foot.

Michael carried him into the house and ripped away his clothes, while the Father telephoned for doctors and the police. Hawkins' eyes were open; his lips, tight together against his teeth, moved once or twice before he got up the strength to speak.

"It was . . . Harry Jersey . . . shot me," he managed to say at last. "Harry . . . Jersey. If I go out—before the boys get here . . . tell them."

The precinct captain from Maxwell station was there almost as soon as the patrol wagon and a carload of men from the detective bureau. At sight of Michael, the captain demanded, "Where was this boy when the shooting took place, Father? Was he in your sight?"

The priest said, "He was facing me, in this room, sir. I'd be pleased if you'd not accuse him again. Whatever this lad tells you, sir, it's the truth, and I vouch for it

And will you take your hat off in my house!"

With that he went out to the room where Detective-sergeant Hawkins lay, with the doctors working over him, for they said it would not do to move him to the hospital at once.

The captain, whose name, Michael learned, was Harris, was not a quick man; you had to say a thing over and over to him, before he understood it properly, and then, perhaps, he only half believed.

But he heard Michael's story to the end.

"He's got a nerve, that Boyle," he exclaimed once, and again, when Michael told him the words Hawkins uttered as he lay on the office floor, "Harry Jersey, eh? I know him well. Slicked down hair like this movie fellow Valentino, and a pair of gold teeth that he smiles with."

It was Michael's turn to exclaim. "That's the one who brought me the message," he cried. "Told me to go to Boyle before eight o'clock."

"Will you pipe down?" the captain bade. "How many ears do you want to hear you talking? If you're smart, young fellow, you'll take a long vacation away from this town."

"Away from here?" Michael stammered. The bell on the steeple across the yard struck midnight, and the captain waited till it was done before he spoke.

"Because," he started to answer, and then the door opened, and one of the doctors marched in very briskly. "What's the news on Hawkins, doc?" the captain asked.

The doctor wiped his hands on a handkerchief and thrust it back into his pocket.

"Hawkins is dead," he said.

MICHAEL felt a sudden quick emptiness in his own stomach. He remembered that it had been this officer who first befriended him in the cell at the station house the other night by calling Father Maloney, and expecting nothing in return. Not the way Boyle would befriend him, for a price. And Boyle would blame him, in this, too. For surely Harry Jersey had seen him go into the priest's house, and the detective soon follow him, and Jersey had got away.

He had been shot, all right, small doubt of that; one could tell from the sidewise way he ran, but would that keep him from talking? Talking he was this very minute, you could lay your last shirt on that!

The captain left him sitting alone in a little side room which Father Maloney called his weeping wall, where parishioners awaited their turns to speak to him on busy days. Ah, and he wished he were not alone, Michael thought. You can do a great deal of thinking in a very few minutes, when you're by yourself, he discovered again, and he was just for opening the door when the captain tramped back in.

"Now, listen," he said. "You be careful. Boyle will not be any too happy over this, you know, and he'll put you out of your troubles quick, if you give him a chance. I've done told the newspaper boys that you've no idea what happened outside tonight. And, of course, I've said we've no idea who shot Hawkins."

"But you know!" Michael cried. "You know who shot him."

"Will you ever learn to keep that yap of yours shut?" the policeman whispered. "Of course we know. But we'll say nothing. Later is soon enough. Maybe next week or next year he'll think the coast is clear and Dave Boyle will drag him out of where he already has got him hid." He gave Michael one of those slow, dull looks of his. "Unless, of course, the witnesses get erased sooner than that."

It was two o'clock before the last of the police had gone and Father Maloney said, "You'll stay here the rest of the night, my son. I've got a bed made up. I'd not relish having you set foot outside before daylight."

Michael argued.

"No, stay the night," the priest insisted. He cleared his throat: "I've talked to that police captain, my boy, and he does have a couple of ideas, even if he doesn't appear to. Now—" again he cleared his throat.

Michael waited. He knew this was no good news that the old man was about to give him, and neither did he know whether, what with this and that, he could stand any more news that was bad.

"You've got your heart set on the fire department job, I suppose," Father Maloney was saying. "You've been counting on it all these years, and all that. Michael boy, forget the fire department."

"But, Father!"

"Oh, yes, I understand. I have a feeling for you. A fine, exciting job it is, and your father's example is before you, and your grandfather's, and such things. But Michael, my lad—there's odds against you. You can't fight the likes of a man . . ."

"I'll fight Boyle!" Michael flared. "Sure, I'll fight him!"

"And get what poor Hawkins got for your trouble? No, the thing for you to do is to go away for a while, as the police officer says, and mayhap Boyle will forget you. Such a scoundrel cannot live forever. It's die he will of his own wickedness. Then . . . you come back, and good men will see what they can do."

"I've no place to go," Michael replied, with a show of stubbornness. "And even if I did have, I'd stay here."

"Sleep on it," Father Maloney advised. "I will show you your bed."

Michael closed his door and sat a long time thinking miserably of how things might have turned out, if he had not stopped the other night, when he saw Paddy and Tony running toward him. He would have missed those nights and that day in jail, missed his first meeting with Harry Jersey, and his talk with Czar Boyle. His heart beat rapidly. He would have missed knowing Detective Hawkins, and—why, if it hadn't been for him himself, the detective would be walking around right now!

They were heavy thoughts to take to bed. Michael sat and listened until the sound of Father Maloney, moving around above him, had quieted, and then, at last he took off his shoes.

But how could a man go to bed, with so much on his mind? How did he know that this house wasn't being watched right this minute by some of Boyle's troublemakers? The thought itched him, and he spent an uncomfortable half hour, trying to down it, trying not to go to the window, and lift the curtain just half an inch to look out.

He settled deeper in his chair. The clock on All-Saints Church struck three. Michael's eyes felt heavy. He closed them and sat there listening to the distant hum of the city through the open window behind its curtain. He dropped off into a doze, then wakened, startled, thinking that he was talking to David Boyle.

He slept again. When he did awake, the church clock was striking four. But he was not completely awake. It was half dream and half real. Something was choking him, like a wad of sandburrs caught in his throat. His head was heavy. Something smelled like the devil's kitchen stoop.

He nearly went back to sleep, but something told him to stir himself. What was that smell? What was the noise, like somebody rattling a heavy piece of paper? That other sound, like hail against a window? He opened his eyes.

THE room still was dark, since the curtains were drawn. That smell—Suddenly he was wider awake; was kicking out his feet, finding his shoes, and pressing his toes into them.

That smell was smoke. Smoke! The rattling of paper was the licking of fire.

He leaped up yelling, "Father! Father Maloney!"

Barging across the room, he bumped into the opposite wall, where he thought the door ought to be, and the plaster burned his hands, with heat on the other side of it. Twice and a third time he yelled and at last he found the door and jerked it open.

Fire swept in at him. He slammed the door. Wide awake now, he groped through smoke for the window and yanked up its curtain. With one foot he booted a hole in

the screen and went out through it and dropped the five feet to the ground.

He was yelling for all the wind there was in his lungs, "Father! Father Maloney! Get out o' there!"

He spun around. The five windows on this side of the house all seeped smoke around their sash and other smoke was pouring in small black cataracts from between the brown clapboards.

It was just daylight, but plainly he could see how the house was charged with this smoke, and he thought with a sudden terror, "The Father, he's dead in his bed upstairs!"

And again he thought, "And I'm alone with him! It's I who will get the blame again." He knew in that moment that the fire was no accident. That it was Boyle's own way of getting rid of the Father. Of himself.

He was running. The front porch where Detective Hawkins had fallen last night still wore a dark smear that he knew was blood. He charged up the steps. Overhead, a window broke with a small grating sound, and there was a grunt of imprisoned heat, and fire shot out.

Somewhere in the distance a steady clop-clop of a horse and the iron rattle of tires on paving bricks broke through the morning stillness.

"Fire!" Michael bellowed. "Help!"

He heard a window open across the street, and a woman screaming and then he rushed to the door. He had seen Father Maloney lock it carefully the night before, and make sure the bolt was set. but he threw all his young weight against it, once, twice, a half dozen times. It would not give.

The milk wagon clopped around the corner and Michael yelled again. The wagon stopped and a voice shouted, "I'll get ye help!"

The office window, where he had sat so long last evening, was on Michael's left, and he rushed at it. The heel of his palm was bleeding when he drew it back, from smashing the glass. Less smoke seemed to come out of the hole in the pane than from other windows, and he eased himself into it.

But faith, wasn't the smoke thick enough to bedevil a blessed saint! He felt his way through it, bending low, the way he so often had heard the boys on Engine 5 tell how to get through a black wall of it.

He found the stairway at last, crawling on hands and knees, for the fire was sweeping along the narrow hallways from the kitchen. It gave him small chance to get up the stair, even less to find his way down.

Father Maloney had been walking about in the room directly over Michael's own, late last night as he prepared for bed, and Michael fought his way up through the heat and smoke and fire and turned to his right and booted at a door. This would be the room certainly.

And this the bed. And this Father Maloney upon it, lying as still as a dead man. Michael shook him. The smoke was clogging his own throat again. He was getting light-witted, what with the heat and not having air to breathe and the way the blood was leaving him out of the cut in his hand.

"Father!" he cried, choking, and he bent over and he caught up the old man's body, and light as a feather it seemed, even if his own knees were weak.

He straightened up, then, with the priest hanging limp, but he delayed long enough, in spite of the heat pounding in at the door to grab a blanket from the bed, and with his one good hand, he tossed it over Father Maloney's face and body, and the buried his own nose in it and felt his way to the door.

As he did so, from somewhere he heard the sound of bells and one of those new squealing sirens from some battalion chief's red automobile buggy. The fire had reached the foot of the stair. He staggered, rushing down into it, and held his breath.

He felt it claw at the back of his neck and catch at his ankles and blister his back, right through the coat he wore.

His head was light. Was he going to fall, right here in the midst of it all? He managed to stagger on. He was in the office, then, and somehow, he was at the window he had broken coming in. He had a leg through the window. The siren was screaming again, and then it wasn't screaming. He was climbing out of the window, and then he wasn't climbing out. He was holding Father Maloney tightly, protecting the old man's face, and then he wasn't holding him.

He was breathing fire, and then he wasn't breathing fire. He was lying on his back and someone was saying, "Lift him gentle now. Gentle, I say."

THE bandages were the worst. You couldn't get at the itch of whatever it was on your neck and your face. Couldn't see. Could only smell horrible smells and feel the pain of the burns and hear voices talking about you, and seeming a long way off.

It was so for three days, but how was a fellow to know whether it was day or night, till they told him afterward?

It was strange, no end, that Father Maloney should be first out of bed, too, what with his age and all, but there he was, with his patches of gauze on his face and with one arm tied up, and looking older than ever but smiling just the same, standing over Michael's bed.

"I've no recollection of it at all, my son," he was saying, "but the chief of the firemen, ah, he's told me. How he met you coming out through that window, with me in your arms, and the blanket keeping the fire off me, and you half burned up. A fine job of firemanship he called it, although I think it's a peculiar word. Yes, the house is burned, or most of it, and I'm living across the street for the moment —where I've got a room for you, temporarily."

"Temporarily?" Michael managed to repeat, though his lips were so puffed it's a wonder any word came through.

"Till you go to work in the fire department," Father Maloney said. "Ah, yes, my son, it's been attended. It's no running you'll do, after all. It's stay, as you say, and finish. So the battalion chief . . . Murphy, his name is—when he heard who you were and what you wanted and the several other things I told him—why, he brought the chief of department himself to my room, and they promised me. The new schools starts September first."

"Thanks," Michael managed to say, "but—David Boyle . . ."

"Forgive me," Father Maloney said, "but it's your own words, and I'm taking them out of your mouth. It was you that said . . ."

"To Hell with him," Michael repeated.

"Amen," said the father, and allowed himself to smile.

LOOK FORWARD TO

the further education of the irrepressible Mike in

THE SCHOOLING OF MICHAEL COSTELLO

By KARL DETZER

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"It was bestial!" Rowena Lennington cried. "Bestial!"

Two Hours to Go

By THEODORE ROSCOE

EVERYBODY looks startled when the engines slow, a tremor passes through the ship and the passengers realize the great Trans-Andean Airliner, out of Buenos Aires for Santiago de Chile, has come in to an emergency landing two hours short of its destination. The radio is out of order, the pilot announces, and they may be delayed on this deserted army field for some time while he makes his way through the rain and sleet to a nearby mining camp to send a message for assistance.

To John Enfield, in Seat 1, this is a welcome interruption, for one of his thirteen fellow passengers may be the murderer he seeks. In his pocket is a letter: *"Taking Trans-Andean Air Express Sept. 15 Buenos Aires to Santiago, Chile."* It is signed by a piece of silk, a fragment of cherry-colored foulard flowered with forget-me-nots. There is a dark stain in one corner of the fragment which matches in color and design eleven similar fragments which have come to Enfield through the mail. Piece by piece these fragments are forming a pattern—a pattern that, when completed, should resemble, symbolically enough, a hangman's nose. Will he be able to place it around the neck of one of his fellow travelers? Somehow he must make them talk. He has tried to develop a general discussion but without success, and now, after the first flurry of excitement is over: "Suppose you had only two hours left to go, and you knew it," he says to the man in the neighboring lounge chair, "how would you wish to spend them? Assuming you could press a magic button and be transported anywhere you wished."

Mary Messenger, pretty schoolteacher in Seat 2, answers at once. All her life has been run on schedule, she says. And this trip, on which she has hoped something will happen, has simply been more schedules—until now. Given *her* choice she would like

This story began in last week's Argosy

to be right where she is. Adam Henry Clay, newspaper tycoon in Seat 3, refuses to participate. But his traveling companion, Millicent Royce, fading actress in Seat 5, answers for him. "He'd like to be Napoleon, strutting in the palace of Versailles," she says bitterly. "And I—I'd spend them telling a lot of high-nosed bluebloods just where they could go!" The quiet man in Seat 4, Hammand Carlyle, a lawyer who has resigned from the Bar, would finish his book exposing the legal inconsistencies that have sent innocent men to the electric chair. The aristocratic Mrs. Piedmont Lennington in Seat 6 would be in church.

As Rowena Lennington, her lovely daughter in Seat 8, begins to speak Enfield catches a glimpse of something under his ashtray that might be taken for a dead butterfly, but under surreptitious inspection is seen to be a scrap of cherry-colored silk flowered with pale blue forget-me-nots. "—and for that reason," Rowena Lennington is saying, "I killed a man!"

CHAPTER VI

THAT CABIN IN THE ALPS

A GUST of wind, buffeting the starboard side of the plane, sent a seismic tremor through the airliner's hull. Blown rain dashed against the windows in redoubled assault, white spurts bursting on the glass. The ceiling lights flickered and steadied; and from the corner of an eye, Enfield saw the co-pilot, Walther, move across the cockpit to inspect a dial among the clock-like meters and mechanisms on the instrument panel.

The gale, Enfield knew, was mounting to storm velocity; but the others in the cabin lounge were now too preoccupied to notice. All eyes were concentrated on the tall girl in black tweeds, the passengers held in a charade-like pose of attention by the startling confession: "I killed a man—"

Enfield saw Mary Messenger reach out to grip Carlyle's arm. Adam Henry Clay dropped his newspaper. While the others looked up startled—the wiry man halted in the act of shuffling cards—Charles, the valet, peering open-mouthed from the door to the steward's pantry—Enfield waited, tensened, tight-lipped, his feelings a confusion of incredulity, suspicion, repressed excitement.

He could not believe this girl had slipped that token under his ashtray—a murderer's trade-mark—decoyed him to this unlikely corner of South America only to stage a dramatic confessional. Unfathomable as were those messages signed in silk, he was sure the sender had a deeper motive behind the play. Yet that fragment found under his ashtray matched the twelve in his pocket; it had been planted there while the plane was at San Luis del Monte; the airliner's crew could not be concerned, for he had checked them thoroughly at Buenos Aires; there remained only the thirteen passengers, and Rowena Lennington was declaring that she had killed a man.

"Rowena!" her mother voiced a shocked little scream. "Rowena, what is the meaning of this ridiculous nonsense?"

"It isn't nonsense," the girl shook her head. "It's something I've wanted to get off my chest to somebody ever since it happened. We're playing a game that calls for honesty, and I'm answering the question honestly. Please, Mother," stubborn before Mrs. Piedmont Lennington's glare, "it's my story, and I'd like to tell it. It's what I'd like to do with my last two hours if I had the chance as defined by Mr. Enfield, and it's a part of my life you never knew about, Mother. I'd press the magic button, then, and I'd go back to that time I was mountain climbing in Switzerland. That night I was lost in the Carnic Alps. I've always wanted to live that night over and differently, and if I had the chance to, that's what I'd do with my last two hours."

Her mother cried indignantly, "But what do you mean by telling these people—"

"SIT down, Mother," the girl insisted. "It's a part of what happened you don't know about. You know I was lost overnight in a blizzard near the summit, and you know about the man that was—the man that was—"

Her eyes were suddenly shiny, and she sat down on the arm of her chair, blinking, chin stubborn in an effort for composure.

"Has anybody got a cigarette? Thanks," to the fuzzy haired man's hasty offer of a pack, "I'll take a Cuban." Selecting a cigarette from the flat box held out by the solitaire-player, she lit it with a grateful nod.

"I hope I don't look it," she resumed with a smile that chided herself, "but I'm twenty-nine, and the thing I'm telling about happened nine years ago, and every time I've thought of that chap in those nine years, I've had to hide behind a cigarette. You know it's a relief to be getting this story out of my system; it's the sort of confession you couldn't make to a priest—it's nothing one could expiate in any manner. In a way it's the inverse of the case Mr. Carlyle mentioned—the man who didn't mean to kill, yet found himself legally a murderer. I—I meant to, and in no way could I be legally held."

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington panted, "Rowena Lennington, if you persist in this idiotic—"

"It's true." The girl's lips were grim. "I believe with Mr. Carlyle that it's what's in one's heart that counts. When I went on that vacation in the Swiss Alps I didn't have any heart at all. I didn't know there was such a thing," her tone hardened emphatically, "unless it was on a silly lace Valentine. The only things that interested me were dancing, painting, horses, how to enter a drawing room, and skiing, Oh, and of course I had dates and went about chaperoned. But always with the *right* boys. That meant boys who were just suits of clothes and hats with faces under them—dummies who danced and bowed and always said the right thing—with sawdust inside of them, for all I knew. There were other boys, of course. I simply didn't go with them, that was all—"

Rowena Lennington's stare, focussed on the carpet up the aisle, was somber. "Father decided, while I was in Europe, I ought to have a go at mountain climbing with some friends going to make an easy Alpine ascent. I went to Switzerland in a great whoop over the idea. The Matterhorn, and all that. A chance to wear those modish pantaloons and hobnailed boots and go leaning over cliffs with a rope around my belt and a pick in my hand. What simply delicious fun. Absolute thrills. Oh, my!

"The party was the right kind, as you can well imagine. A surgeon friend of my father's. Two English boys from Oxford—perfect specimens of waxworks with heads made out of books and manners as smoothly mechanical as well-oiled machinery. The surgeon's wife, and my Aunt Cornelia and a Professor of Geology friend of the surgeon's who joined us the last moment at the take-off.

"ALL these people were very lovely, but the Swiss guides and a young Russian guide were something else. Of course being something else, I ignored them, until the second day or so, ascending a beautiful escarpment that tinkled with icy vistas, snowflowers and cowbells, I began to notice the young Russian was about nine times as interesting as my Oxford escort and forty times as entertaining. He had close-curled yellow hair and the sort of handsome features we're supposed to believe Russians never have.

"He was easily six feet tall, lithe and terribly graceful, and strong as Hercules. We were carrying skis—rather, he carried them all, as well as my pack and Aunt Cornelia's. It fascinated me to watch him walk when the rest of us were puffing. Then he'd flash me a smile that made my silly head spin. Most thrilling of all, he'd stop on occasion and take a swig of vodka from his kit—something that made Aunt Cornelia turn her eyes to heaven. After that he'd sing, swinging his arms as he walked. Aunt Cornelia didn't approve of him, and let me know she didn't.

"Of course, his foreign manners were impossible. The man was a perfect brute; at mealtimes he ate like a wolf, grinning and humming and picking his teeth in the most informal way; and I wouldn't have thought of talking to him. He couldn't speak anything but Russian anyway. Our

head guide, who could speak Russian, assured us the fellow was all right, an expert climber, very dependable though new to the climb we were embarking on. One of the leftovers of the War trying to make his way in a new world. The kindly Swiss were breaking him in. He wasn't a count or duke or anything, but it seemed he'd been with the Imperial Guard.

"I'd read *Michael Strogoff* and *Anna Karenina;* and I could imagine this handsome Slav as dashing about in a droshky, singing mad love songs to beautiful Russian ballet dancers, drinking champagne at wild officers' banquets, charging his horse up the steps of the Kremlin—the typical cavalryman of the novels, impetuous, reckless, semi-barbarian.

"He did look the part," Rowena Lennington made a sweeping gesture with her arm. "Striding along with his hat in his hand. His hair blowing over his eyes. Always grinning or halting to pick a flower and thrust it into his hatband, or irrepressably bursting into a song. Contrast with those stuffy English boys made him seem like a perfect Cossack to me. And something about him made me angry. He was a bit of a show off—swinging on ahead when everybody else was tired—using one hand in a climb where the rest of us must use two—leaning out over a dangerous crag to grin at the valley far below. He was so—so sure of himself. So impervious to fatigue. So superb on skis when we reached the snow-line.

"There was nothing he couldn't do, from building a campfire with one match to climbing a glacier without his Alpenstock. It annoyed me that he could do everything so much better than anyone else in the party, and I began trying to keep up with his stunts, determined to show him he wasn't quite the champion he obviously thought himself. I insisted on carrying my own pack and my own rope. Keeping pace with him on the climb. The ease with which he outdistanced me, and the way he'd chuckle at places where I needed assistance, infuriated me. It was clear he considered us a lot of softies. Me in particular. Now and then he would give me a tolerant smile that I regarded, coming from a guide, as insolence.

"If I could have talked to him, vented my girlish feelings with some caustic remarks aimed at what I believed his arrogance and conceit. He was just too good looking, too sure of himself, too clever, that was all. He was the typical man, lording it over everything, and I resented it. But there wasn't any way I could tell him about it. By the end of the week it became a sort of private game of stump the leader—myself against Mikhail, which happened to be his name—a competition which he didn't appear to notice, and which, naturally, wasn't apparent to the rest of the party."

THE girl's eyes darkened, remembering. "The Alps. Great snowy ranges sparkling against the blue. Glacial air, vast canyons of blue and pink snow, trails in the clouds, sheer drops with glimpses of toy valleys far below. The Russian and I were always in the lead, racing on skis or on foot, first to reach the mountain rest-houses, first to unpack for a camp. One afternoon on the last lap before we were to reach the peak of the climb, we started a race up a glacier, our objective a rest-house visible near the summit. Mikhail kept glancing up at the sky, worried I thought. Like a fool, I kept skiing on ahead.

"All at once it began to snow. We were crossing a ridge, and looking back I couldn't see the others in our party. Our tracks behind us were covered in a trice, the ridge obscured by the curtains of blowing white flakes. The Russian frowned and pointed at the distant rest-house still visible against the summit, motioning me to keep on. I signaled desperately that I wanted to rejoin our party, and my guide urged me forward just as desperately, making signs to assure me the others would have pitched camp, and the tents might be impossible to find.

"The snowstorm had become a blizzard, and the next thing I knew, the fun was

out of the afternoon. Did you ever see it snow so hard the sky went almost black? In that storm at the top of Switzerland you could hardly see three paces before your eyes!"

Rowena Lennington shivered at the memory. "It was all we could do to make that rest-house at the crest. I know now what a close shave it was. Like fighting your way through night in a storm at the North Pole. It couldn't have been a mile, and it seemed to take years. I was done up when we got there. Blinded. Fairly frozen. There was only enough spirit left in me to resent the grin that Russian gave me as he flicked on his electric torch to show me the front door.

"I can see," the girl drew a sharp breath, "the interior of that Alpine cottage as if it were yesterday. Like a log cabin—two small rooms with a door between. The front door opened into the bigger room which was snugly furnished with a rustic table, a bunk, a little black iron stove and a bin of charcoal. There was a window heavily shuttered, and a great curly pair of goat-horns on the wall.

"The back room was obviously a woman's retreat, neatly outfitted with an iron bed, a bureau, a clothes cabinet, a smaller iron stove. There was no back door, just one small window in the back wall. Everything was as neat and cozy as the varnished interior of a Swiss clock, a haven for chance mountain-climbers and sportsmen.

"The wind practically flung us across the threshhold as Mikhail unlatched the front door, and I hung to the table in the darkness, sobbing with cold. He had a fight to shut the door against the blast; then he lit a carbide lamp and held it up, eyes cheerful, to reassure me. It wasn't five minutes before he had a fire going in the front-room stove; then he made one in the smaller stove in the back room, and the place was warm in a jiffy. With his usual insouciant efficiency, he unpacked our duffle bags, fixed blankets in the bunk, made the cot in the back room. Whistling, he got out the mess kits and cooking pans. When the tinned meat was frying, he hauled out his vodka flask, held it toward me. He seemed amused by my refusal. Turning to the stove, he began to sing.

"I WAS thawed out by that time," the girl put a hand through her hair with a nervous gesture. "I was thawed out, and I began to look around. The storm was howling to take the roof off, but the beams were stout overhead, and the little cabin was tight and secure. It was the shadows on the wall that bothered me first. The shadow of that impervious Russian looming over the little black stove that had red holes in the grate. The shadow of his soldierly shoulders and strong, curly head.

"Then the—the firelight was gold on his hands. His back was toward me, and I began to watch his hands. They were large hands, but they weren't peasant's hands—how sure they were of themselves, lazy in a graceful, powerful way like the man himself, deft in getting things done, working in an effortless way, never wasting motion. The meal was ready in no time.

"We ate in silence, and he ate enormously; it angered me, his obvious enjoyment in his own cooking, smiling and bobbing his head and urging me to have second helpings of this and that. It was certainly good, that meal he conjured from tins. I wouldn't have let him think it, though. I made faces as if I didn't like it very much, although I was dying for another helping of venison. 'So you cook, too?' I told him caustically. 'Is there anything in the world you think you can't do, Mister Boy Scout?'

"He didn't understand me, of course, and only laughed, wiped his mouth on his sleeve and leaned back in his chair, admiring the fire he'd built in the stove and, I supposed, his culinary prowess. I don't know as I'd ever seen a man quite as content with himself. I sat there listening to the storm and slowly angering at my guide's indifference to the situation that had separated us from the rest of the party and brought us together alone in a mountain cabin in a blizzard. It was like

one of those situations in a Hollywood movie—the couple driven in by the storm —that sort of thing. 'If Mister Mikhail starts any romancing,' I assured myself, 'I'll show him a thing or two with the handle of my Alpenstock.'

"And presently he had out his vodka flask, and was humming *The Blue Danube*. I can see him there yet, tilted back sociably in his chair, arms folded, hands complacent on the bulges of muscle under his flannel shirt-sleeves. Humming in his throat, his eyes amused by whatever he was thinking about, as unconcerned as if there were no one else in the room.

"It was that air of detachment, that unconcerned manner that made me want to slap him across the cheek. It wasn't that he simply ignored me. He didn't. His atitude toward me was that of a father for an infant—he wasn't that much older than I was, either—his expression implied a sort of, 'Well, my child, this is cozy, isn't it?' as if I were six or seven.

"'And just you try and start anything,' I thought.

"You see, I knew these foreigners. Only he didn't try anything. Just sat there drinking his vodka and making himself at home. Showing me those handsome teeth of his that were like a dental advertisement in his tanned face. Giving me that complacent, self-entertained eye.

"I BEGAN to wonder how old he was. If he'd been married back in Russia. Certainly women had spoiled him, to give him that super-satisfied air. 'You think you're pretty smooth, don't you!' I flared, after an interval that was somehow like an impasse. 'I suppose all the girls you've known in the past would've thought it was just ducky to be here with you in this romantic setting. Well, we American girls aren't so stupid.'

"He stared across the table, unable to understand either the words or the tone. Then he shrugged turned sideways to face the stove, thrust his hands into his pockets and mused cheerfully at the grate-irons. Just as if I wasn't there. 'So that's your method, is it?' I thought. But I mustn't let him see I was the least uneasy about him. I yawned to show him how completely bored I was.

"He was on his feet immediately, solicitous and bowing. Waving a hand to indicate the back room as mine. Oh, he was very polite. Walked over smiling to hold open the door. I sauntered into my room as casually as I could, shut the door with emphasis and let him hear me click the inside latch. I heard him go back to his chair, humming to himself. But it was funny the minute that door was shut between us. The cabin was very warm after that struggle through the icy blizzard. I— I felt as if I were going to faint.

"Going straight to the shutters of the window in my room, I unhooked them and latched them open for an inch. At once the cold almost paralyzed me. I stoked up my little stove, and huddled under a mass of blankets while the snow whirled in through my window and the wind howled like a passing horde of wolves, but I wouldn't have closed the shutters for anything. And I wouldn't have turned out my carbide lamp for anything, either."

CHAPTER VII

REASON FOR HOMICIDE

ROWENA LENNINGTON paused, her eyes appealing to the card-player for another cigarette. Her fingers, Enfield saw, were trembling. Inhaling deeply, she expelled the smoke with a sigh and a nod of thanks.

"Well," she resumed, "there's the picture up to the midnight I'm talking about. Alpine cottage in a mountaintop blizzard. That Russian guide in the front room. Me, huddled under blankets in the back. I could hear him moving around. Humming to himself. Presently he was singing in a low, constrained baritone, and I knew he was at the vodka again.

"I couldn't sleep. I imagine it was around eight o'clock when I went to my room, and the time dragged endlessly in the miserable cold I'd inflicted on myself

by leaving the window open. Perhaps three hours had passed when the singing stopped. When I listened, I couldn't hear a sound beyond my door. That bothered me more than his singing. I began to have a feeling he was standing on the other side of the door, listening.

" 'Don't be a fool,' I told myself. 'He wouldn't dare—' And, of course, I stopped any thoughts of that kind. Only I'd heard about vodka—read about it in novels. The guide was a Russian. And he was a man. Maybe he *was* standing on the other side of the door. Listening. I sat bolt upright under my blankets. I was sure I'd heard his step creak out there. No, it was only a board expanding from the heat of that stove. Or was it? I hugged back under the blankets, heart pounding. Why had the man stopped singing? Why wasn't he moving around?

"And then," Rowena Lennington paled as she spoke, "it happened. A sound like a chair going over, and a little crash of glass. I heard him fall, and I heard him get up off the floor. He was muttering to himself in a jumbled drunken way, and his footsteps were staggering. It seemed to me he wandered around the room, knocking things over, and for a moment or two there was a pounding sound, as if he were hammering on the table. I was petrified. The guide was blind drunk, from the sound, and mumbling to himself.

"I flew to the door to make sure about the latch, and he must have reached it at the same time. He knocked. Softly at first. Then loudly. I called out to him to go away, and he shouted something I couldn't understand, in Russian. Then he knocked harder. His shouts were more insistent. I think he was bumping the panels with his shoulder, and the door trembled under the impact. Oh, it was hateful the way he called out. First commandingly. Then in a tone of pleading. Then in a drunken, desperate way, beating wildly on the door with his fists.

"I screamed at him to let me alone, and when I screamed like that he attacked the door like a wildman. It sounded as if he were weeping and snuffling as he clawed and pounded on the door. I suppose I became hysterical. I had just sense enough not to climb out of the window and go screaming off into that black, glacial blizzard—sure death for me if I had.

"I don't know why it never occurred to me that he might dash around the cottage and come in through that back window. I was too horrified and frightened to use my wits, and as it was, he continued to hammer on the door. Oh, the sound of those fists. And that mumbo-jumbo, drunken shouting in Russian.

"In crazy panic I shoved the bureau against the door, jammed the cabinet against the bureau and the bed against the cabinet for a barricade. He was pleading with me again, sobbing. 'Go away! Go away!' I screamed. There was another crash, as if he'd fallen down; then he attacked the door in redoubled effort to break through.

"HIS strength and persistence were terrible. The door opened a crack as the latch broke apart, and I had a glimpse of his face at the aperture, his eyes white-rimmed, rolling like a fish's, his cheeks mottled, hair tumbling over his forehead, lips apart, beads of perspiration standing out like blisters on his jaws. A thread of saliva ran down on his chin and he was panting horribly, like a maddened animal. Oh, it was bestial. Bestial! He worked a hand and wrist through the crack, and it reminded me, dreadfully, of the hand of a begger pleading, outstretched, imploringly, for alms. Alms—my God! It waved at me desperately, that hand. Drunkenly. Asking me to remove the barricade and let him in.

"I struck at the hand with my Alpenstock. Battered the knuckles until they bled. Struck at his ravening, mumbling face. He staggered back from a blow across the wrist, and I flung myself at the door with all the frantic power left in me, jamming it tight shut, shoving the Alpenstock as a wedge under the knob so it wouldn't budge.

"He fell," Rowena Lennington's voice had worn itself to a whisper, "slowly, horridly, clawing the door as he slid down. I heard his body sluff to the floor and the thump of his head. You know how a drunken man breathes? He made a gargling sound, then a sound as if he were grinding his teeth. After that everything was silent. I crept into a corner, fainting, sick, and spent the longest night I will ever spend in my life crouching awake in my blankets, not daring to shut my eyes or move. I suppose I must have slept part of the time, though. There was sunshine in the room all of the sudden; blue sky between the window-shutters, and outside a glorious Alpine sunrise above a world of crystal and snow.

"Imagine my relief at peering from the window and seeing the rest of our party just topping the crest of the summit and coming into view. Unlimbering my skis, I shoved them out of the window, crawled out after them, and went flying to meet my friends across the shimmery drifts.

"I couldn't tell them what had happened. I could only sob hysterically and point at the cottage. 'The Russian! The Russian!' Everybody hurried forward to find out what had occurred. But we couldn't go in by the way of the front door. A ten-foot drift had piled up against the door, tons of packed snow. The side window, too, was buried by the same huge drift. We had to go in by the rear window—the surgeon, the two Swiss guides, the English college boys and I.

"They stared at the furniture barricading the door, but even then I couldn't tell them what had happened. The doctor seemed to understand, though, as he pushed back the bureau and bed and kicked aside the wedged Alpenstock. He opened the door grimly, after a piercing glance at me—then stepped quickly back. A gust of stale heat poured from the shadow-cornered front room. The stove-lids made red patterns of light in the dimness. The carbide lamp was burning gloomily on the table. The chair was overturned, and fragments of a glass glimmered on the floor.

"The Russian boy lay face down on the floor across the doorway, sprawled full length, horribly inert. The surgeon turned him over angrily; then went to one knee, squinting at the senseless, mottled face.

" 'He's drunk!' I screamed. 'He tried to get into my room at midnight. He brought me here to this cottage when we could've turned back, and he tried to get into my room. He's drunk—!'

"The surgeon looked at the front door, held fast against the snowbank. At the side window where the shutters, too, were locked against the huge drift. Then he looked at the young Russian's face; then up at me.

" 'No, Rowena,' he said. 'That stove in here—'

" 'Stove—?' I gasped.

"The surgeon looked at me. 'Have you never heard of carbon-monoxide gas? Have you never seen suffocation—?' "

ROWENA LENNINGTON'S hands were clenched together on her knee as she finished her recital, her eyes darkly luminous in a face gone painfully pale. She didn't appear to see the cigarette box offered by the card-player; to be aware of her staring audience; or to hear Carlyle's husky-throated, "George! That was a rotten experience—"

Then, as her fingers relaxed their grip and slow color returned to her face, she looked around her with a sigh.

"That's that." Swinging sidewise, to drop back into her chair. "Now you know why I'd want to go back there, if I had two hours left to do it in, and live that midnight differently. Thanks for—for listening."

Mr. Earwig leaned forward, palm cupped at ear, to ask in a piping voice, "Did you say carbon-monoxide gas from a stove—?"

The girl across the aisle nodded woodenly. "It was a charcoal fire. You couldn't smell it. He must have—have fallen asleep in his chair at the table, after turning off the drafts or something. Woke up unable to breathe. You see, he couldn't open the window or the front door—the

snow had drifted to the eaves—" she broke off with a gesture of hopelessness.

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington, who had been sitting as though stunned by her daughter's speech, said severely, "The guide was suffocated by his own foolish handling of the fire. I don't understand, Rowena, why you had to startle everybody by saying what you did."

"That I killed him?" Rowena Lennington's eyes were suddenly angry, glinting. "I did. Because of my own stupid romanticism and silly imaginings. Because of what was in my own heart. That young Russian guide wasn't interested in me. I found out he'd married a lovely Swiss girl just a week before he took the job with us as guide. What do you think of that? I know what I think of it! I know what I've thought of myself," Rowena Lennington said in a low, self-scalding voice, "ever since I realized just whom I was barricading the door against, that night!"

HER voice stopped incisively; it was as if the curtain had dropped on a scene. The passengers, all of whom had been listening, sat in their lounge chairs like people in a theater who had witnessed an act and were still held by the mood of the play. Rain drumming on the windows at their backs had become an unnoticed monotony; the caterwauling of wind in outer night seemed no longer threatening, pushed into the background by the calming sedative of talk.

It was extraordinary, Enfield thought, how people needed someone to talk to. This tall girl, looking so self-assured in smart traveling tweeds, seemed the last person in the world to offer so open-handed a confessional. Given an audience, particularly an audience of chance acquaintances, most people would reveal themselves as never before the inhibiting eye of family or old friends—it explained the confessional house-parties of the Buchman Movement, the evangelistic fervor of camp meetings, the easy good-fellowship of an ocean liner's smoke room. People ached to discuss themselves. To explain themselves. Everybody would welcome the chance to publish a biography. And nearly everybody, Enfield knew, carried somewhere beneath a mundane exterior a brooding conscience-prick of some kind, a long-buried remorse, a secret flaw that cried for the salve of self-abnegation or public exposure. The Church knew that. And psychiatrists. And Shakespeare—*A friend is an ear.*

Enfield called, off-handedly, "Well, Sordo, how about those sandwiches?" reintroducing the steward to the scene. But he was detailing Rowena Lennington's story carefully, recording it in his mind. There were other reasons for talking besides getting something off one's chest. There were confessionals that boasted, and confessionals spoken to mislead.

And now the fuzzy haired man seated opposite Miss Lennington was speaking. Prompted by the confidences given by others, inspired to add his own voice to the roundelay, his hornrimmed glasses shining with an inner light of kindled excitement.

"It's my turn, ain't it?" he asked, tense-posed on the edge of his seat. "All right," looking up and down the aisle, "I'll tell you. Everybody else is game to come through; I guess there ain't any reason why I shouldn't. What would I do with my last two hours if I could press a magic button and do anything I pleased?" His voice went up-key, flatted on the blurt. "I'd go back to Christmas 1917, and I'd kill a Dutchman named Schicklgrueber!"

Once more the little audience in the club lounge of the stranded airliner was shocked into staring surprise. Enfield had been confident his question would induce strange answers. So far the answers had all been surprising—the little mathematics teacher who hated two-times-two—the attorney denouncing Law—Miss Royce's outburst at society—Miss Lennington's outburst against herself. Yes, all had been surprising in their turn—even Adam Henry Clay's resentful silence and Mrs. Piedmont Lennington's self-righteous censorship—surprisingly outspoken and vehement,

capped by this explosive: "I'd kill a Dutchman named Schicklgrueber!"

Enfield found himself hoping the pilot on his lonely way through the storm-lashed night to that mining camp would not return too soon.

He wanted to hear the fuzzy haired man's reason for a proposed homicide. He hoped the passengers in the after part of the cabin—Mr. and Mrs. Earwig; the German, Gerstner; the expressionless solitaire-player, and the white-haired elderly gentleman with the mild blue eyes—would have their turn at answering. Then he wanted to give his own answer.

His own answer, Enfield suspected, would be most surprising of all. It was only a question of which one of those in the plane it would surprise most.

CHAPTER VIII

COFFINS FOR KIDS

"MY NAME'S Flaum—Irving Flaum." The fuzzy haired man was digging in a vest pocket to produce a pack of business cards which he distributed at once to those within reach, dropping the remainder aboard a tray of sandwiches in the hand of the passing steward.

Catching a sandwich on the fly, folding it into his mouth with adroit dispatch, he swallowed twice, hiccuped, and went on, dusting pudgy fingers of crumbs, "That's me, see?" nodding at the card he had thrust in Rowena Lennington's hand. "Irving Flaum—Representative—Heavenly Rest Funeral Supplies. Coffins—that's my line." He nodded brightly, his glasses shining enthusiasm. "Of course we carry all sorts of merchandise—what the trade calls underground novelties—but Heavenly Rest Coffins—*Good Until Judgment Day*—that's my main item."

He paused to snare another sandwich from the retiring steward.

Miss Royce's comment came hard-toned above the tinkle of her cocktail glass. "He wants to kill somebody because he's a coffin salesman. My God!"

"I wasn't selling coffins in 1917, but that's where I learnt what an A-1 business it was," was the heated retort. "Yeah, back there in the War. Irv, I said to myself in the trenches, here's the line you been lookin' for. Why, it was plain as the nose on my face, right there around me. Sooner or later everybody in this world is a customer for a coffin."

Enfield supressed a chuckle. The speaker's glasses were regarding his hearers with the eager gleam of bifocals sizing up prospective business, a gleam that made several of the prospects decidedly uncomfortable. Adam Henry Clay, master of the Clay Newspaper Syndicate, was glaring about him as if hunting an exit that would get him away from this. Mrs. Piedmont Lennington had recoiled in her chair with a mixture of alarm and indignation. And at the word "coffin," the wiry man, in the act of dealing a hand of solitaire, crossed his fingers and turned hastily to knock on wood.

IRVING FLAUM hitched forward in his chair, confidentially. A grubby, fattish man in soiled white ducks, striped shirt, rumpled tie, blatant yellow shoes—his hair flaring like a mussed wig, his goggles excited—he made Enfield think of a Hollywood producer in the throes of an All-Star special, or that quarter of Manhattan known as the garment district.

"Sure, sooner or later everybody in this world is a customer for a coffin—" the words sounded a little fabulous from an Irving Flaum in an airliner stranded in the Andes Mountains of Chile—"so I says to myself, Irv, the hell with Tin Pan Alley, when the war's over that's the business for you. I go back to New York, and I go with the Heavenly Rest people. Their goods don't have enough class. I give them a couple of nice ideas, and they bring out some real nifty features."

He hunted through a pocket fenced with pencils; deplored "I thought I had a folder. Never mind. Anyway, pretty soon we was doing up some of the best. What we call 'a front carry into Broadway'—that's the class funerals—Heavenly Rest

was getting them all. *Everybody in a coffin that ought to be in a coffin!* that's our motto. We did good business. Heavenly Rest ain't chiselers—we don't sell papier maché for mahogany and we don't ask a price that ain't fair.

"If people want our Kindly-Light number with a glass top, or our Triple-Deck Bronze Sarcophagus—why, that's their own funeral—for average I always recommend something quiet and plain. That's why I got my customer's confidence. That's why Heavenly Rest makes me general manager of their foreign trade. I've sold Heavenly Rests all over Europe, Mexico and South America, and I always give the clients a square deal. If people want a coffin we got the number to fit their purse as well as their size. But where I draw the line," Irving Flaum half rose from his chair, panting, "is selling coffins to people that *don't* want coffins!"

The pretty school teacher in the seat across from Enfield exclaimed, "Mercy, Mr. Flaum. Are there many people who—who *want* coffins?"

Irving Flaum looked up the aisle. "Everybody's got to have one sometime." His features expressed melancholy. "Heavenly Rest is just a service, see, Miss Messenger, like calling in the doctor or needing an ambulance. That's always been my attitude—I ain't a furniture salesman, I'm a service."

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington made a choking sound, and Irving Flaum regarded her near-sightedly. "I am a service," he insisted with unexpected feeling. "People like something nice at the last—even these foreigners down here in South America, and the people in Europe—and I give it to them. Only lately I began to lose all pleasure in the coffin business. Why? Business is too good! Can you understand that? It's too good!"

He spread his hands, offering his listeners a paradox.

"That's what I mean about not liking to sell coffins to people who don't really want them. Me, all I ask is a good product to sell, and nice business. But a boom? I don't want it! The public don't want it, and I don't want no boom in the coffin market. Especially in the short-sizes for kids."

"Say!" Millicent Royce spoke out explosively. "You're a pleasant guy to have around on a night like this. You want to kill somebody—there's a boom in the coffin market—short sizes for kids—"

"WELL, I'll tell you." The fuzzy haired man removed his glasses to wipe them with his pocket handkerchief, nodding and squinting. "There's normal trade levels; there's trade levels that's too low; and there's trade levels that's too high. Generally the coffin business follows a pretty even norm. I like that. It may seem funny to you, but the coffin business is a pretty good indication of what's goin' on in life. You know from a normal market that things are okay, understand? Ordinarily there ain't much demand for my product in kids' sizes.

"Here's what happened," Flaum held out a palm despairingly. "Heavenly Rest is doing a nice business a couple of years ago, and I stop in at the main office, enthusiastic. The production manager rushes in and gets me by the arm. 'You got to go to Europe!' he gives me. 'You got to start a new factory. The plant here ain't going to be able to meet the demand.' He points to the window, and I see our factory chimneys smoking like the stacks of railroad express trains. Trucks are rushin' supplies of lumber. Everybody's working overtime.

"I been in the middle of Mexico, and I don't know about anything. What is this? Well, it seems this is a special order from our Shanghai branch, a couple of hundred thousand rough-boxes. That pleases me because I opened our Shanghai branch; it means we beat out the other competition. That's what I think. Only it ain't so. Our competitors, the Open-the-Gates people, and Mausoleums, Ltd., can't meet their own demands. And Shanghai, I find, is booming. They're out of short-sizes all over China.

"Next thing I got a hurry call to Holland. We ship through there to Berlin. It ain't coffins this time, but it amounts to the same thing. It's a hurry call for urns. We got a special bronze item, look well on any mantelpiece. You know — your ashes when you're cremated. Average, we wouldn't sell one a month. All the sudden Berlin's sold out of them. It's another boom.

"All right, we hardly meet that demand, when the orders start pouring in from Spain. Five hundred of our special Spanish design for Toledo. Three hundred for Seville. They're all out of Number Sixes in Santander. Rush orders to Valencia, Barcelona. Five thousand express shipment to Madrid."

Irving Flaum blotted perspiration on his forehead, panting, "We ain't hardly able to keep up with Spain, when there's a rush order, secret, to Italy. Day and night our factories work to keep up the pace, and the next thing is a hurry call from Austria. Vienna, Salzburg—those Austrian orders are still coming in. Heavenly Rest supplies those markets through local dealers all over Europe. Then three months ago I get a rush order to Brazil. Now it's Mexico—I ain't able to meet the orders, so I'm shipping some extras up from Chile. On top of that there's these cables from Czechoslovakia. Stocks exhausted by early buying. Building new factory anticipation large Balkan market."

Flaum swallowed to clear static from his throat; his voice punctuated the question with a squeak. "Do you think you know what's going on in the world, you people? Do you think you read about it in the papers? Pardon me—I don't mean nothing personal, Mr. Clay—but the papers don't give the real story. The figures in the coffin business, that's the real story. Spain—Italy—Austria—those places are booming, and it's the orders for coffins that give you an idea.

"Heavenly Rest can't nowhere meet the orders. Our competitors can't meet the orders. And it's the orders for kids that's got me in the last couple of years. It's a new angle boomed up in the coffin business, and our factories can't meet the demand. Short-sizes! Two-year-old sizes! Say, did you ever see a freight car start off for Madrid loaded with nothing but coffins for kids—?"

HIS voice broke off as his eyes fixed a blind stare at the mental picture conjured by his words. There was a somber wait undertoned by the mourning of wind and the rhune of driving rain. Then the card player at the aisle's end cut into the silence with a flat-voiced query:

"What's the point, Flaum? What's this got to do with a Dutchman in 1917 you want to kill?"

"Well, I'll tell you. All the time these other people was telling what they'd do with their last two hours, I was askin' myself what I'd do. At first I didn't know. There's my wife Nona wants a new mink coat, maybe my last two hours I'd like to give her the very best. Maybe I'd like to spend it seeing my Mama in the place I got her at New Rochelle. My first instinct was I'd like to put over this deal I got pending with the Rosario Brothers that think they're going to chisel me, and this once I'd like to show them.

"Then I got thinking how all those things didn't count. They'd be important, but they'd only be important to Irving Flaum."

All at once the speaker's eyes had become moist; he snuffled fiercely, clapped himself over the heart.

"Who'm I?" he demanded, looking about him dramatically. "Who's Flaum? Say, I know what I look like to you people. Just another Yid. Sure, I'm just another Yid. My old man was a tailor and his name was Flaumbaum, as long as everybody's telling the truth. I'm a Yid and I'm comic, and some of you people been thinkin' I make my money out of other people's trouble, am I right? Well, that last ain't true.

"I got a heart, see? and I know what's important. I'm going to say the hell with this Rosario Brothers deal because it's

about shipping more short-size coffins to Madrid, and Irv Flaum ain't got the heart to sell any more coffins for kids. Do you think I can eat my meals? Do you think I can sleep? Not with this boom in the coffin business, I can't. Not when I know I might have stopped it. Not when I know that I had the chance in 1917 that might have stopped it!"

CHAPTER IX

"I'D KILL ME A DUTCHMAN"

HANDS gripping the arms of his chair, the fuzzy haired man leaned forward, aiming his glare at some point in the smoke-haze before him. "It was 1917, see? I was a sergeant in the A.E.F. Not fat like I am now—I done a little boxing once—and I joined up.

"What happened? We go to Limoges, and a month before Christmas we're sent up to some lousy front south of Metz. It ain't a nice place. It's gray. Everything's been smashed down and pulverized and blown to pieces so many times that the country is a sort of slough. Mud flows around in the trenches like water in canals. There's some black trees like skeletons and a couple of crumbled walls and a lot of rusty barb wire. No Man's Land is a kind of swamp, and four or five hundred yards beyond there's the German line, a lot of foxholes up the hill. The war's gone on there for three years, and if that place was France then I never saw hell.

"We didn't see any Germans. They was in those holes just the same. Every morning and evening our artillery would send a string of blasts across that hillside, what the technicians called 'softening them up.' Then the Boche guns way off somewhere would get even by softening us up. That was a hell of a war! Sitting there in a canal of mud with our bayonets rusting on our rifles, waiting for shells from ten miles away to soften us up. Who figured the war was rheumatism? We boys from Broadway, we'd gone over there to save the world for Democracy, and we wanted to see these Germans.

"Yeah, we wanted to see these Germans with the eagles on their helmets and their fierce Kaiser Bill mustaches and their clanking military boots all doing the goose-step. We wanted to go over there and knock their blocks off. We wanted a crack at these Huns.

"All right, we got it. The skipper calls me into his mudhole. 'Flaum, I want you should ask your squad if they'll volunteer. Would you be willing to lead a raid?' It took my appetite a little, but that's what I'd come for. 'Say when,' I salute. He looks in a notebook. 'I'll name the day later,' he says with a wry kind of smile. 'The colonel wants a raiding party to nip through the German wire and surprise one of their dugouts. We want to know what regiment is facing us. Bring back two or three prisoners, that'll be enough.'

"That looked like more than enough for Irv Flaum, but I wouldn't back down and be a *schlemiel*. I'd been made a sergeant, see? and I wasn't no fat man twenty years ago. I asked the boys would they go, and I didn't have no trouble getting volunteers. But the night the captain sent for us was something else again. I didn't think about it until I seen one of the faces in my squad.

" 'Why the hell,' this boy wants to know, savage, 'does the captain have to send us over the top on Christmas Eve?'

"Sure enough, it was Christmas Eve the night the skipper called us on duty for the raid. He said he didn't want to do it, but those were the colonel's orders—probably G.H.Q. wanted a couple of Boche for the general's Christmas present. I can see us yet, there in that dugout with the skipper passing around the hand grenades and wire-cutters, and the boys one minute looking scared, next minute looking mad. Outside a light snow had started to fall, and every so often there'd be a flare from a starshell. I know what the boys were thinking. They were thinking of those Huns with the eagles on their helmets sitting over there behind those deadly machine guns. Any other night they'd have gone over there plenty willing, but I guess

this time they figured there wasn't any Santy Claus.

"Well, it wasn't my festival. I guess that's why the skipper picked me instead of some other topkick. Just the same we all start out blue. Back in our trench the boys have all got boxes from their fathers and mothers and girls in America. The trench is full of presents.

" 'And tomorrow we was goin' to have a duck,' a boy from Brooklyn groans.

" 'Well, that'll give you guys something to fight for,' I tell them with my teeth chattering. 'We got to knock the spots out of these devils so's nobody'll miss the cook's Christmas dinner.' "

THE fuzzy-haired man sprang to his feet, unable to restrain his emotion. "That's the two hours I'd like to go back to if I had the chance," he cried. "The two hours beginning with the minute we started off across No Man's Land for the German wire. Scared? I'm a liar if I wasn't scared. It was quiet as if there wasn't a sound in the world. Just the snow sifting down, an' the squelch of our boots as we crept forward, bent over at the middle. When we reached the first shell-holes, we went flat in the muck and snow, crawling on our stomachs so's no periscopes would see us. The starshells was worst. *Zoop!* they'd go up. Then this spray of light would turn the landscape pale green. Every time one would pop, we'd lie down and play dead. I'd think, 'This is the end of Irv Flaum!'

"I guess maybe it was the snow that saved us, but I'll never know why they didn't hear my teeth knockin' together. They must've made more racket than the riveting hammers putting up the Chrysler Building. I'd think of the Huns waiting for us with their saw-tooth bayonets an' machine guns. Big devils with shaved heads and those skulls on their hats, like the Crown Prince. 'Irv,' I told myself, 'you're scairt stiff.' But I couldn't let the other boys see it. I kept my pistol in my left hand, and my right in my bag of hand grenades.

"I've made some long trips in my life, and a lot of them Third Class, but nothing never so long and Third Class as that crawl acrost No Man's Land. It seemed years before we got to the German wire. It was terrible. Even so we got there too soon to suit me. I remember there was a couple of dead hangin' there in the wire. Scarecrows left to frighten us away. That's where I first thought up the slogan, *'Everybody in a coffin that ought to be in a coffin.'*

"Did you ever try to crawl through a snarl of barbed wire? It's a lousy way to spend a Christmas Eve. The boys behind me was glummer by the minute, and I wasn't none too happy. *Snip, snap, snip*—that's the sound of our wire-cutters, and they made a noise loud enough to wake a cemetery. We'd crawl a little way, snip the wire ahead of us, crawl a little further. If there'd only been a little shooting, if a siren would only go off, or somebody'd yell. But there was just the soft silence of the snow, and the *snip-snap* of the shears.

"We could see the humped-up line of the German sandbags, gray in the gloom, but there wasn't a sign of a Dutchman. It was quiet as the grave. That wasn't funny. It was just like crawling up to the crater of a volcano, see? The volcano was silent, but any second the lid was going to blow off."

Irving Flaum glared into the memory reflected by the goggly shine of his glasses. "I can't stand that," he panted. "I can't stand waiting for the guns in that trench to let go. It was the end of Mrs. Flaum's boy, Irvie, and I knew it, and I can't stand that creeping busines any longer. I ain't a hero. I'm wishing I was back on Broadway at the corner of Fifty-Second Street. What am I doing in a soldier suit? But I get so scared waiting for the guns to let go, that I get mad. If I got to die, I want to do it quick.

"I grab out a couple of bombs, figuring I'll make sauerkraut out of a couple of these Germans, anyway. I signal the boys to stay back while I reconnoiter a minute,

because what's the use of everybody committing suicide? I'm crazy, I'm that scared.

"There's a communication trench goes zigzag near where I'm crouching, and I make a fast slither up to the sandbags and drop down into that. Just as I dive into the trench a starshell goes off. *Zoop!* and it's bright as day.

"I PLAY dead. I drop against the wall of that German trench and shut my eyes and hold my breath and play I been dead since King Solomon. I play dead so well that I begin to hear music. The snowflakes are like feathers coming down in the dark, and there's this soft, low, faraway music like a quartet somewhere singing. Then I know I'm dead. I must've been shot comin' over the trench. I open my eyes expecting to see bright lights and angels.

"It's dark. The starshell has gone out, and the only light is a chink of yellow in the shadowy sidewall a little way down the trench. I'm alone by myself in this trench, and there ain't any angels. But the music keeps going on. It's coming from that chink of yellow in the sidewall, and I make out the entrance to a dugout covered over by an old piece of canvas, and this light is leaking through a crack in the tarpaulin. The music stops, and I hear low voices. There's men down there in the dugout."

The fuzzy haired man put a hand to his ear in a pantomime of listening. Then he moved past his chair on exaggerated tiptoe. "I sneak up to the dugout entrance, see? I'm holding the bombs all set to release the trigger. I say my last prayers, and I'm ready to touch off the dynamite. Then I put my eye to that crack in the canvas. And am I flabbergasted! Am I flabbergasted!"

Irving Flaum went back on his heels in demonstration. His glasses were moons in the astonishment manufactured on his face. "Do you know what I saw in that dugout?" he shrilled. "No, but I better tell what I'd expected to see. Helmets with eagles on them, that's what I expected to see. These Prussian *schlemiels* all covered with medals and braid. Big stiff-necked goose-steppers with fierce mustaches and polished military boots. All the time I'd been waiting to go over the top, I'd thought of these Germans as the big shots of the military business, War Lords!

"War Lords? Well, if those soldiers down in that dugout were War Lords, they wasn't what I expected. They was Germans all right—I knew a little of it from my grandmother's people—but I couldn't believe my eyes. Boys! A ragged squad of boys, none of 'em not a day over sixteen by the looks, a couple that might've been recruited from an orphan asylum.

"Medals and braid? I never seen such tatters. Those gray uniforms were so ragged and thin that their knees and elbows came through the holes. A couple of those boys was wrapped in dirty blankets. One had a shirt made of a potato sack with his bare arms poked through. They wore those little round field caps, or I wouldn't have know 'em for soldiers at all, they was that thin and shabby.

"There was one man over in a corner. His face was so thin it looked like a skull. Every minute or so he'd grab himself by the throat and cough. He didn't even have shoes; his feet was wrapped up in bundles of soggy newspaper.

"Say, I thought our trench dugouts was lousy, but that place was hell. Water dripped down from the roof, and there wasn't any stove, just a couple of embers burning in a fireplace scooped in the wall. It was cold as ice down there, and full of smoke. There was a table made of a packing case, and some candles burning in old beer bottles. The boys were grouped around the table, and I could see 'em scratching an' shivering. One of the boys was crying. He wanted to stop, but the tears just kept streaking down his face. But it was the tree that was worst.

"I DON'T know where they got it, but it was a little sprig of evergreen stuck upright in a jam pot in the middle of their

table. No fancy decorations; just hung with bits of torn newspaper and colored string and pieces of bright cloth. And that's the scene. Me, outside peeping into that dugout. Snow sifting down. Those ragged boys down there in that candle-lighted mud hole standing around a Christmas tree.

"'Sing!' one of them says in a low voice, lifting a tin can full of something that looks like beer. 'And do not drink too fast, as it is the one bottle to go around.'

"They stand around the table and lift up tin cans for drinking glasses. They're singing *Tannenbaum.* My grandmother used to sing it to me. Say," Irving Flaum looked around him fiercely, "do you think I could've chucked a bomb into that dugout? Do you think I could've chucked a bomb into that batch of waifs singing *Tannenbaum?* They ain't soldiers! They're starving, ragged boys that ain't had a square meal in weeks, and they're grouped around a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve singing *Tannenbaum.*

"Then they sing *Heilige Nacht.* I can hear it yet, me crouched there in that trench with the snow coming down. Those voices coming soft out into the night. It ain't my song, but I know what it means. *Stille Nacht—Heilige Nacht.* I'm through. I come over there to bomb War Lords, not a bunch of homesick, half-starved kids singing *Silent Night.*

"Just as they're half way through the number and I'm wondering what I'm going to do, there's an interruption. There's a door at the back of the dugout that apparently leads to some trenches behind it, and someone's coming. Footbeats come tramping up the duckboards, and the back door is pushed open. The boys stop singing. In comes a non-com, and if I live to be a million, I'll never forget him.

"He wasn't dressed much better than the others—just a tramp. Not much older, either. His face was sort of pinched up with ears that stuck out because his forage cap was too big for him, and he looked pretty hungry. But he had a big handlebar moustache like a vaudeville comic, and was he important? I never seen a non-com that thought himself so important! His shoulders was back like a general's, and his chest was puffed out, all fuss and feathers, and he came strutting in through that back door like a one-man parade. He was just one big High-Private, I could see that; Mister Somebody on account of the stripe on his sleeve.

"'*Achtung!*' He blew out his cheeks and shouted like a cannon, and those ragged boys at the table jumped around and snapped to attention. This non-com pulled himself up like a ramrod. 'What is the meaning of this! Do not waste those candles! Who gave you permission to sing? Come to attention faster when I order you.'

"Say, he went on like that for about three minutes. Throwing orders. Sending those boys jumping and running around. Outside, I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh because this non-com with his whiskers was funny. He was like a parody on these German officers you hear about, see? Like a kid with a paper hat playing soldier. He stamped and puffed out his cheeks and popped his eyes and scowled like he thought he was Von Hindenburg instead of a non-com with one stripe. All at once his eye lights on this veteran over in the corner sitting on a heap of rags.

"'You!' he thunders, pointing. 'What do you mean by lounging back there like that? *Achtung!*'

"The man gets up slow, kind of grinning and good humored. 'Why not let the lads have their fun, Herr Corporal?' he asks. 'They was only keeping up courage on Christmas Eve.'

"WELL, this funny-whiskered non-com looked like he's having a cat fit. '*Achtung!*' he thunders at the man. 'Or I will give you five weeks in the guard cell. How dare you address me in such a tone? Christmas Eve, is it? There is not time for sentimentality among soldiers defending the Fatherland!'"

Irving Flaum gesticulated passionately. "This non-com was funny, I tell you. A

regular comic. Watching him strut around, I forgot where I was. He amused that veteran with his feet wrapped in newspapers, too. This veteran took about as much as he could stand; then he walks up to this non-com and looks down at him like a mastiff looks at a barking poodle.

"'Look here, *meine kleine Maus,*' he gives him. 'Who do you think you are? Before you got that stripe on your cuff you was almost human. I thought you was a pal of mine when we joined this Nineteenth Regiment. Now you are a lot of hot air. Get out of here before I kick you out. You may be a corporal, but I knew you when you were a half-baked infant and everybody in the village called you Little Schicklgrueber. You are still little to me, even if you changed your name from Schicklgrueber!'

"Say, I thought this corporal would bust. He can't speak, he's so mad. He keeps trying to pump himself up with importance, like a toy balloon trying to be a Zeppelin. And this veteran calling him a punk. It's comic how mad he gets. Comic! It's pathetic! He's like a schoolboy tryin' to play general with a wooden sword. I can't stand that. This German Army is a bunch of underfed, ragged kids, all shriveled up from hunger, and the corporal's a funny little tramp with a big mustache like someone in burlesque. I look down at the bombs in my hands, and I feel ashamed. Honest, I feel sick at my stomach.

"Then I must've kicked some pebbles under the snow or something, for there's a rattle of dirt down the dugout steps. That does it. Those ragged schoolboys jump around with eyes as big as saucers. Only the veteran has enough presence of mind to grab his rifle from a corner. The corporal? All the wind goes out of him like a busted paper bag. Actually I see his hair go up. He makes one dive to get under a bunk, like that! I'm telling you, I never saw nobody more scared.

"I put the grenades back into my kit, and I get out of there. I get out fast. I hop up over the sandbags and lie there flat for a second, hugging the snow. The veteran looks out, but he don't see me. I see his face, though, and I hear the sigh he gives. 'It is all right, *Brüderchen,*' I hear him say to his pals. 'It is nothing but the snow. Nobody would attack on Christmas Eve. And if someone will kick Schicklgrueber out from under that bunk we can finish *Heilige Nacht.*'

"I HEAR them singing it, soft, as I crawl back through the wire. The music fades out behind me. Pretty soon I come on the boys all crouched together, waiting with their bombs. 'The hell with it,' I tell them. 'There ain't nobody there. All the troops is concentrated in a second line trench, and to attack it would be suicide. I got the regimental number off a cap lying there in the mud,' I lie, 'and if the colonel wants prisoners he'll have to send an army over some other night.'

"We do a fade across No Man's Land, and I don't care if I'm demoted or not. You see how I figured? I figured I'd come to France to do some fighting, not bomb a bunch of kids that was twice as scared as I was. Those soldiers in that trench was orphans, by the look, not War Lords. And that's where I made the biggest mistake in the war!"

Irving Flaum pulled a breath, and shook his fist above his flaring hair. "That's where I made the biggest mistake of all time! I should've dropped my bombs in that dugout and blown one of those Germans into pretzels. When I think it's my fault he's still alive, I can't eat. I can't sleep. War Lords? This guy in that dugout was worse than the whole General Staff in Berlin. It's the fellow that's responsible for this boom today in coffins. Responsible for the market in short-sizes, the rush for those little coffins in Madrid and Alicante and Vienna and Prague. I'm talking about that comic little non-com the veteran called Schicklgrueber—"

Glasses blazing, the fuzzy haired man glared at his audience in the lounge chairs. Nobody stirred. There was an expectant pause, then Rowena Lennington asked,

"Schicklgrueber? You wish you'd killed that stupid little corporal?"

"If it was my last two hours, and I could live them over again, I'd blow him out of existence," Irving Flaum said thickly.

"But who was he?" Mary Messenger asked.

"I never knew till I seen his war-time picture and read his life story a year ago in a magazine," Irving Flaum declared hoarsely. "You can't say, 'Heil Schicklgrueber—' Even to Germans that would get a laugh. So he'd had his name changed, even back then. That poppycock little corporal was Hitler—Adolph Hitler. And to think I passed up the chance *I* had! Me, with a nose like mine—"

CHAPTER X

FLARE UP

IRVING FLAUM — Representative — Heavenly Rest Funeral Supplies—sank back in his chair with a groan of self-condemnation and a gesture to show his listeners that his story, as well as his future happiness, was ended.

Enfield discerned in this emotional bit of autobiography the narrative talent characteristic of the veteran traveling salesman, the troubador of a thousand sagas beginning, "Have you ever heard this one?" Tears and smiles; sneers, grins and grimaces of despair—the man had the knack of yarn-spinning. But it would have been impossible to determine from Flaum's facial dramatics at just what point in his story Truth might have been decorated with poetic license, Fact become Fancy under the pressure of imagination.

Watching from behind a mask of casual cigarette smoke, Enfield had kept the fuzzy haired man under close examination. He had been able to dissect nothing of significance from the body of Flaum's story, but he had to confess he had been entertained.

Their expressions engrossed, the others in the lounge compartment had been equally diverted. There were murmurs of, "Adolph Hitler—good heavens!" And, "I once heard he changed it to Hitler from some peculiar Austrian name." And, "No, it was changed by Hitler's father," from Adam Henry Clay, heavily authoritative. And, in a grave, deliberate voice from the white haired old gentleman at the cabin's end, "History is only the record of Caprice —all men owe their lives to Chance."

Then Gerstner's comment was unexpected. On the starboard side of the aisle, seated opposite Flaum, the German passenger had paid little attention to this game occupying his fellow travelers. Enfield had remarked the man's repressed impatience and mounting concern at the airliner's delay. A dozen times the man had consulted a cumbersome silver watch tethered on a heavy chain across his vest. From the timepiece, his scowl always went to the rain-lashed window framing a glimpse of storming outer darkness. Again he would frown in the direction of the pilot's cockpit where the co-pilot was tinkering at the instrument dash. Other times, ear close to the window, he gave Enfield the impression of someone expectantly listening.

AT FLAUM'S reference to the German Army, however, Gerstner had given a quick sideglance; thereafter, his eyes screened by his down-pulled hatbrim, he had been observing the coffin salesman narrowly.

Now he swivelled his chair abruptly to face Irving Flaum.

"Be careful what you say about Adolph Hitler!"

"Hey?" The fuzzy haired Flaum jolted upright.

"You are one of these smart Jews." The eyes under the hatbrim were contemptuous; Gerstner's voice, laboriously accented, a guttural sneer. "You are of the kind who do a lot of talking while you are on this side, but would talk mighty low around Berlin. Only Germany is a whole lot bigger than just Berlin these days, *verstehen?* Be careful, anywhere, how you make fun of Adolph Hitler?"

"And what if I did?" Flaum leaned up out of his chair. "Who do you think you are, maybe, to tell me what I should be careful—"

"I do not sit here and listen to Hitler be insulted." Gerstner pointed a commanding finger. "I do not listen to Hitler be insulted by some smart Jew."

Rowena Lennington swerved in her chair to ask, sharply, "Mister Gerstner, do you think it necessary to call people names?"

"I wasn't speaking to you." Gerstner rounded, brusquely taking off his hat. "I wasn't speaking to you, *gnädiges Fräulein*. Pardon me, but the man across the aisle as anyone can see—"

Mrs. Piedmont Lennington whispered fiercely, "Rowena, you keep out of this!"

"Jew or Gentile," it was the quiet voice of the white-haired tourist passenger in the chair beyond Gerstner's, "does that make a difference among gentlemen?"

"I wasn't talking to you, either," Gerstner snapped around. Then in mocking deference, "So, but I respect your gray hairs, *mein Herr*. I am only surprised that one of your advanced years should have such little understanding of the German attitude toward these—"

"Just a moment, Gerstner." Enfield was on his feet. "It isn't necessary to start a Nazi argument here."

"And who said anything to *you!*" the German shouted. Flinging hat to floor, he sprang up out of his chair, red-faced, quivering eyes blazing at Enfield. "Who said anything to you, I want to know? *Himmelherrgott!* One merely makes a remark about these—these people and is at once attacked by half the world. By what right do you interfere?"

Enfield began amiably, "Since Chile happens to be a Democracy—"

"A Democracy. Ha! And I thought in these so-wonderful Democracies everybody had the right to free speech."

"Free speech, yes," Enfield pointed out. "But invective, especially in front of ladies, is something else again."

"*Ja?* I do not happen to know what the word invective—is it swearing?—means. I do know I will not listen to this fool insult Adolph Hitler who saved Germany from being enslaved by the Jews."

Hammand Carlyle asked humorously, "Since you've mentioned the point, Mister Gerstner, isn't it asking a little too much of Americans to believe that sixty-five million Germans were enslaved by a few hundred thousand Jews?"

Gerstner bawled, "Are you trying to be funny, too? If you would read *Mein Kampf* and the historic works of Mommsen and Alfred Rosenberg—but no!—did I not hear you say tonight that you were a renegade lawyer?"

Carlyle's eyes looked hot. "I didn't happen to say anything of the kind. Had you been courteous enough to listen—"

"OH," Mary Messenger cried, putting an anxious hand on Carlyle's arm, "please don't let's everybody have an argument. It'll spoil the game." She appealed hopefully, "And it's Mrs. Earwig's turn."

"That's right," the solitaire-player in the chair beyond the Earwigs put in. He scooped up the cards as he spoke; shuffled them dexterously in lean, quick fingers; regarding Gerstner bleakly, one eye squinting through the smoke of a cigarette which drooped from the corner of sardonic lips. "That's right, Gerstner, we're playing a game."

Infuriated, the German wheeled. "Another hero of Democracy out to defend this fellow."

Irving Flaum cried, "I don't need no defense from a Nazi!" making as if to rise.

The wiry man waved him back in his chair, and stood up in Flaum's stead, getting to his feet with easy deliberation. Shuffling his deck of cards with the adroit nonchalance of a magician about to display a trick, he confronted the red-eyed German coolly.

"I said we're playing a game." His jaws moved lazily on the words as if he were chewing a wad of gum. "I said we're

playing a game, and it's this little lady's turn." He inclined his head to Mrs. Earwig.

"And I am not playing in your game!" Gerstner raged back.

"All the more reason to shut up and sit down," the wiry man said flatly. "When people are playing a game, the kibitzers on the sidelines are supposed to keep quiet. Here's another thing. I don't like your sneer at me, calling me a hero of Democracy."

"What is that to me, if you do not like it?"

"Why," the wiry man said lazily, shuffling the cards in his fingers with a speed that blurred them in the lamplight, "it might mean a bash in the nose. I don't like your face," he told Gerstner calmly. "I don't like your attitude toward Miss Lennington and the old gent here and the others in the plane. They're nice respectable people, and they won't do anything about it. But I," the wiry man softened his drawl, "will. Nobody's using that tone of voice on Jack McCracken. Any more wise lip out of you, and I'll take you outside and slap you so hard you'll think you were hit by the eight ball. So why not sit down and shut up!"

It was doubtful if Herr Gerstner understood the idiomatic terminology in which the wiry man's ultimatum had been couched, but there could be no mistake about the meaning. Herr Gerstner altered his attitude. From overbearing, his manner melted into obsequious apology. He picked up his hat, and stood twisting the brim in his fingers, bowing right and left, elaborately begging everyone's pardon.

"You must forgive me. I am very much upset tonight. This delay in the plane, it is unsettling. It was important that I should reach Valparaiso tomorrow morning—I was to have an interview with the Chilean Minister of Finance. If I am late, the commission will fail. You will please forgive my patriotism, I am sure, when I explain that I am an envoy of the German Government.

Despite skepticism of such sudden humility, Enfield felt a little sorry for the man. The typical swashbuckler squirming before anyone ready to call his bluff. "*Ja,* I was going out anyway," Gerstner was saying, putting on his topcoat as he backed up the aisle toward the door. "This air, it has given me a headache. You will excuse me. I apologize to everyone—even him."

IT WAS not a gracious exit, envenomed by that parting shot. Gerstner slammed the door, going out, and could be heard talking angrily to himself on the gangway steps, in defiance of the pilot's request that the passengers remain in the plane. Enfield was glad to see the man go. Sociability, it appeared, was not one of the high points of his doctrine. Enfield was relieved that nervous tension, inspired by the lateness of the hour, had not flared up into a fight.

For a moment it had seemed as if things might come to blows.

The cabin was growing chilly with the nearness of midnight; the air had staled with cigarette smoke and want of ventilation; hours of sitting had made the chairs uncomfortable; there was that inevitable undercurrent of strain among people too long and too closely confined.

He looked at his watch—11:49. That pilot on his way through the mountains couldn't have covered much more than a couple of miles at best. Fifteen miles was a long trek at night in a rainstorm, following a wilderness trail with a compass and flashlight.

"How about some more coffee?" he suggested, breaking an unpleasant atmosphere left by Gerstner's abrupt departure. "We've still a good while to wait. How about some more coffee, and going on with the game?"

"Why not?" The wiry man stepped into the breach. "It's no use letting a kibitzer bust up the party. I been kind of interested in this game, what everybody's had to say. I'd sort of like a chance to play my own hand in it."

Rowena Lennington supplemented ruefully, "It wouldn't be fair to quit after

the rest of us have—what do the confession magazines call it?—told all." She laughed wryly. "I've been hoping someone's answer would be more stupid than mine."

Millicent Royce had been staring at the carpet, chin down and furs askew, with the concentration of one maintaining that delicate balance between vigilance and torpor. She roused from this pose to declare, "Well, I told you the truth. I cer'n'ly did! Nobody can say I didn' tell th' truth."

Adam Henry Clay growled, "Are you started again?"

He glared at her.

"I told the truth," she swayed around, scowling at the publisher, as if he had challenged her statement. "They asked for it, an' I told 'em."

"So did I," Irving Flaum asserted in a cracked voice. "Who does that German think he is out there? I wouldn't care if he was the Kai—"

"Let's get on with the game," the wiry man cut in insistently. He nodded down at Mrs. Earwig, shy beside her husband who had been hugged back in his chair, withdrawn from the controversy in wordless dismay. "Okay, mother," the man in the aisle urged gently. "It's your turn."

Enfield said quickly, "Yes, Mrs. Earwig—please." His eyes were bright, there was an undertone of eagerness in his voice. And to himself: "I'm beginning to get places—if I can only keep this going . . ."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

You Can't Take It With You

THEY are going to put sirens on people now. Recently Mr. Samuel Feinstein of New York City gave a demonstration of his anti-snatcher siren, devised to protect bank messengers and payroll men from robbery. And the siren does more than that; rigged up with it, a runner can't possibly decamp with funds.

The invention is a box equipped with two wires which are locked around the messenger's body when he sets out and unlocked when he arrives. The way the siren works, the messenger has got to grip the handle of his box continually while he makes his trip. If he lets go, the siren immediately goes off—with a voice that carries a mile and a half. A thief is going to look pretty silly trying to slink off with an object that screams like an ambulance in a hurry. Furthermore, the box has a timer; that's set when the messenger starts out, and if he doesn't arrive according to schedule, the siren lets loose. No chance for pausing to drink a beer—or to appropriate cash.

Mr. Feinstein, evidently a man who thinks of everything, has designed another contraption for payroll carriers using cars. While the machine is on, you can't open the car door, or reach in, and not be screamed at. All this, Mr. Feinstein claims, is going to reduce payroll insurance rates by fifty percent, and no doubt he's right. Probably, if sufficiently urged, Mr. Feinstein will rig up all small, wealthy children with sirens—and there's the end of the kidnaping menace.

—*Charles Dorman*

"This is my wife, senor, and her sister."

By ROLLIN BROWN

Author of "Dark Trail," "Thirteen Stones," etc.

Day of the Dog

Through a reeking, crawling tropical hell, Jim Middleton carried the battered snapshot of the girl with gray eyes—a girl he'd never seen and whose name he didn't know . . .

HE HAD been two years and seven months in the tropics, without a trip home, when the Crowley Company sent orders that he proceed down coast to Santa Buenosita. It was mahogany again, a concession that would likely go to the first man in the field now. Beat the White & Dunlop people at any cost was the order.

It was while unpacking the few things he needed in his room at the rambling little Hotel de Occidento, waiting for the morrow, that James Middleton discovered the loss of the picture. It was gone. He had carried it with him for better than a year and a half now, everywhere.

The picture was a very plain snapshot enlargement of a snow scene and a girl. The girl had bobbed hair and laughing eyes that must be gray in life; the hair was probably chestnut. She wore a short fur coat and the snow was up to her ankles. James Middleton had never seen the girl in life, understand; he had merely found the picture, a year and a half before, in a hotel room, where it might have been left by anyone—even Pete Jannigan, who had been fighting him on the San Salvador deal at the time.

Middleton growled under his breath now. Thought of the morrow wasn't cheering, not when he was this late getting to the scene of action. And unless he made good at the capitol tomorrow, with Señor don Gaspar Agustin Ramirez, he might as well decide to stay in the tropics forever.

That he'd likely be bucking Pete Jannigan again here, Middleton knew. Pete Jannigan, tall, yellow-skinned, looking like a fever-infested derelict and wiser than hell itself, had been in Panama City the last Middleton had heard. That meant the White & Dunlop people wouldn't have had to have an ear very close to the ground to get him talking to Señor Ramirez first. And Jannigan could talk the language of concessions, or anything else that White & Dunlop wanted.

Middleton walked stiffly across the little hotel dining room that was never filled, at the heels of the solitary waiter. Suddenly he stumbled. He realized later that he had tripped over a large mongrel she-cur, curled in sleep beside one of the tables. Stumbling, his eyes swept down across a table to the left. They caught squarely upon the face of the girl—bobbed hair, and it was chestnut in color; laughing eyes, and they were gray. It was the gray-eyed girl of the picture come to life!

It was then Middleton realized that he was on the floor, on his hands and knees. That was when he saw the dog, too; the beast was holding its ground and snarling in his face.

James Middleton got to his feet, staring at the girl. And the gray-eyed girl was smiling, plainly, looking certainly into his own face. Her teeth were very even and white between unrouged lips. She nodded toward James Middleton, and said pleasantly and unmistakably:

"How do you do, Mr. Middleton."

James Middleton gasped.

LATER, at his own table, he wondered what he had said, what he had actually done at that instant, if anything. From a distance half across the room he watched the gray-eyed girl. Her companion at dinner, he saw, was a girl of like age. But she, the other, was dark in a Spanish way. Her face was pale and her lips deeply red; she was richly dressed. When the two left the room, which was soon, the mongrel she-cur tagged the richly dressed girl.

James Middleton gulped what was left of his meal. But oustide, the rambling veranda of the hotel was deserted. He finally sat down.

A step sounded from the other end of the veranda. The girl with gray eyes walked slowly up the steps. Her hair was moist and blown a bit he saw when she came into the light. She smiled.

"A heavenly night, Mr. Middleton, isn't it?"

There was no mistaking his own name. Two years and seven months down here without a trip home . . . She was the girl of the picture, but he'd never met her. He managed jerkily:

"I'm sorry. I don't know your name."

She laughed in a clear, sparkling tone. "Oh, you wouldn't be expected to."

"I—I wish you'd explain a bit."

"There's little enough to explain," she told him. "You'll be going up to the capitol by tomorrow's first and only train. The concession can't be put off, can it? Perhaps we'll meet again up there."

"Meet?—Listen, please—just a minute —"

"Goodnight, Mr. Middleton."

In some ways Middleton considered, in later calm, this was too extraordinary. First the picture found long ago in a hotel room; tonight the girl in life, suddenly; she knew his name and knew that he would be going into the capitol tomorrow morning, knew his business. An American girl with gray eyes and chestnut hair. Had it been the other girl, the Spanish type, he might have suspected Pete Jannigan's hand somewhere in the affair; that is, if the girl had approached him more subtly.

THE train into the capitol had left an hour after dawn. Now it slowed for no accountable reason. The narrow-gauge engine's whistle tooted shrilly twice. The train came to a jarring halt.

Silence.

In a moment pandemonium broke loose behind the first-class section door of the coach, among the peons, men, women and children clustered in behind like flies along

an unscreened restaurant counter. In a forward seat, the gray-eyed girl turned and spoke slowly to her companion in the excellent Spanish that Middleton had been hearing them use. The cur-hound stalked out into the first-class aisleway and bristled at the noise from behind.

Out of the corner of his own window, then, James Middleton caught sight of a squat, sandal-footed peon, and the man held a short rifle aimed carefully at something or someone on the train. Middleton left his seat and stepped toward the girl with gray eyes.

"If you have any jewelry that you especially want to keep, I'll drop it into the nearest cuspidor," he said. "On a bet, that might save it. You might as well throw any currency out of the window; they'll get it anyhow."

A minute or two passed. Nothing happened. Trembling, the Spanish girl had drawn a heavy veil across her features, which the gray-eyed girl had to tie for her. Finally the voices in the rear part of the coach silenced, and behind the door a sharp order came in Spanish.

"They're herding them out behind. Don't pay any attention," said Middleton.

Turning, he saw that the gray-eyed girl was also veiled. He nodded.

"Good idea. Nothing you want to try and save?"

"Listen," she asked slowly; "there couldn't be—couldn't be more than robbery to this? Maria, you know—" She gestured toward the Spanish girl. "They might want her."

Before Middleton could answer the door behind crashed open under a rifle butt. The sandaled *mozo* he had seen from the window earlier stood there. Behind was a taller, chestier figure, in military breeches, shoes and military cap. The *mozo* grinned, abashed; but the second man didn't.

"The Señorita Maria Concepción Ramirez will come with us, pleeze," he commanded in Spanish, the last word his obvious interpretation of English courtesy.

Middleton grimaced. "She's not here," he snapped in his very passable Spanish. "We are American tourists. Understand? This is my wife"—and Middleton indicated the gray-eyed girl by preference—" and this other her sister. Here is our money. Now get out!"

The half-caste didn't move. He pointed an accusing dirty finger at the mongrel she-cur that stood bristling in the aisleway.

"There is the Senorita Ramirez's dog," he said. "I have seen that snarling pet of hers, that *perra,* a hundred times. That the *senorita* had been spoken for in betrothal I had heard rumor, but didn't know." A veiled crafty look came into his eyes. "But it is well perhaps to find the *señor* here, too. The family of the *senorita's* espoused would undoubtedly be wealthy, pleeze. That will make the ransom double. It is a stroke of fortune, your being here, *señor.* But as to a sister, you lie, pleeze."

The gray-eyed girl haughtily stood up, drawing the fold of the veil double across her eyes. To Middleton's surprise, she called sharply to the dog in her clear Spanish:

"Stop growling. Stop it! Come here."

The mongrel she-cur dropped her bristles and languidly obeyed. Then the gray-eyed girl turned toward the door, indicating with a side gesture the Spanish girl opposite her, and said:

"This is only my serving maid. I am Senorita Ramirez, as you say. I will come."

AGAINST the jungle wall stood half a dozen men; four of them were armed with rifles while the other two had only *machetes.* As soon as he was on the ground, Middleton's hands were pulled out before him and painstakingly bound with strands of moist rawhide thong.

He could see two little runty cayuses back in the jungle screen and a small native mule. Now one of the armed peons led the mule forward, and the pigeon-chested half-caste in shoes gestured for the gray-eyed girl to mount.

"I'm sorry," the girl whispered in Middleton's ear. "I'll fix things as soon as the train can get away. This is splendid of you."

Just how she would fix things Middleton didn't know, but he nodded. The name of Maria Concepción Ramirez, who was the Spanish girl they wanted, obviously, kept running through Middleton's mind. It wasn't impossible that she was some relation to the man Middleton wanted to see in the capitol, the Señor don Gasper Agustin Ramirez, dictator of the mahogany concession.

There was hurry then. The close-pressed mass of natives beside the coach stood in awed, wide-lipped silence. The half-caste gave orders and mounted one of the cayuses. Middleton was pushed into file, heading into the jungle behind the girl's mule.

A moment later Middleton felt something sniffing at his heels. It was Senorita Ramirez's mongrel pet hound, wagging her skinny tail vigorously, sniffing eagerly. She paused with Middleton's eyes upon her, bared her teeth suddenly and snarled. A peon kicked her from behind.

She snapped at his bare foot, drew blood and a scream, and neatly escaped the downward sweep of the man's *machete.* Then she took a position at the rear, just barely out of reach of the last man's hands.

AT noon the cavalcade halted and one of the men started away with the horses and the mule. Through the morning care had been used to hide the tracks, but now the stock was plainly to travel with them no longer. Middleton understood this much. It was the first chance he had had to speak with the girl alone.

"Since you're not Miss Ramirez," he said, "and they obviously wanted her, what is your plan?"

The girl with the gray eyes attempted a smile. "I'm not, no! And thank you for your help. I couldn't have done it without you . . ." She turned to the half-caste, motioning him toward her, and began in her excellent Spanish:

"Before you send the horses away, *Capitan—*"

"*General* Tomas Silvas," he corrected. "Pleeze. You know General Silvas, is it not so?"

"It is not so," said the girl a bit hysterically. "I do not know any Tomas Silvas. I never heard of him. I'm not the Senorita Ramirez, either. A friend of hers, traveling with her. That's all. Do you understand that? You've made a mistake. By now the *senorita* is half way up to the capitol. I'm a friend of hers; that's all. You've made a mistake, understand?"

The half-breed smiled indulgently and shook his head. "No mistake," he said. And smiled again.

The girl suddenly tore the veil from her face. Her face was very pale, but the gray eyes were steady.

"Now, look at me. Do I look like the *senorita?*"

General Tomas Silvas stared. His eyes widened and turned faintly glassy on the surface. He shook his head vaguely and muttered to himself.

"But this is Senorita Ramirez's espoused?" he said at last, indicating Middleton.

"He is nothing of the sort," said the girl with gray eyes. "He's an American who works for the Crowley Company . . . . Nobody will pay any ransom for him, either. Now think that over."

General Silvas appeared to. After a long excited conversation with his companions, the general returned.

"But you are the *senorita's* great friend," he said to the girl with gray eyes. "That is true. You value her life above your own, to so change places with her and allow her to escape. So she will make her father pay for you both, I think—as much as he would have paid for her, herself. You understand, pleeze? If not—" He left the sentence uncompleted and made an unhealthy gesture, as though slitting a throat. "So," he cried, "you understand, pleeze!"

"How much ransom do you want?" Middleton asked the bandit leader, who somewhere in the past had been able to afford a second-hand pair of shoes.

"Ten thousand, gold. Not one *peseta* less."

JAMES MIDDLETON whistled softly and turned to the girl. "The more ragged they are, the greater the scheme," he said. "But if this Ramirez is the Ramirez I think he is, he can do it easily enough—that is, if he will. Pay first, then take after the bandits. He'll understand that much."

"But," faltered the girl with gray eyes. "But—but you see, Maria's father doesn't even know me. He's very wealthy; that's true. But I—I just met his daughter at school in the States. She was studying English; I, Spanish. We—we became acquainted and friendly; that's all. And I decided to come down on the same boat with her."

Middlelton gasped. "You little fool!" he swore under his breath. Then aloud: "Tell me, how do you come to know so much about me?"

He could see that tears were near the surface in those gray eyes. Still, she was game.

"You see," she said, "Pete was coming here—"

"Pete who?"

"Pete Jannigan," she exclaimed. "You know him. He's been all over the Central American tropics in the last ten years, most of the time for White & Dunlop. He wanted me to—"

"Oh," said Middleton. His eyes hardened. "So Pete Jannigan got you to come here? Told you about me, the concession and the like. That's the way it figures out. So Jannigan after all is the explanation."

She nodded.

But it seemed that the light had gone out of the sky for James Middleton, as they went hurriedly on again, afoot now.

At an hour or two before dark a tiny clearing showed up ahead. Middleton saw a small brush-stem and thatch shack. A rickety plank door was thrown open, the gray-eyed girl was bade enter the hut and the door again closed.

One of Middleton's legs was also bound now, as well as his wrists, and an end thong in turn securely fastened to a mahogany log of some weight. He could hobble about for a few feet, dragging the log, and that was all. A tiny cooking fire had been made in the dooryard.

Darkness came. Middleton was suddenly forced to realize that he had an ally, the cur she-hound, pampered pet of a wealthy *senorita*. The dog snuggled down close against his legs. Middleton kicked with his free foot, and she snapped back and ripped the leg of his trousers open. Again, when he woke from sleep, there the cur was, snuggled against the warmth of his legs.

The second day was worse. Twice Middleton saw the girl with gray eyes; once through the opened door of the shack, again when she was allowed to stroll a short ten feet back and forth in the dooryard. They were not allowed to speak.

It was early the third morning that a stranger appeared, and his thick forefinger traced excited lines across the lowlands, in gesture, and up into the hills. Middleton couldn't hear what was said; and he didn't need to. The thing was suddenly perfectly obvious and plain to him. A troop of *rurales,* maybe a detachment from the national army, had been sent into the neighborhood.

The worst had happened; not that it wasn't to be expected.

After all, the gray-eyed girl wasn't Ramirez's own child, not even distant kin. not even known to the elder Ramirez by sight. And Pete Jannigan evidently hadn't felt himself called upon to gather any such sum of money as that demanded. Perhaps he had tried and was unable to do so . . . . The situation was this: A few troops, much talk, would put a face on the thing at the capitol. That was all. Evidently General Silvas still held hopes of the ransom, and that was the only encouraging thing in the whole mess.

The she-cur stayed at Middleton's feet and snarled. He no longer kicked at her with his free foot.

AS the swift tropical dusk fell that night there was a suppressed air of excitement in the camp. Peon scouts had

returned and been sent out again; only two of the ragged bandits remained at the general's side, and these two were seemingly making preparation to leave. Middleton caught words from the general's speech:

"We go on . . . dark. Too near. . . ."

The *rurales* were getting too close then. No cooking fires had been lighted that dusk and this too was significant. In the dooryard Middleton saw one of the peons swing a club at the dog, for attempted theft; saw her leap high and dodge; and she soon enough was back at her old stand at Middleton's feet. She sniffed angrily, hungrily, too. She hadn't eaten much for three days. Across the intervening space Middleton asked:

"We leave soon, for where?" He cursed the general under his breath.

The half-breed laughed softly. "We leave, *si, señor.* We, not you. You are worth exactly as much as that other dog beside you. Perhaps the troops will find two of you," he added unhopefully.

Middleton sat down. "The girl with gray eyes, she goes?" he was able to ask, yet knowing the answer.

Again the soft laugh of the general. *"Por Dios!* Yes, of course."

Suddenly, in cover of the deepening dusk, Middleton worked feverishly again at the thongs about his leg and wrists, worked desperately. The cur she-hound sat down and looked on interestedly. Something had to be done—a final effort. Something! Fight!

Fight? With bound wrists and one leg anchored to a mahogany log?

Middleton began to inch forward, dragging and carrying the log tied to his foot. In time he stood against the rear wall of the shack, and, listening, he could hear the occasional rustle of the dress, the slow step of the girl within. He scratched on the stem wall of the shack softly. Moments seemed to pass.

"Yes?" she whispered against the inside wall of the hut, and it sounded as if the word were only the softness of her breathing.

"They're going to try and take you away —alone," whispered Middleton. "I'm still bound hand and foot, can't get loose. But I've picked up a club. Listen—when they take you out make a break. Try to get out here, beside me and fight."

"Yes," was all she said after seconds, breathing the word. "I'll do it. I'll try."

Game! There you had it.

In the fingers of his two bound hands Middleton held the club he had picked up. In the waiting moments, then, he felt a new companionship for the dog. Her nose snuggled into his hands, sniffed hungrily, anxiously. Middleton thought that she was merely companionable, sensing his distress, as he had heard animals somehow had the power, and giving him her dumb sympathy.

BUT this was far from true. Three days without food, to one accustomed to richness and plenty, had twisted the form of the she-cur's ribs. Her stomach gnawed upon itself, and she was an animal of stout heart and much resource. Rawhide, hard and iron-tough, still had in it the vague smell of food, she had discovered. The dog took an experimental nip. The stuff actually had a good taste to it.

She began to gnaw on the wrist thongs, like the wild, half-starved thing she was by now. Middleton suddenly prayed. . . . One of the thongs parted. Middleton threw the strength of his arms against the wrists.

The rawhide strips gave and his hands were free.

It was the work of scant moments now, hands loose, to twist a knot free at his ankle. He picked up the club again.

Vaguely he could distinguish the dirty white clothing of the forms outlined in the night before him. The girl had just been led outside. Any success seemed to depend on surprise. He took a pace back. At that instant his ally, the cur she-hound following at Middleton's heels, growled shrilly, a falsetto snarl that would have attracted the attention of the devil himself.

The three forms before the hut stiffened in the darkness——held perceptibly motionless for an over-long time. One mut-

tered something. The general whispered tensely . . . The girl screamed as they charged in a body.

Middleton thought it was the general in the lead.His root club caught the man and dropped him like a felled ox. A *machete* whizzed by and went on through the brush-stem wall of the house.

An uncalulated streak of gunfire cut the night. The boom of it rattled through the cañon, echoing back and forth. The general, last of the three to charge, in fact, bellowed hoarsely. Middleton saw that the girl was fighting, too. Game! He leaped on, swung again with the club and missed. A rifle butt caught his leg at the thigh. The dog under his feet gave a ripping snarl. He tripped over her; caught himself, half-down.

Nothing was clear from that time on. Middleton fought. His left arm was cut. He knew that twice his club hit flesh before he lost it . . . . Then he was grappling for the possession of a rifle, the general's rifle, the barrel of it in the grasp of his right hand, trying to kick the man before him in the stomach. He saw the girl behind. Only the general seemed to be left standing.

The dog had entered into the thing, into the spirit of the fight. She dodged in and out again. The general's military breeches ripped from the seat down to the knee joint under her sharp fangs.

It was really her fight. She fought for the sheer love of the thing. She yelped gloriously, fastened her teeth and hung on. She had been born to fight and to give the dog world two large and assorted litters of puppies each year, and in place of this she had led a long and sterile existence of perfumed baths and rich food. She loved this.

Her teeth fastened into the calf of General Tomas Silvas' right leg. She clung there even after he had fallen and Middleton's fingers had his throat, even after the general had gone limp and after Middleton himself knew nothing. Hers was the big end of the victory and little enough of the glory, of course.

WHEN Middleton opened his eyes several minutes evidently had passed. He tried to shake himself. It was like some new and terrible nightmare, this. He blinked, blinded.

For before his eyes a pillar of flame danced straight up into the night from the site where the shack had been. Middleton stared, fascinated. He tried to remember, to collect in his mind the scenes that lay behind this.

Something touched his face, a hand. He sat up swiftly, and almost bumped heads with the girl with gray eyes. They looked at each other in the light of the fire pillar that was already beginning to die. The girl suddenly sank down, her face in her hands, and began to cry.

"I—thought—they'd killed you," she sobbed.

Middleton shook his head vaguely. They hadn't, and the girl had a rifle. The general's, it must be.

"I tried to bind them," her words rushed on. "The couch I slept on was made of thongs—"

"Oh," said Middleton, blinking, trying to remember the details of this. "Bind who, what?"

"The general. I had to light the candle they'd given me. It tipped over in the hut. The flame caught in the thatch—"

"Oh," said Middleton. "Good. We might have thought of that before. Flame could be seen for miles."

"And the dog ate the thongs," she continued hysterically. "One peon ran away, but the other was stunned. I had him bound and the dog ate the thongs while I was trying to tie the general. I know because she choked and nearly strangled. I've been standing guard over the general—"

"Good," said Middleton. "Fine dog, that— Here let me take that rifle."

The swift fire had almost died, but in the glow of the embers Middleton rebound the general.

The tropical night came back, thick, moist, heavy. The girl and Middleton sat down, side by side, in guard over the

general, and the cur-hound came back and curled herself against Middleton's legs.

It wasn't long—very soon, it seemed—that voices were calling in the cañon. The *rurales* had seen the slash of flame against the night, even heard the shot that had preceded it. Theirs was great concern over the girl. She was immediately lifted on sturdy shoulders. The Señor Gasper Agustin Ramirez would see that appointments came to the right man after this, perhaps a gold reward. Before Middleton realized it, she was being borne away.

"Hey!" he called. "Why, I don't even know your name. Just that you're playing the game with Pete Jannigan. Why, say, listen—"

There wasn't any answer.

"Anyhow," Middleton muttered, "well, anyhow—anyhow. . . . Well, goodbye," he mumbled, softly.

BUT business as usual again. Stick it out until you know you're beat, anyhow. One learned things with the Crowley Company. Two years and seven months without a trip home. Oh, well—

How many days behind time was he, anyhow, here in the capitol at last? If Jannigan didn't have the concession by now—

"Ramirez. The home of Señor don Gaspar Agustin Ramirez," Middleton told a *coche* driver. The man needed no other direction.

"Señor Ramirez," said Middleton again, let out in the lighted entryway of a big walled house. A servant went away; then came swiftly back.

"This way, *señor*."

In a candle-bright room stood a tall, white-mustached Spaniard. He bowed gracefully, and asked:

"Señor don James Middleton? I have been expecting you, yes." He gave the servant an order; and his heels clicked together when he stiffly, bending from the waist, handed Middleton a paper. . . . "It is made out here, the concession, *señor*, under the usual terms of your company. Is that as you wished?"

James Middleton stared.

"It is a pleasure, you must understand, *señor*," the old Spaniard continued, "to answer any request of the young lady American who is a friend of my daughter's. After what has happened, you can understand."

"She, the American girl with gray eyes, asked you to have this concession made out for me, for the Crowley Company?" Middleton gulped.

"The young lady American, my daughter's friend," agreed Señor Ramirez. "To be sure she asked it, and I gladly consented, more than gladly. After what she did, you understand."

"I see," said James Middleton. But he didn't.

He had no more words. He stumbled back to the entryway again.

Then, just outside, Middleton saw the unmistakable form of the shambling, yellow-skinned Pete Jannigan coming toward him. Jannigan looked worse than usual; the fever must have had him down again. He grinned, showing yellow, tobacco-stained teeth.

" 'Lo. How's the world?" he greeted Middleton. He didn't offer to shake hands. "Fever's had me down in bed. Last two weeks. Down in Corinto. Rotten luck in that hole. You just been in to see His Nibs?"

Middleton nodded. Jannigan meant Señor Ramirez. Middleton slowly pulled the concession papers from his pocket. His face changed color, and he said:

"Listen, Jannigan. It's white enough of you, but I'm not taking charity yet, even for the Company. You tell the girl with gray eyes that, and thank her just the same. But right here, now, Pete, I'm going to match you, heads or tails, and the winner takes this concession. Got that straight?"

Jannigan laughed; spat a long stream of tobacco juice into the hitherto spotless entryway.

"Pshaw!" he said. "You don't know Sis. She'd kill me for runnin' amuck in her own plans. Besides, Middleton, White &

Dunlop don't happen to want this concession . . . I just got in here yesterday—to find all that had happened. Week late—fever, y' know. Poor kid, Sis. This was to be a vacation for her. I was to show her 'round a bit. Meet her here because she knew Ramirez's kid, and they were comin' down on th' same boat from New York—"

Middleton stared.

"Jannigan, you mean that this gray-eyed girl is your sister?" Middleton stared with wide eyes at Jannigan. "You mean that you, Pete Jannigan of all people, got a sister like that?"

Jannigan grinned back at him.

"Sure—kid sister. I'd wrote her she'd probably see you 'round here somewhere, an' to string you along if she did. . . . She has got pretty eyes, at that—gray. A long time ago over in Salvador I remember I'd meant to show you her picture one night, but danged if I hadn't gone an' lost it around the hotel somewhere first.

"You didn't know she was my sister, huh? That's funny. Well, come on back in and meet her."

IT was night again. There were fireflies, the big glowing things of the tierra caliente. Stars seemed too low in the sky . . . . Funny! When a man had waited two years and seven months for a thing—or was it eight months now? Middleton had lived on the thought of that next vacation trip up home. He had it in his hands now, cinched with the concession. He could go now, as soon as he got the papers to the Crowley Company. And Middleton found he didn't want to go now. That was the funny part of it. It was, in fact, as he went back into the house at Pete Jannigan's side, the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

Somewhere, somehow, the night seemed to have played a trick on him.

But No Pink Elephants

THERE is a pangolin in the Washington Zoo now. This animal, as you may not know, is a kind of anteater and resembles an over-grown lizard. Pandora, the one in question, is the first pangolin ever to reach the Western Hemisphere alive, and the history of her arrival is a curious one.

David Frazeur left his freighter at Sumatra one evening to go ashore. When he woke up on board the next morning, he was mildly surprised to find Pandora the pangolin in bed with him. But eventually he got hold of himself and vaguely remembered something about picking up some animal somewhere the night before. That explained Pandora, and so Frazeur brought her to the United States, no doubt enraging the scientists because they have been trying to do the same thing for years.

Of course one can't suspect the Washington Zoo. But is that really a pangolin, or is it something Mr. Frazeur dreamed up after a boisterous evening? If any of you are troubled by seeing strange animals or little men or such, you might just leave them at the Washington Zoo, and they'll be nicely taken care of. Perhaps they'll be of considerable scientific value. Park your pink elephants at the Washington Zoo.

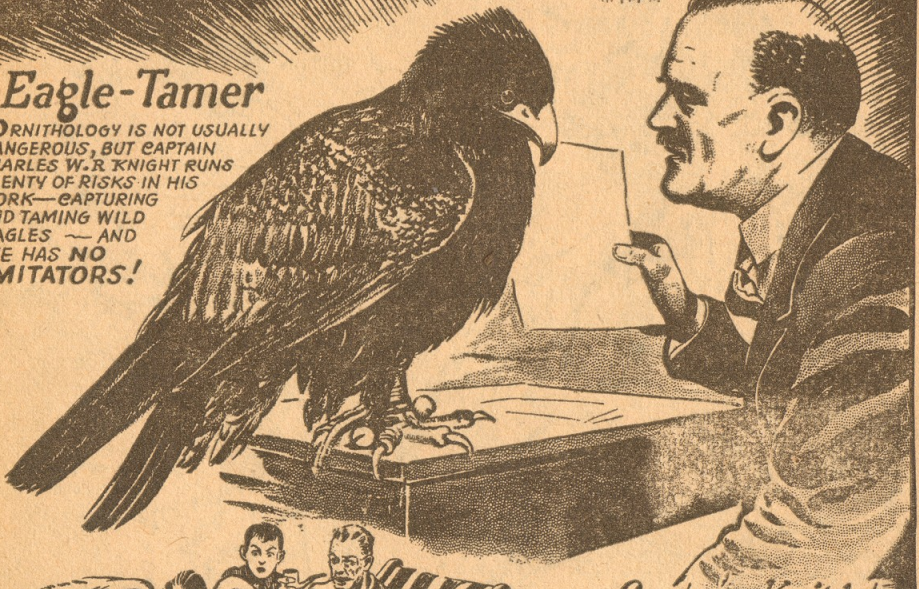
—Crosson Howard

MEN of DARING

By Stockton Allen

Eagle-Tamer

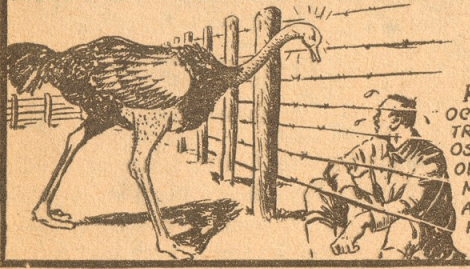
ORNITHOLOGY IS NOT USUALLY DANGEROUS, BUT CAPTAIN CHARLES W. R. KNIGHT RUNS PLENTY OF RISKS IN HIS WORK—CAPTURING AND TAMING WILD EAGLES — AND HE HAS **NO IMITATORS!**



Captain Knight

AS A BOY IN ENGLAND, KNIGHT GOT INTERESTED IN THE SPORT OF FALCONRY. AN OLD FALCONER TOOK HIM IN HAND, AND SOON HE GRADUATED FROM HAWKS TO EAGLES. HE HAS BEEN WORKING WITH BIRDS EVER SINCE—EXCEPT HIS WORLD WAR PERIOD. IN ONE OF THE BATTLES OF THE SOMME HE WAS GASSED AND TAKEN FROM THE FRONT LINE—TO RECEIVE A MILITARY CROSS!

KNIGHT WENT BACK TO HIS EAGLES. HE TRAINED A SCOTCH GOLDEN EAGLE AS IF IT WERE A GOSHAWK—AND THE JOB WAS TOUGH! IN HANDLING THE GREAT BIRD HE HAD TO WEAR A MASK AND PADDING TO PROTECT HIS WRISTS. ONCE, WHEN KNIGHT WAS WORKING WITHOUT PROTECTION, A HUGE EAGLE SUDDENLY STRUCK HIM IN THE FACE WITH ITS FOOT. IT NEARLY COST KNIGHT AN EYE, BUT HE FINALLY CALMED THE BIRD DOWN. HE STILL BEARS THE SCARS.



HIS CLOSEST CALL OCCURRED WHEN HE WAS TRYING TO PHOTOGRAPH AN OSTRICH. A KICK FROM ONE OF THESE BIRDS USUALLY MEANS DEATH. KNIGHT'S MANEUVERING INFURIATED THE OSTRICH—SOON HE WAS RUNNING FASTER THAN HE HAD EVER GONE BEFORE. A DIVE THROUGH A FENCE SAVED HIM—BY A NOSE.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

"Bring them in here. The dead —the dying . . ."

Beat to Quarters

By C. S. FORESTER

CAPTAIN HORATIO HORNBLOWER has accomplished the near-impossible not once — but twice. He has brought H.M.S. Frigate *Lydia* round the world to Spanish America without touching at a single port, and delivered his cargo of arms to El Supremo for harrying the Spaniards. With his 36-gun frigate he has captured the Spanish 52-gun two-decker *Natividad* without loss of a man, and turned it over to El Supremo. By nature a warm-hearted and companionable man—still Hornblower cannot permit himself to confide in his officers, who idolize him; he must, he believes, appear silent, emotionless, confident—the rigid disciplinarian at all times.

Then a messenger arrives with news that Britain has joined Spain in an alliance against Bonaparte, and orders for Hornblower to return to England. Complicating matters is a request that he pick up Lady Barbara Wellesley in Panama for the return voyage. First, however, he must eliminate the *Natividad's* threat to the treasure galleons of Britain's new allies. Worried over the presence of a member of the influential Wellesley family aboard, Hornblower attacks the *Natividad* in a storm. The engagement is a standoff. Both ships are crippled and drift apart during the night. Hornblower repairs his damage. He must take the *Natividad,* he knows, or suffer a court-martial for incompetence . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE BATTLE

FROM the *Lydia's* masthead, in the clear daylight of the Pacific, a ship might be seen at a distance of as much as twenty miles, perhaps. A circle of twenty miles' radius, therefore, covered

This story began in the Argosy for September 17

the extent of sea over which she had observation.

It kept Hornblower occupied, during the remaining hours of darkness, to calculate the size of the circle in which the *Natividad* would necessarily be found next morning. She might be close at hand; she might be as much as a hundred and fifty miles away.

That meant that if pure chance dictated the positions of the ships at dawn, it was almost exactly fifty to one against the *Natividad* being in sight; fifty to one on the ruin of Hornblower's professional reputation and only his professional abilities to counterbalance those odds. Only if he had guessed his enemy's plans correctly would he stand justified, and his officers knew it as well as he.

Hornblower was conscious that Gerard was looking at him with interest through the darkness, and that consciousness caused him to hold himself rigid and immobile on the deck, neither walking up and down nor fidgeting, even though he could feel his heart beating faster each time he realised that dawn was approaching.

The blackness turned to grey. Now the outlines of the ship could be ascertained. The main topsail could be seen clearly. So could the fore topsail. Astern of them now the faintest hint of pink began to show in the greyness of the sky. Now the bulk of the grey waves overside could be seen as well as their white edges. Overhead by now the stars were invisible. The accustomed eye could pierce the greyness for a mile about the ship.

And then astern, to the eastward, as the *Lydia* lifted on a wave, a grain of gold showed over the horizon, vanished, returned, and grew. Soon it became a great slice of the sun, sucking up greedily the faint mist which hung over the sea. Then the whole disk lifted clear, and the miracle of the dawn was accomplished.

"Sail ho!" came pealing down from the masthead; Hornblower had calculated aright.

Dead ahead, and ten miles distant, she was wallowing along, her appearance oddly at contrast with the one she had presented yesterday morning.

Something had been done to give her a jury rig. A stumpy topmast had been erected where her foremast had stood, raked far back in clumsy fashion; her main topmast had been replaced by a slight spar—a royal mast, presumably—and on this jury rig she carried a queer collection of jibs and foresails and spritsails all badly set—"Like old Mother Brown's washing on the line," said Bush—to enable her to keep away from the wind with main course and mizzen topsail and driver set.

At sight of the *Lydia* she put her helm over and came round until her masts were line, heading away from the frigate.

"Making a stern chase of it," said Gerard, his glass to his eye. "He had enough yesterday, I fancy."

HORNBLOWER heard the remark. He could understand Crespo's psychology better than that. If it were profitable to him to postpone action, and it undoubtedly was, he was quite right to continue doing so, even at the eleventh hour.

At sea nothing was certain. Something might prevent the *Lydia's* coming into action; a squall of wind, the accidental carrying away of a spar, an opportune descent of mist—any one of the myriad things which might happen at sea.

There was still a chance that the *Natividad* might get clear away, and Crespo was exploiting that chance to the last of his ability. That was logical though unheroic, exactly as one might expect of Crespo.

It was Hornblower's duty to see that the chance did not occur. He examined the *Natividad* closely, ran his eyes over the *Lydia's* sails to see that every one was drawing, and bethought himself of his crew.

"Send the hands to breakfast," he said —every captain of a king's ship took his men into action with full bellies if possible.

He remained, pacing up and down the quarterdeck, unable to keep himself still

any longer. The *Natividad* might be running away, but he knew well that she would fight hard enough when he caught her up.

Those smashing twenty-four pounders which she carried on her lower deck were heavy metal against which to oppose the frail timbers of a frigate. They had wrought enough damage yesterday—he could hear the melancholy clanking of the pumps keeping down the water which leaked through the holes they had made; that clanking sound had continued without a break since yesterday.

With a jury mizzenmast, and leaking like a sieve despite the sail under her bottom, with sixty-four of her attenuated crew hors de combat, the *Lydia* was in no condition to fight a severe battle. Defeat for her and death for him might be awaiting them across that strip of blue sea.

Polwheal suddenly appeared beside him on the quarterdeck, a tray in his hand.

"Your breakfast, sir," he said, "seeing as how we'll be in action when your usual time comes."

As he proffered the tray Hornblower suddenly realised how much he wanted that steaming cup of coffee. He took it eagerly and drank thirstily before he remembered that he must not display human weakness of appetite before his servant.

"Thank you, Polwheal," he said, sipping discreetly.

"An' 'er la'ship's compliments, sir, an' please may she stay where she is in the orlop when the action is renooed."

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower, staring at him, thrown out of his stride by this unexpected question. All through the night he had been trying to forget the problem of Lady Barbara, as a man tries to forget an aching tooth. The orlop meant that Lady Barbara would be next to the wounded, separated from them only by a canvas screen—no place for a woman. But for that matter neither was the cable tier. The obvious truth was that there was no place for a woman in a frigate about to fight a battle.

"Put her wherever you like as long as she is out of reach of shot," he said, irritably.

"Aye aye, sir. An' 'er la'ship told me to say that she wished you the best of good fortune today, sir, an'—an'—she was confident that you would meet with the success you—you deserve, sir."

Polwheal stumbled over this long speech in a manner which revealed that he had not been quite as successful in learning it fluently as he wished.

"Thank you, Polwheal," said Hornblower, gravely. He remembered Lady Barbara's face as she looked up at him from the main deck yesterday. It was clean cut and eager—like a sword, was the absurd simile which came up in his mind.

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower angrily. He was aware that his expression had softened, and he feared lest Polwheal should have noticed it, at a moment when he knew about whom he was thinking. "Get below and see that her ladyship is comfortable."

THE hands were pouring up from breakfast now; the pumps were clanking with a faster rhythm now that a fresh crew was at work upon them. The guns' crews were gathered about their guns, and the few idlers were crowded on the forecastle eagerly watching the progress of the chase.

"Do you think the wind's going to hold, sir?" asked Bush, coming onto the quarterdeck like a bird of ill omen. "Seems to me as if the sun's swallowing it."

There was no doubting the fact that as the sun climbed higher in the sky the wind was diminishing in force.

The sea was still short, steep, and rough, but the *Lydia's* motion over it was no longer light and graceful. She was pitching and jerking inelegantly, deprived of the steady pressure of a good sailing wind. The sky overhead was fast becoming of a hard metallic blue.

"We're overhauling 'em fast," said Hornblower, staring fixedly at the chase so as to ignore these portents of the elements.

"Three hours and we're up to 'em," said Bush. "If the wind only holds."

It was fast growing hot. The heat which the sun was pouring down on them was intensified by its contrast with the comparative coolness of the night before.

The crew had begun to seek the strips of shade under the gangways, and were lying there wearily. The steady clanging of the pumps seemed to sound louder now that the wind was losing its force. Hornblower suddenly realised that he would feel intensely weary if he permitted himself to think about it.

He stood stubborn on the quarterdeck with the sun beating on his back, every few moments raising his telescope to stare at the *Natividad,* while Bush fussed about the trimming of the sails as the breeze began to waver.

"Steer small, blast you," he growled at the quartermaster at the wheel as the ship's head fell away in the trough of a wave.

"I can't, sir, begging your pardon," was the reply. "There aren't enough wind."

It was true enough. The wind had died away so that the *Lydia* could not maintain the two knot speed which was sufficient to give her rudder power to act.

"We'll have to wet the sails. Mr. Bush, see to it, if you please," said Hornblower.

ONE division of one watch was roused up to this duty. A soaking wet sail will hold air which would escape it if it were dry. Whips were rove through the blocks on the yards, and sea water hoisted up and poured over the canvas. So hot was the sun and so rapid the evaporation that the buckets had to be kept continually in action.

To the clanging of the pumps was now added the shrilling of the sheaves in the blocks. The *Lydia* crept, still plunging madly, over the tossing sea and under the glaring sky.

"She's boxing the compass now," said Bush with a jerk of his thumb at the distant *Natividad.* "She can't compare with this beauty. She won't find that new rig of hers any help, neither."

The *Natividad* was turning idly backwards and forwards on the waves, showing sometimes her broadside and sometimes her three masts in line, unable to steer any course in the light air prevailing. Bush looked complacently up at his new mizzen-mast, a pyramid of canvas, and then across at the swaying *Natividad,* less than five miles away. The minutes crept by, their passage marked only by the monotonous noises of the ship. Hornblower stood in the scorching sunlight, fingering his telescope.

"Here comes the wind again, by God!" said Bush, suddenly. It was sufficient wind to make the ship heel a little, and to summon a faint harping from the rigging. " 'Vast heaving with those buckets, there."

The *Lydia* crept steadily forward, heaving and plunging to the music of the water under her bows, while the *Natividad* grew perceptibly nearer.

"It will reach him quickly enough. There! What did I say?"

The *Natividad's* sails filled as the breeze came down to her. She straightened upon her course.

" 'Twon't help him as much as it helps us. God, if it only holds!" commented Bush.

The breeze wavered and then renewed itself. The *Natividad* was hull-up now across the water when a wave lifted her. Another hour—less than an hour—and she would be in range.

"We'll be trying long shots at her soon," said Bush.

"Mr. Bush," said Hornblower, spitefully, "I can judge of the situation without the assistance of your comments, profound though they be."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Bush, hurt. He flushed angrily for a moment until he noticed the anxiety in Hornblower's tired eyes, and then stumped away to the opposite rail to forget his rage.

As if by way of comment the big main-course flapped loudly, once, like a gun. The breeze was dying away as motivelessly as it had begun.

And the *Natividad* still held it; she was holding her course steadily, drawing away once more, helped by the fluky wind.

Here in the tropical Pacific one ship can have a fair wind while another two miles away lies becalmed, just as the heavy sea in which they were rolling indicated that last night's gale was still blowing, over the horizon, at the farther side of the Gulf of Tehuantepec.

Hornblower stirred uneasily in the blazing sun. He feared lest he should see the *Natividad* sail clean away from him; the wind had died away so much that there was no point in wetting the sails, and the *Lydia* was rolling and sagging about aimlessly now to the send of the waves. Ten minutes passed before he was reassured by the sight of the *Natividad's* similar behaviour.

THERE was not a breath of wind now. The *Lydia* rolled wildly, to the accompaniment of a spasmodic creaking of woodwork, flapping of sails, and clattering of blocks. Only the clangor of the pumps sounded steadily through the hot air. The *Natividad* was four miles away now—a mile and a half beyond the farthest range of any of the *Lydia's* guns.

"Mr. Bush," said Hornblower. "We will tow with the boats. Have the launch and the cutter hoisted out."

Bush looked doubtful for a moment. He feared that two could play at that game. But he realised—as Hornblower had realised before him—that the *Lydia's* graceful hull would be more amenable to towing than the *Natividad's* ungainly bulk, even without counting the possibility that yesterday's action might have left her with no boat left that would swim. It was Hornblower's duty to try every course that might bring his ship into action with the enemy.

"Boats away!" roared Harrison. "Cutter's crew, launch's crew."

The pipes of his mates endorsed the orders. The hands tailed on to the tackles, and each boat in turn was swayed up into the air, and lowered outboard, the boats' crews fending off as the *Lydia* rolled in the swell.

There began for the boats' crews a period of the most exhausting and exasperating labour. They would tug and strain at the oars, moving the ponderous boats over the heaving waves, until the tow ropes tightened with a jerk as the strain came upon them.

Then, tug as they would, they would seem to make no progress at all, the oar blades foaming impotently through the blue water, until the *Lydia* consented to crawl forward a little and the whole operation could be repeated.

The heaving waves were a hindrance to them—sometimes every man on one side of a boat would catch a simultaneous crab so that the boat would spin round and become a nuisance to the other one—and the *Lydia,* so graceful and willing when under sail, was a perfect hellion when being towed.

She yawed and she sagged, falling away in the trough on occasions so much that the launch and the cutter were dragged, with much splashing from the oars, stern first after her wavering bows, and then changing her mind and heaving forward so fast after the two ropes that the men, flinging their weight upon the oar looms in expectation of a profitless pull, were precipitated backwards with the ease of progression while in imminent danger of being run down.

THEY sat naked on the thwarts while the sweat ran in streams down their faces and chests, unable—unlike their comrades at the pumps—to forget their fatigues in the numbness of monotonous work when every moment called for vigilance and attention, tugging painfully away, their agonies of thirst hardly relieved by the allowance of water doled out to them by the petty officers in the sternsheets, tugging away until even hands calloused by years of pulling and hauling cracked and blistered so that the oars were agony to touch.

Hornblower knew well enough the hardship they were undergoing. He went forward and looked down at the toiling seamen, knowing perfectly well that his own

body would not be able to endure that labour for more than half an hour at most.

He gave orders for an hourly relief at the oars, and he did his best to cheer the men on. He felt an uneasy sympathy for them—three-quarters of them had never been sailors until this commission, and had no desire to be sailors either, but had been swept up by the all-embracing press seven months ago. Hornblower was always able (rather against his will) to do what most of his officers failed to do—he saw his crew not as topmen or hands, but as what they had been before the press caught them, stevedores, wherry men, porters.

He had waggoners and potters—he had even two draper's assistants and a printer among his crew; men snatched without notice from their families and their employment and forced into this sort of labour, on wretched food, in hideous working conditions, haunted always by the fear of the cat or of Harrison's rattan, and with the chance of death by drowning or by hostile action to seal the bargain.

So imaginative an individualist as Hornblower was bound to feel sympathy with them even when he felt he ought not, especially as he (in common with a few other liberals) found himself growing more and more liberal minded with the progress of years.

But to counterbalance this weakness of his there was his restless nervous anxiety to finish off well any task he had set himself to do. With the *Natividad* in sight he could not rest until he had engaged her, and when a captain of a ship cannot rest his crew certainly cannot—aching backs or bleeding hands notwithstanding.

By careful measurement with his sextant of the subtended angles he was able to say with certainty at the end of an hour that the efforts of the boats' crews had dragged the *Lydia* a little nearer to the *Natividad,* and Bush, who had taken the same measurements, was in agreement. The sun rose higher and the *Lydia* crept inch by inch towards her enemy.

"*Natividad's* hoisting out a boat, sir," hailed Knyvett from the foretop.

"How many oars?"

"Twelve, sir, I think. They're taking the ship in tow."

"And they're welcome," scoffed Bush. "Twelve oars won't move that old tub of a *Natividad* very far."

HORNBLOWER glared at him and Bush retired to his own side of the quarterdeck again; he had forgotten his captain was in this unconversational mood. Hornblower was fretting himself into a fever. He stood in the glaring sun while the heat was reflected up into his face from the deck under his feet. His shirt chafed him where he sweated.

He felt caged, like a captive beast, within the limitations of practical details. The endless clanking of the pumps, the rolling of the ship, the rattle of the rigging, the noise of the oars in the rowlocks, were driving him mad, as though he could scream (or weep) at the slightest additional provocation.

At noon he changed the men at the oars and pumps, and sent the crew to dinner—he remembered bitterly that he had already made them breakfast in anticipation of immediate action.

At two bells he began to wonder whether the *Natividad* might be within extreme long range, but the mere fact of wondering told him that it was not the case—he knew his own sanguine temperament too well, and he fought down the temptation to waste powder and shot.

And then, as he looked for the thousandth time through his telescope, he suddenly saw a disk of white appear on the high stern of the *Natividad.* The disk spread and expanded into a thin cloud, and six seconds after its first appearance the dull thud of the shot reached his ears. The *Natividad* was evidently willing to try the range.

"*Natividad* carries two long eighteens aft on the quarterdeck," said Gerard to Bush in Hornblower's hearing. "Heavy metal for stern chasers."

Hornblower knew it already.

He would have to run the gauntlet of those two guns for an hour, possibly, before he could bring the brass nine-pounder on his forecastle into action. Another puff of smoke from the *Natividad,* and this time Hornblower saw a spout of water rise from a wave half a mile ahead.

But at that long range and on that tossing sea it did not mean that the *Lydia* was still half a mile beyond the *Natividad's* reach. Hornblower heard the next shot arrive, and saw a brief fountain of water rise no more than fifty yards from the *Lydia's* starboard quarter.

"Mr. Gerard," said Hornblower. "Send for Mr. Marsh and see what he can do with the long nine forward."

It would cheer the men up to have a gun banging away occasionally instead of being merely shot at without making any reply. Marsh came waddling up from the darkness of the magazine, and blinked in the blinding sunshine.

He shook his head doubtfully as he eyed the distance between the ships, but he had the gun cleared away, and he loaded it with his own hands, lovingly. He measured out the powder charge on the fullest scale, and he spent several seconds selecting the roundest and truest shot from the locker.

He trained the gun with care, and then stood aside, lanyard in hand, watching the heave of the ship and the send of the bows, while a dozen telescopes were trained on the *Natividad* and every eye watched for the fall of the shot. Suddenly he jerked the lanyard and the cannon roared out, its report sounding flat in the heated motionless air.

"Two cables' lengths astern of her!" yelled Knyvett from the foretop. Hornblower had missed the splash—another proof, to his mind, of his own incompetence, but he concealed the fact under a mask of imperturbability.

"Try again, Mr. Marsh," he said.

THE *Natividad* was firing both stern chasers together now. As Hornblower spoke there came a crash forward as one of the eighteen-pounder balls struck home close above the water line. Hornblower could hear young Savage, down in the launch, hurling shrill blasphemies at the men at the oars to urge them on—that shot must have passed just over his head.

Marsh stroked his beard and addressed himself to the task of reloading the long nine-pounder.

While he was so engaged, Hornblower was deep in the calculation of the chances of battle.

That long nine, although of smaller calibre, was of longer range than his shorter main deck guns, while the carronades which comprised half of the Lydia's armament were useless at anything longer than close range. The *Lydia* would have to draw up close to her enemy before she could attack her with effect. There would be a long and damaging interval between the moment when the *Natividad* should be able to bring all her guns into action and the moment when the *Lydia* could hit back at her.

There would be casualties, guns dismounted perhaps, serious losses. Hornblower balanced the arguments for and against continuing to try and close with the enemy while Mr. Marsh was squinting along the sights of the nine-pounder.

Then Hornblower scowled to himself, and ceased tugging at his chin, his mind made up. He had started the action; he would go through it to the end, cost what it might. His flexibility of mind could crystallise into sullen obstinacy.

The nine-pounder went off as though to signal this decision.

"Just alongside her!" screamed Knyvett triumphantly from the foretop.

"Well done, Mr. Marsh," said Hornblower, and Marsh wagged his beard complacently.

The *Natividad* was firing faster now. Three times a splintering crash told of a shot which had been aimed true. Then suddenly a thrust as if from an invisible hand made Hornblower reel on the quarterdeck, and his ears were filled with a brief rending noise. A skimming shot had

ploughed a channel along the planking of the quarterdeck. A marine was sitting near the taffrail stupidly contemplating his left leg, which no longer had a foot on the end of it; another marine dropped his musket with a clatter and clapped his hands to his face, which a splinter had torn open, with blood spouting between his fingers.

"Are you hurt, sir?" cried Bush, leaping across to Hornblower.

"No."

HORNBLOWER turned back to stare through his glass at the *Natividad* while the wounded were being dragged away. He saw a dark dot appear alongside the *Natividad,* and lengthen and diverge. It was the boat with which they had been trying to tow—perhaps they were giving up the attempt. But the boat was not being hoisted in. For a second Hornblower was puzzled. The *Natividad's* stumpy foremast and mainmast came into view. The boat was pulling the ship laboriously round so that her whole broadside would bear. Not two, but twenty-five guns would soon be opening their fire on the *Lydia.*

Hornblower felt his breath come a little quicker, unexpectedly, so that he had to swallow in order to regulate things again.

His pulse was faster, too. He made himself keep the glass to his eye until he was certain of the enemy's manœuvre, and then walked forward leisurely to the gangway.

He was compelling himself to appear lighthearted and carefree; he knew that the fools of men whom he commanded would fight more diligently for a captain like that.

"They're waiting for us now, lads," he said. "We shall have some pebbles about our ears before long. Let's show 'em that Englishmen don't care."

They cheered him for that, as he expected and hoped they would do. He looked through his glass again at the *Natividad.* She was still turning, very slowly—it was a lengthy process to turn a clumsy two-decker in a dead calm. But her three masts were fully separate from each other now, and he could see a hint of the broad white stripes which ornamented her side.

"Ha—h'm," he said.

Forward he could hear the oars grinding away as the men in the boats laboured to drag the *Lydia* to grips with her enemy.

Across the deck a little group of officers—Bush and Crystal among them—were academically discussing what percentage of hits might be expected from a Spanish broadside at a range of a mile.

They were coldblooded about it in a fashion he could never hope to imitate with sincerity. He did not fear death so much—not nearly as much—as defeat and the pitying contempt of his colleagues. The chiefest dread at the back of his mind was the fear of mutilation.

An ex-naval officer stumping about on two wooden legs might be an object of condolence, might receive lip service as one of Britain's heroic defenders, but he was a figure of fun nevertheless. Hornblower dreaded the thought of being a figure of fun. He might lose his nose or his cheek and be so mutilated that people would not be able to bear to look at him.

It was a horrible thought which set him shuddering while he looked through the telescope, so horrible that he did not stop to think of the associated details, of the agonies he would have to bear down there in the dark cockpit at the mercy of Laurie's incompetence.

THE *Natividad* was suddenly engulfed in smoke, and some seconds later the air and the water around the *Lydia,* and the ship herself, were torn by the hurtling broadside.

"Not more than two hits," said Bush, gleefully.

"Just what I said," said Crystal. "That captain of theirs ought to go round and train every gun himself."

"How do you know he did not?" argued Bush.

As punctuation the nine-pounder forward banged out its defiance. Hornblower

fancied that his straining eyes saw splinters fly amidships of the *Natividad,* unlikely though it was at that distance.

"Well aimed, Mr. Marsh!" he called. "You hit him squarely."

Another broadside came from the *Natividad,* and another followed it, and another after that. Time after time the *Lydia's* decks were swept from end to end with shot. There were dead men laid out again on the deck, and the groaning wounded were dragged below.

"It is obvious to anyone of a mathematical turn of mind," said Crystal, "that those guns are all laid by different hands. The shots are too scattered for it to be otherwise."

"Nonsense!" maintained Bush sturdily. "See how long it is between broadsides. Time enough for one man to train each gun. What would they be doing in that time otherwise?"

"A Dago crew——" began Crystal, but a sudden shriek of cannon balls over his head silenced him for a moment.

"Mr. Galbraith!" shouted Bush. "Have that main t'gallant stay spliced directly." Then he turned triumphantly on Crystal. "Did you notice," he asked, "how every shot from that broadside went high? How does the mathematical mind explain that?"

"They fired on the upward roll, Mr. Bush. Really, Mr. Bush, I think that after Trafalgar——"

Hornblower longed to order them to cease the argument which was lacerating his nerves, but he could not be such a tyrant as that.

In the still air the smoke from the *Natividad's* firing had banked up round about her so that she showed ghostly through the cloud, her solitary mizzen topmast protruding above it into the clear air.

"Mr. Bush," he asked, "at what distance do you think she is now?"

Bush gauged the distance carefully.

"Three parts of a mile, I should say, sir."

"Two-thirds, more likely, sir," said Crystal.

"Your opinion was not asked, Mr. Crystal," snapped Hornblower.

At three quarters of a mile, even at two thirds, the *Lydia's* carronades would be ineffective. She must continue running the gauntlet. Bush was evidently of the same opinion, to judge by his next orders.

"Time for the men at the oars to be relieved," he said, and went forward to attend to it. Hornblower heard him bustling the new crews down into the boats, anxious that the pulling should be resumed before the *Lydia* had time to lose what little way she carried.

IT WAS terribly hot under the blazing sun, even though it was now long past noon. The smell of the blood which had been spilt on the decks mingled with the smell of the hot deck seams and of the powder smoke from the nine-pounder with which Marsh was still steadily bombarding the enemy. Hornblower felt sick—so sick that he began to fear lest he should disgrace himself eternally by vomiting in full view of his men.

When fatigue and anxiety had weakened him thus he was far more conscious of the pitching and rolling of the ship under his feet.

The men at the guns were silent now, he noticed—for long they had laughed and joked at their posts, but now they were beginning to sulk under the punishment.

That was a bad sign.

"Pass the word for Sullivan and his fiddle," he ordered.

The red-haired Irish madman came aft, and knuckled his forehead, his fiddle and bow under his arm.

"Give us a tune, Sullivan," he ordered. "Hey there, men, who is there among you who dances the best hornpipe?"

There was a difference of opinion about that apparently.

"Benskin, sir," said some voices.

"Hall, sir," said others.

"No, MacEvoy, sir."

"Then we'll have a tournament," said Hornblower. "Here, Benskin, Hall, MacEvoy. A hornpipe from each of you, and

a guinea for the man who does it best."

In later years it was a tale told and retold, how the *Lydia* towed into action with hornpipes being danced on her main deck. It was quoted as an example of Hornblower's cool courage, and only Hornblower knew how little truth there was in the attribution.

It kept the men happy, which was why he did it. No one guessed how nearly he came to vomiting when a shot came in through a forward gunport and spattered Hall with a seaman's brains without causing him to miss a step.

Then later in that dreadful afternoon there came a crash from forward, followed by a chorus of shouts and screams overside.

"Launch sunk, sir!" hailed Galbraith from the forecastle, but Hornblower was there as soon as he had uttered the words.

A round shot had dashed the launch practically into its component planks, and the men were scrambling in the water, leaping up for the bobstay or struggling to climb into the cutter, all of them who survived wild with the fear of sharks.

"The Dagoes have saved us the trouble of hoisting her in," he said, loudly. "We're close enough now for them to feel our teeth."

The men who heard him cheered.

"Mr. Hooker!" he called to the midshipman in the cutter. "When you have picked up those men, kindly starboard your helm. We are going to open fire."

He came aft to the quarterdeck again.

"Hard a-starboard," he growled at the quartermaster. "Mr. Gerard, you may open fire when your guns bear."

VERY slowly the Lydia swung round. Another broadside from the *Natividad* came crashing into her before she had completed the turn, but Hornblower actually did not notice it. The period of inaction was over now. He had brought his ship within four hundred yards of the enemy, and all his duty now was to walk the deck as an example to his men. There were no more decisions to make.

"Cock your locks!" shouted Gerard in the waist.

"Easy, Mr. Hooker. Way enough!" roared Hornblower.

The *Lydia* turned, inch by inch, with Gerard squinting along one of the starboard guns to judge of the moment when it would first bear.

"Take your aim!" he yelled, and stood back, timing the roll of the ship in the heavy swell. "Fire!"

The smoke billowed out amid the thunder of the discharge, and the *Lydia* heaved to the recoil of the guns.

"Give him another, lads!" shouted Hornblower through the din. Now that action was joined he found himself exalted and happy, the dreadful fears of mutilation forgotten. In thirty seconds the guns were reloaded, run out, and fired. Again and again and again, with Gerard watching the roll of the ship and giving the word. Counting back in his mind, Hornblower reckoned five broadsides from the *Lydia,* and he could only remember two from the *Natividad* in that time. At that rate of firing the *Natividad's* superiority in numbers of guns and weight of metal would be more than counterbalanced.

At the sixth broadside a gun went off prematurely, a second before Gerard gave the word. Hornblower sprang forward to detect the guilty crew—it was easy enough from their furtive look and suspicious appearance of busyness.

He shook his finger at them.

"Steady, there!" he shouted. "I'll flog the next man who fires out of turn."

It was very necessary to keep the men in hand while the range was as long as at present, because in the heat and excitement of the action the gun captains could not be trusted to judge the motion of the ship while preoccupied with loading and laying.

"Good old Horny!" piped up some unknown voice forward, and there was a burst of laughter and cheering, cut short by Gerard's next order to fire.

The smoke was banked thick about the ship already—as thick as a London fog, so that from the quarterdeck it was im-

possible to see individuals on the forecastle, and in the unnatural darkness which it brought with it one could see the long orange flashes of the guns despite the vivid sunshine outside.

Of the *Natividad* all that could be seen was her high smoke cloud and the single topmast jutting out from it.

The thick smoke, trailing about the ship in greasy wreaths, made the eyes smart and irritated the lungs, and affected the skin like thundery weather until it pricked uncomfortably.

Hornblower found Bush beside him.

"*Natividad's* feeling our fire, sir," he roared through the racket. "She's firing very wild. Look at that, sir."

OF THE broadside fired only one or two shots struck home. Half a dozen plunged together into the sea astern of the *Lydia* so that the spray from the fountains which they struck up splashed round them on the quarterdeck.

Hornblower nodded happily. This was his justification for closing to that range and for running the risks involved in the approach.

To maintain a rapid fire, well aimed, amid the din and the smoke and the losses and the confusion of a naval battle called for discipline and practice of a sort that he knew the *Natividad's* crew could not boast.

He looked down through the smoke at the *Lydia's* main deck. The inexperienced eye, observing the hurry and bustle of the boys with the cartridge buckets, the mad efforts of the gun crews, the dead and the wounded, the darkness and the din, might well think it a scene of confusion, but Hornblower knew better. Everything that was being done there, every single action, was part of the scheme worked out by Hornblower seven months before when he commissioned the *Lydia,* and grained into the minds of all on board during the long and painful drills since. He could see Gerard standing by the mainmast, looking almost saintly in his ecstasy—gunnery was as much Gerard's ruling passion as women; he could see the midshipmen and other warrant officers each by his subdivision of guns, each looking to Gerard for his orders and keeping his guns working rhythmically, the loaders with their rammers, the cleaners with their sponges, the gun captains crouching over the breeches, right hands raised.

The port side battery was already depleted of most of its men; there were only two men to a gun there, standing idle yet ready to spring into action if a shift of the fight should bring their guns to bear.

The remainder were on duty round the ship—replacing casualties on the starboard side, manning the pumps whose doleful clanking continued steadily through the fearful din, resting on their oars in the cutter, hard at work aloft repairing damages.

Hornblower found time to be thankful that he had been granted seven months in which to bring his crew into its present state of training and discipline.

Something—the concussion of the guns, a faint breath of air, or the send of the sea—was causing the *Lydia* to turn away a trifle from her enemy. Hornblower could see that the guns were having to be trained round farther and farther so that the rate of firing was being slowed down. He raced forward, running out along the bowsprit until he was over the cutter where Hooker and his men sat staring at the fight.

"Mr. Hooker, bring her head round two points to starboard."

THE men bent to their oars and headed their boat towards the *Natividad;* the towrope tightened while another badly aimed broadside tore the water all round them into foam. Tugging and straining at the oars they would work the ship round in time. Hornblower left them and ran back to the quarterdeck. There was a white-faced ship's boy seeking him there.

"Mr. Howell sent me, sir. Starboard side chain pump's knocked all to pieces."

"Yes?" Hornblower knew that Howell the ship's carpenter would not merely send a message of despair.

"He's rigging another one, sir, but it will be an hour before it works, sir. He told me to tell you the water's gaining a little, sir."

"Ha—h'm," said Hornblower. The infant addressing him grew round-eyed and confidential now that the first strangeness of speaking to his captain had worn off.

"There was fourteen men all knocked into smash at the pump, sir. 'Orrible, sir."

"Very good. Run back to Mr. Howell and tell him the captain is sure he will do his best to get the new pump rigged."

"Aye aye, sir."

The boy dived down to the main deck, and Hornblower watched him running forward, dodging the hurrying individuals in the crowded space there. He had to explain himself to the marine sentry at the fore hatchway—no one could go below without being able to show that it was his duty which was calling him there. Hornblower felt as if the message Howell had sent did not matter at all. It called for no decision on his part. All there was to do was to go on fighting, whether the ship was sinking under their feet or not. There was a comfort in being free of all responsibility in this way.

"One hour and a half already," said Bush, coming up rubbing his hands. "Glorious, sir. Glorious."

It might have been no more than ten minutes for all Hornblower could tell, but Bush had in duty bound been watching the sand glass by the binnacle.

"I've never known Dagoes stick to their guns like this before," commented Bush. "Their aim's poor, but they're firing as fast as ever. And it's my belief we've hit them hard, sir."

He tried to look through the eddying smoke, even fanning ridiculously with his hands in the attempt—a gesture which, by showing that he was not quite as calm as he appeared to be, gave Hornblower an absurd pleasure. Crystal came up as well as he spoke.

"The smoke's thinning a little, sir. It's my belief that there's a light air of wind blowing."

He held up a wetted finger.

"There is indeed, sir. A trifle of breeze over the port quarter. Ah!"

There came a stronger puff as he spoke, which rolled away the smoke in a solid mass over the starboard bow and revealed the scene as if a theatre curtain had been raised. There was the *Natividad,* looking like a wreck. Her jury foremast had gone the way of its predecessor, and her mainmast had followed it. Only her mizzenmast stood now, and she was rolling wildly in the swell with a huge tangle of rigging trailing over her disengaged side.

Abreast her foremast three ports had been battered into one; the gap looked like a missing tooth.

"She's low in the water," said Bush, but on the instant a fresh broadside vomited smoke from her battered side, and this time by some chance every shot told in the *Lydia,* as the crash below well indicated.

The smoke billowed round the *Natividad,* and as it cleared the watchers saw her swinging round head to wind, helpless in the light air.

The *Lydia* had felt the breeze. Hornblower could tell by the feel of her that she had steerage way again; the quartermaster at the wheel was twirling the spokes to hold her steady. He saw his chance on the instant.

"Starboard a point," he ordered. "Forward, there! Cast off the cutter."

The *Lydia* steadied across her enemy's bows and raked her with thunder and flame.

"Back the main tops'l," ordered Hornblower.

THE men were cheering again on the main deck through the roar of the guns. Astern the red sun was dipping to the water's edge in a glory of scarlet and gold. Soon it would be night.

"She must strike bloody soon. Why don't she strike?" Bush was saying, as at close range the broadsides tore into the helpless enemy, raking her from bow to stern. Hornblower knew better. No ship under Crespo's command and flying El

Supremo's flag would strike her colours. He could see the golden star on a blue ground fluttering through the smoke.

"Pound him, lads, pound him!" shouted Gerard.

With the shortening range he could rely on his gun captains to fire independently now. Every gun's crew was loading and firing as rapidly as possible.

So hot were the guns that at each discharge they leaped high in their carriages, and the dripping sponges thrust down their bores sizzled and steamed at the touch of the scorching hot metal. It was growing darker, too.

The flashes of the guns could be seen again now, leaping in long orange tongues from the gun muzzles. High above the fast fading sunset could be seen the first star, shining out brilliantly.

The *Natividad's* bowsprit was gone, splintered and broken and hanging under her forefoot, and then in the dwindling light the mizzenmast fell as well, cut through by shots which had ripped their way down the whole length of the ship.

"She must strike now, by God!" said Bush.

At Trafalgar Bush had been sent as prize master into a captured Spanish ship, and his mind was full of busy memories of what a beaten ship looked like—the dismounted guns, the dead and wounded heaped on the deck and rolling back and forth as the dismasted ship rolled on the swell, the misery, the pain, the helplessness.

As if in reply to him there came a sudden flash and report from the *Natividad's* bows. Some devoted souls with tackles and hand-spikes had contrived to slew a gun round so that it would bear right forward. and were firing into the looming bulk of the *Lydia*.

"Pound him, lads, pound him!" screamed Gerard, half mad with fatigue and strain.

The *Lydia* by virtue of her top hamper was going down to leeward fast upon the rolling hulk.

At every second the range was shortening. Through the darkness, when their eyes were not blinded with gun flashes, Hornblower and Bush could see figures moving about on the *Natividad's* deck.

They were firing muskets now, as well. The flashes pricked the darkness and Hornblower heard a bullet thud into the rail beside him. He did not care.

He was conscious now of his overmastering weariness.

THE wind was fluky, coming in sudden puffs and veering unexpectedly. It was hard, especially in the darkness, to judge exactly how the two ships were nearing each other.

"The closer we are, the quicker we'll finish it," said Bush.

"Yes, but we'll run on board of her soon," said Hornblower.

He roused himself for a further effort.

"Call the hands to stand by to repel boarders," he said, and he walked across to where the two starboard side quarter-deck carronades were thundering away. So intent were their crews on their work, so hypnotised by the monotony of loading and firing, that it took him several seconds to attract their notice. Then they stood still, sweating, while Hornblower gave his orders. The two carronades were loaded with canister brought from the reserve locker beside the taffrail. They waited, crouching beside the guns, while the two ships drifted closer and closer together, the *Lydia's* main deck guns still blazing away.

There were shouts and yells of defiance from the *Natividad,* and the musket flashes from her bows showed a dark mass of men crowding there waiting for the ships to come together.

Yet the actual contact was unexpected, as a sudden combination of wind and sea closed the gap with a rush. The *Natividad's* bow hit the *Lydia* amidships, just forward of the mizzenmast, with a jarring crash.

There was a pandemonium of yells from the *Natividad* as they swarmed forward to board, and the captains of the carronades sprang to their lanyards.

"Wait!" shouted Hornblower.

His mind was like a calculating machine, judging wind and sea, time and distance, as the *Lydia* slowly swung round.

With hand spikes and the brute strength of the men he trained one carronade round and the other followed his example, while the mob on the *Natividad's* forecastle surged along the bulwarks waiting for the moment to board. The two carronades came right up against them.

"Fire!"

A thousand musket balls were vomited from the carronades straight into the packed crowd. There was a moment of silence, and then the pandemonium of shouts and cheers was replaced by a thin chorus of screams and cries—the blast of musket balls had swept the *Natividad's* forecastle clear from side to side.

FOR a space the two ships clung together in this position; the *Lydia* still had a dozen guns that would bear, and these pounded away with their muzzles almost touching the *Natividad's* bow. Then wind and sea parted them again, the *Lydia* to leeward now, drifting away from the rolling hulk; in the English ship every gun was in action, while from the *Natividad* came not a gun, not even a musket shot.

Hornblower fought off his weariness again.

"Cease firing," he shouted to Gerard on the main deck and the guns fell silent.

Hornblower stared through the darkness at the vague mass of the *Natividad,* wallowing in the waves.

"Surrender!" he shouted.

"Never!" came the reply—Crespo's voice, he could have sworn to it, thin and high-pitched. It added two or three words of obscene insult.

Hornblower could afford to smile at that, even through his weariness. He had fought his battle and won it.

"You have done all that brave men could do," he shouted.

"Not all, yet, Captain," wailed the voice in the darkness.

Then something caught Hornblower's eye—a wavering glow of red round about the *Natividad's* vague bows.

"Crespo, you fool!" he shouted. "Your ship's on fire! Surrender, while you can."

"Never!"

The *Lydia's* guns, hard against the *Natividad's* side, had flung their flaming wads in amongst the splintered timbers. The tinder-dry wood of the old ship had taken fire from them, and the fire was spreading fast.

It was brighter already than when Hornblower had noticed it; the ship would be a mass of flames soon. Hornblower's first duty was to his own ship—when the fire should reach the powder charges on the *Natividad's* decks, or when it should attain the magazine, the ship would become a volcano of flaming fragments, imperilling the *Lydia.*

"We must haul off from her, Mr. Bush," said Hornblower, speaking formally to conceal the tremor in his voice. "Man the braces, there."

The *Lydia* swung away, closehauled, clawing her way up to windward of the flaming wreck. Bush and Hornblower gazed back at her.

There were bright flames now to be seen, spouting from the shattered bows—the red glow was reflected in the heaving sea around her. And then, as they looked, they saw the flames vanish abruptly, like an extinguished candle.

There was nothing to be seen at all, nothing save darkness and the faint glimmer of the wave crests. The sea had swallowed the *Natividad* before the flames could destroy her.

"Sunk, by God!" exclaimed Bush, leaning out over the rail.

HORNBLOWER still seemed to hear that last wailing "Never!" during the seconds of silence that followed. Yet he was perhaps the first of all his ship's company to recover from the shock.

He put his ship about and ran down to the scene of the *Natividad's* sinking. He sent off Hooker and the cutter to search for survivors—the cutter was the only boat

left, for gig and jolly boat had been shattered by the *Natividad's* fire, and the planks of the launch were floating five miles away.

They picked up a few men—two were hauled out of the water by men in the Lydia's chains, and the cutter found half a dozen swimmers; that was all. The *Lydia's* crew tried to be kind to them, as they stood on her deck in the lantern light with the water streaming from their ragged clothes and their lank black hair, but they were sullen and silent; there was even one who struggled for a moment, as if to continue the battle which the *Natividad* had fought so desperately.

"Never mind, we'll make topmen of them yet," said Hornblower, trying to speak lightly.

Fatigue had reached such a pitch now that he was speaking as if out of a dream, as if all these solid surroundings of his, the ship, her guns and masts and sails, Bush's burly figure, were unreal and ghostlike, and only his weariness and the ache inside his skull were existing things.

He heard his voice as though he were speaking from a yard away.

"Aye aye, sir," said the boatswain.

Anything was grist that came to the Royal Navy's mill—Harrison was prepared to make seamen out of the strangest human material; he had done so all his life, for that matter.

"What course shall I set, sir?" asked Bush, as Hornblower turned back to the quarterdeck.

"Course?" said Hornblower, vaguely. "Course?"

It was terribly hard to realise that the battle was over, the *Natividad* sunk, that there was no enemy afloat within thousands of miles of sea. It was hard to realize that the *Lydia* was in acute danger, too; that the pumps, clanking away monotonously, were not quite able to keep the leaks under, that the *Lydia* still had a sail stretched under her bottom, and stood in the acutest need of a complete refit.

Hornblower came by degrees to realise that now he had to start a new chapter in the history of the *Lydia,* to make fresh plans.

And there was a long line of people waiting for immediate orders, too—Bush, here, and the boatswain and the carpenter and the gunner and that fool Laurie.

He had to force his tired brain to think again.

He estimated the wind's force and direction, as though it were an academic exercise and not a mental process which for twenty years had been second nature to him. He went wearily down to his cabin and found the shattered chart cases amid the indescribable wreckage, and he pored over the torn chart.

He must report his success at Panama as soon as he could; that was obvious to him now. Perhaps he could refit there, although he saw small chance of it in that inhospitable roadstead, especially with yellow fever in the town. So he must carry the shattered *Lydia* to Panama.

He laid off a course for Cape Mala, by a supreme effort compelled his mind to realise that he had a fair wind, and came up again with his orders to find that the mass of people who were clamouring for his attention had miraculously vanished. Bush had chased them all away, although he never discovered it. He gave the course to Bush, and then Polwheal materialised himself at his elbow, with boat cloak and hammock chair. Hornblower had no protest left in him.

He allowed himself to be wrapped in the cloak, and he fell half fainting into the chair. It was twenty-one hours since he had last sat down. Polwheal had brought food, too, but he merely ignored that. He wanted no food; all he wanted was rest.

Then for a second he was wide awake again. He had remembered Lady Barbara, battened down below with the wounded in the dark and stifling bowels of the ship. But he relaxed at once. The blasted woman could look after herself—she was quite capable of doing so. Nothing mattered now.

His head sank on his breast again. The

next thing to disturb him was the sound of his own snores, and that did not disturb him long. He slept and he snorted through all the din which the crew made in their endeavour to get the *Lydia* shipshape again.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUNDAY MORNING

WHAT awoke Hornblower was the sun, which lifted itself over the horizon and shone straight into his eyes. He stirred and blinked, and for a space he tried, like a child, to shield his eyes with his hands and to return to sleep.

He did not know where he was, and for that time he did not care. Then he began to remember the events of yesterday, and he ceased trying to sleep and instead tried to wake up.

Oddly, at first he remembered the details of the fighting and could not recall the sinking of the *Natividad*. When that recollection shot into his brain he was fully awake.

He rose from his chair, stretching himself painfully, for all his joints ached with the fatigues of yesterday. Bush was standing by the wheel, his face grey and lined and strangely old in the hard light. Hornblower nodded to him and received his salute in return; Bush was wearing his cocked hat over the dirty white bandage round his forehead.

Hornblower would have spoken to him, but all his attention was caught up immediately in looking round the ship.

There was a good breeze blowing which must have backed round during the night, for the Lydia could only just hold her course closehauled.

She was under all plain sail; Hornblower's rapid inspection revealed to him innumerable splices both in standing and running rigging; the jury mizzenmast seemed to be standing up well to its work, but every sail that was spread seemed to have at least one shot hole in it—some of them a dozen or more.

The first part of today's work would be spreading a new suit of sails; new rigging could wait for a space.

It was only then, after weather and course and sail set had been noted, that Hornblower's sailor's eye came down to the decks. From forward came the monotonous clangor of the pumps; the clear white water which was gushing from them was the surest indication that the ship was making so much water that it could only just be kept in check.

On the lee side gangway was a long, long row of corpses, each in its hammock. Hornblower flinched when he saw the length of the row, and it called for all his will to count them.

There were twenty-four dead men along the gangway; and fourteen had been buried yesterday. Some of these dead might be—probably were—the mortally wounded of yesterday, but thirty-eight dead seemed certainly to indicate at least seventy wounded down below. Rather more than one-third of the *Lydia's* company were casualties, then. He wondered who they were, wondered whose distorted faces lay hid beneath those hammocks.

The dead on deck outnumbered the living. Bush seemed to have sent below every man save for a dozen men to hand and steer, which was sensible of him, seeing that everyone must be worn out with yesterday's toil while one man out of every seven on board would have to be employed at the pumps until the shot holes could be got at and plugged.

The rest of the crew, at first glance, were all asleep, sprawled on the main deck under the gangways. Hardly anyone had had the strength to sling a hammock (if their hammocks had survived the battle); all the rest lay as they had dropped, lying tangled here and there, heads pillowed on each other or on more unsympathetic objects like ring bolts and the hind axletrees of the guns.

There were still evident many signs of yesterday's battle, quite apart from the sheeted corpses and the dark stains, not thoroughly swabbed, which disfigured the white planking.

The decks were furrowed and grooved in all directions, with jagged splinters still standing up here and there. There were shot holes in the ship's sides with canvas roughly stretched over them. The port sills were stained black with powder; on one of them an eighteen-pounder shot stood out, half buried in the tough oak.

But on the other hand an immense amount of work had been done, from laying out the dead to securing the guns and frapping the breechings.

Apart from the weariness of her crew, the *Lydia* was ready to fight another battle at two minutes' notice.

HORNBLOWER felt a prick of shame that so much should have been done while he slept lazily in his hammock chair. He forced himself to feel no illwill on that account. Although to praise Bush's work was to admit his own deficiencies he felt that he must be generous.

"Very good indeed, Mr. Bush," he said, walking over to him; yet his natural shyness combined with his feeling of shame to make his speech stilted. "I am both astonished and pleased at the work you have accomplished."

"Today is Sunday, sir," said Bush, simply.

So it was.

Sunday was the day of the captain's inspection, when he went round every part of the ship examining everything, to see that the first lieutenant was doing his duty in keeping the ship efficient.

On Sunday the ship had to be swept and garnished, all the falls of rope flemished down, the hands fallen in by divisions in their best clothes, divine service held, the Articles of War read—Sunday was the day when the professional ability of every first lieutenant in His Britannic Majesty's Navy was tried in the balance.

Hornblower could not fight down a smile at this ingenuous explanation.

"Sunday or no Sunday," he said, "you have done magnificently, Mr. Bush."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I shall remember to say so in my report to the Admiralty."

"I know you'll do that, sir."

Bush's weary face was illuminated by a gleam of pleasure.

A successful single ship action was usually rewarded by promotion to Commander of the first lieutenant, and for a man like Bush, with no family and no connections, it was his only hope of making that vitally important step.

But a captain who was anxious to enhance his own glory could word his report so that it appeared that he had won his victory despite of, instead of by the aid of, his first lieutenant—instances were known.

"They may make much of this in England, when eventually they hear about it," said Hornblower.

"I'm certain of it, sir. It isn't every day of the week that a frigate sinks a ship of the line."

It was stretching a point to call the *Natividad* that—sixty years ago when she was built she may have been considered just fit to lie in the line, but times had changed since then. But it was a very notable feat that the *Lydia* had accomplished, all the same. It was only now that Hornblower began to appreciate how notable it was, and his spirits rose in proportion. There was another criterion which the British public was prone to apply in estimating the merit of a naval action, and the Board of Admiralty itself not infrequently used the same standard.

"What's the butcher's bill?" demanded Hornblower, brutally, voicing the thoughts of both of them—brutally because otherwise he might be thought guilty of sentiment.

"Thirty-eight killed, sir," said Bush, taking a dirty scrap of paper from his pocket. "Seventy-five wounded. Four missing. The missing are Harper, Dauson, North, and Chump the negro, sir—they were lost when the launch was sunk. Clay was killed in the first day's action——"

Hornblower nodded; he remembered

Clay's headless body sprawled on the quarterdeck.

"—and John Summers, master's mate, Henry Vincent and James Clifton, boatswain's mates, killed yesterday, and Donald Scott Galbraith, third lieutenant, Lieutenant Samuel Simmonds of the Marines, Midshipman Howard Savage, and four other warrant officers wounded."

"Galbraith?" said Hornblower. That piece of news prevented him from beginning to wonder what would be the reward of a casualty list of a hundred and seventeen, when frigate captains had been knighted before this for a total of eighty killed and wounded.

"Badly, sir. Both legs smashed below the knees."

GALBRAITH had met the fate which Hornblower had dreaded for himself. The shock recalled Hornblower to his duty.

"I shall go down and visit the wounded at once," he said, and checked himself and looked searchingly at his first lieutenant. "What about you, Bush? You don't look fit for duty."

"I am perfectly fit, sir," protested Bush. "I shall take an hour's rest when Gerard comes up to take over the deck from me."

"As you will, then."

Down below decks in the orlop it was like some canto in the Inferno.

It was dark; the four oil lamps whose flickering, reddish yellow glimmer wavered from the deck beams above seemed to serve only to cast shadows. The atmosphere was stifling.

To the normal stenches of bilge and of ship's stores was added the stinks of sick men crowded together, of the sooty lamps, of the bitter powder smell which had drifted in yesterday and had not yet succeeded in making its way out again.

It was appallingly hot; the heat and the stink hit Hornblower in the face as he entered, and within five seconds of his entry his face was as wet as if it had been dipped in water, so hot was it and so laden the atmosphere with moisture.

As complex as the air was the noise.

There were the ordinary ship noises—the creaking and groaning of timber, the vibration of the rigging transmitted downward from the chains, the sound of the sea outside, the wash of the bilge below, and the monotonous clangor of the pumps forward intensified by the ship-timbers acting as sounding boards.

But all the noises acted only as accompaniment to the din in the cockpit, where seventy-five wounded men, crammed together, were groaning and sobbing and screaming, blaspheming and vomiting. Lost souls in hell could hardly have had a more hideous environment, or be suffering more.

Hornblower found Laurie, standing aimlessly in the gloom.

"Thank God you've come, sir," he said. His tone implied that he cast all responsibility, gladly, from that moment on the shoulders of his captain.

"Come round wtih me and make your report," snapped Hornblower.

He hated this business, and yet, although he was completely omnipotent on board, he could not turn and fly as his instincts told him to do.

The work had to be done, and Hornblower knew that now Laurie had proved his incompetence he himself was the best man to deal with it. He approached the last man in the row, and drew back with a start of surprise. Lady Barbara was there; the wavering light caught her classic features as she knelt beside the wounded man.

She was sponging his face and his throat as he writhed on the deck.

IT WAS a shock to Hornblower to see her engaged thus.

The day was yet to come when Florence Nightingale was to make nursing a profession in which women could engage. No man of taste could bear the thought of a woman occupied with the filthy work of a hospital. Sisters of Mercy might labour there for the good of their souls; boozy old women might attend to women

in labour and occasionally take a hand at sick nursing, but to look after wounded men was entirely men's work—the work of men who deserved nothing better, either, and who were ordered to it on account of their incapacity or their bad record like men ordered to clean out latrines. Hornblower's stomach revolted at the sight of Lady Barbara here in contact with dirty bodies, with blood and pus and vomit.

"Don't do that!" he said, hoarsely. "Go away from here. Go on deck."

"I have begun this work now," said Lady Barbara, indifferently. "I am not going to leave it unfinished."

Her tone admitted no possibility of argument; she was apparently talking of the inevitable—much as she might say that she had caught a cold and would have to bear with it until it was over.

"The gentleman in charge here," she went on, "knows nothing of his duties."

Lady Barbara had no belief in the nobility of nursing; to her mind it was a more degrading occupation than cooking or mending clothes (work which had only occasionally, when the exigencies of travel demanded it, engaged her capable fingers) but she had found a job which was being inefficiently done when there was no one save herself to do it better, at a time when the King's service depended in part on its being done well.

She had set herself to the work with the same wholehearted attention to detail and neglect of personal comfort with which one of her brothers had governed India and another had fought the Mahrattas.

"This man," went on Lady Barbara, "has a splinter of wood under his skin here. It ought to be extracted at once."

She displayed the man's bare chest hairy and tatooed. Under the tattooing there was a horrible black bruise, stretching from the breast bone to the right armpit, and in the muscles of the armpit was a jagged projection under the skin; when Lady Barbara laid her fingers on it the man writhed and groaned with pain.

In fighting between wooden ships splinter wounds constituted a high proportion of the casualties, and the hurtling pieces of wood could never be extracted by the route by which they entered, because their shape gave them natural barbs.

In this case the splinter had been deflected by the ribs so as to pass round under the skin, bruising and lacerating, to its present place in the armpit.

"Are you ready to do it now?" asked Lady Barbara of the unhappy Laurie.

"Well, madam——"

"If you will not, then I will. Don't be a fool, man."

"I will see that it is done, Lady Barbara," interposed Hornblower. He would promise anything to get this finished and done with.

"Very well, then, Captain."

Lady Barbara rose from her knees, but she showed no sign of any intention of retiring in a decent female fashion. Hornblower and Laurie looked at each other.

"Now, Laurie," said Hornblower, harshly. "Where are your instruments? Here, you, Wilcox, Hudson. Bring him a good stiff tot of rum. Now, Williams, we're going to get that splinter out of you. It is going to hurt you."

HORNBLOWER had to struggle hard to keep his face from writhing in disgust and fear of the task before him. He spoke harshly to stop his voice from trembling; he hated the whole business.

And it was a painful and bloody business, too. Although Williams tried hard to show no weakness, he writhed as the incision was made, and Wilcox and Hudson had to catch his hands and force his shoulders back.

He gave a horrible cry as the long dark strip of wood was dragged out, and then fell limp, fainting, so that he uttered no protest at the prick of the needle as the edges of the wound were clumsily sewn together.

Lady Barbara's lips were firmly compressed. She watched Laurie's muddled attempts at bandaging, and then she stooped

without a word and took the rags from him.

The men watched her fascinated as with one hand firmly behind Williams' spine she passed the roll dexterously round his body and bound the fast-reddening waste firmly to the wound.

"He will do now," said Lady Barbara, rising.

Hornblower spent two stifling hours down there in the cockpit going the round with Laurie and Lady Barbara, but they were not nearly such agonising hours as they might have been.

One of the main reasons for his feeling so unhappy regarding the care of the wounded had been his consciousness of his own incompetence. Insensibly he came to shift some of his responsibility onto Lady Barbara's shoulders; she was so obviously capable and so unintimidated that she was the person most fitted of all in the ship to be given the supervision of the wounded.

When Hornblower had gone round every bed, when the five newly dead men had been dragged out, he faced her under the wavering light of the last lamp in the row.

"I don't know how I can thank you, ma'am," he said. "I am as grateful to you as any of these wounded men."

"There is no gratitude needed," said Lady Barbara, shrugging her slim shoulders, "for work which had to be done."

A good many years later her ducal brother was to say "The King's government must be carried on" in exactly the same tone. The man in the bed beside them waved a bandaged arm.

"Three cheers for her leddyship!" he croaked. "Hip hip, hurrah!"

Some of the shattered invalids joined him in his cheers—a melancholy chorus, blended with the wheezing and groaning of the delirious men around them. Lady Barbara waved a deprecating hand and turned back to the captain.

"We must have air down here," she said. "Can that be arranged? I remember my brother telling me how the mortality in the hospital at Bombay declined as soon as they began to give the patients air. Perhaps those men who can be moved can be brought on deck?"

"I will arrange it, ma'am," said Hornblower.

LADY BARBARA'S request was strongly accented by the contrast which Hornblower noticed when he went on deck—the fresh Pacific air, despite the scorching sunshine, was like champagne after the solid stink of the orlop. He gave orders for the immediate reestablishment of the canvas ventilating shafts which had been removed when the decks were cleared for action.

"And there are certain of the wounded, Mr. Rayner," he went on, "who would do better if brought up on deck. You must find Lady Barbara Wellesley and ask her which men are to be moved."

"Lady Barbara Wellesley, sir?" said Rayner, surprised and tactless, because he knew nothing of the last development.

"You heard what I said," snapped Hornblower.

"Aye aye, sir," said Rayner hurriedly, and dived away below in fear lest he should say anything further to annoy his captain.

So that on board H.M.S. *Lydia* that morning divisions were held and divine service conducted a little late, after the burial of the dead, with a row of wounded swaying in hammocks on each side of the main deck, and with the faint echo of the horrible sounds below floating up through the air shafts.

CHAPTER XIX

FRESH ORDERS FROM SPAIN

ONCE more the *Lydia* held her course along the Pacific coast of Central America. The grey volcanic peaks, tinged with pink, slid past her to the eastward, with the lush green of the coastal strip sometimes just visible at their feet.

The sea was blue and the sky was blue; the flying fish skimmed the surface, leaving their fleeting furrows behind them.

But every minute of the day and night twenty men toiled at the pumps to keep her from sinking, and the rest of the able bodied crew worked all their waking hours at the task of refitting.

Short handed though they were, the work was carried out efficiently and with dispatch.

The fortnight which elapsed before she rounded Cape Mala went far to reduce her list of wounded. Some of the men were by then already convalescent—the hard physical condition which they had enjoyed, thanks to months of heavy work at sea, enabled them to make light of wounds which would have been fatal to men of soft physique. Shock and exhaustion had relieved the ship of others, and now gangrene, the grim Nemesis which awaited so many men with open wounds in those pre-antiseptic days, was relieving her of still more.

Every morning there was the same ceremony at the ship's side, when two or three or six hammock-wrapped bundles were slid over into the blue Pacific.

Galbraith went that way. He had borne the shock of his wound, he had even survived the torture to which Laurie submitted him when, goaded by Lady Barbara's urgent representations, he had set to work with knife and saw upon the smashed tangles of flesh and bone which had been his legs.

He had bade fair to make a good recovery, lying blanched and feeble in his cot, so that Laurie had been heard to boast of his surgical skill and of the fine stumps he had made and of the neatness with which he had tied the arteries.

Then, suddenly, the fatal symptoms had shown themselves, and Galbraith had died five days later after a fortunate delirium.

Hornblower and Lady Barbara drew nearer to each other during these days.

Lady Barbara had fought a losing battle for Galbraith's life to the very end, had fought hard and without sparing herself, and yet seemingly without emotion as if she were merely applying herself to a job which had to be done.

Hornbower would have thought this was the case if he had not seen her face on the occasion when Galbraith was holding her hands and talking to her under the impression that she was his mother.

The dying boy was babbling feverishly in the broad Scots into which he had lapsed as soon as delirium overcame him, clutching her hands and refusing to let her go, while she sat with him talking calmly and quietly in an effort to soothe him. So still was her voice, so calm and unmoved was her attitude, that Hornblower would have been deceived had he not seen the torment in her face.

AND for Hornblower it was unexpectedly painful when Galbraith died. Hornblower always looked upon himself as a man content to make use of others, pleasingly devoid of human weaknesses. It was a surprise to him to find how hurt and sorry he was at Galbraith's death, and to find his voice trembling and tears in his eyes as he read the service, and to feel a shudder of distress at the thought of what the sharks were doing to Galbraith's body, down there below the blue surface of the Pacific.

He told himself that he was being weak, and then hastened to assure himself that he was merely annoyed at the loss of a useful subordinate, but he could not convince himself.

In a fury of reaction he flung himself into the business of driving his men harder in their task of refitting the *Lydia,* and yet now when his eyes met Lady Barbara's, on deck or across the dinner table, it was not with the complete lack of sympathy which had previously prevailed.

There was a hint of understanding between them now.

Hornblower saw little enough of Lady Barbara. They dined together on some afternoons, always with at least one other officer present, but for the most part he was busy with his professional duties and she with her care of the sick. They neither of them had the time, and he at least had not the superfluous energy to spare for the flirtations that those mild tropic nights should have brought in their train. And

Hornblower, as soon as they entered the Gulf of Panama, had sufficient additional worries for the moment to drive away all possibility of a flirtation.

The Pearl Islands were just in view over the port bow, and the *Lydia*, closehauled, was heading for Panama one day's sail ahead when the guarda-costa lugger which had encountered them before hove up over the horizon to windward.

At sight of the *Lydia* she altered course and came running down wind towards her, while Hornblower kept steadily on his course. He was a little elated with the prospect of making even such a fever-ridden port as badly equipped as Panama, because the strain of keeping the *Lydia* afloat was beginning to tell on him.

The lugger hove-to a couple of cables' lengths away, and a few minutes later the same smart officer in the brilliant uniform came clambering up onto the *Lydia's* deck as had boarded from her once before.

"Good morning, Captain," he said, bowing profoundly. "I trust Your Excellency is enjoying the best of health?"

"Thank you," said Hornblower.

The Spanish officer was looking curiously about him; the *Lydia* still bore many marks of her recent battle—the row of wounded in hammocks told a good part of the story. Hornblower saw that the Spaniard seemed to be on his guard, as though determined to be noncommittal at present until something unknown had revealed itself.

"I see," said the Spaniard, "that your fine ship has been recently in action. I hope that Your Excellency had good fortune in the encounter?"

"We sank the *Natividad* if that is what you mean," said Hornblower, brutally.

The man's face was expressionless but his voice was tense.

"You sank her, Captain?"

"I did."

"She is destroyed?"

"She is."

The Spaniard's expression hardened—Hornblower was led for a moment to think that it was a bitter blow to him to hear that for the second time the Spanish ship had been beaten by an English ship of half her force.

"Then, sir," said the Spaniard, "I have a letter to give you."

HE FELT in his breast pocket, but with a curious gesture of hesitation —Hornblower realized later that he must have had two letters, one in one pocket and one in another, of different import, one to be delivered if the *Natividad* were destroyed and the other if she were still able to do damage.

The letter which he handed over when he was quite certain which was which was not very brief, but was worded with a terseness that implied (having regard to the ornateness of the Spanish official style) absolute rudeness, as Hornblower was quick to realize when he tore open the wrapper and read the contents.

It was a formal prohibition from the Viceroy of Peru for the *Lydia* to drop anchor in, or to enter into, any port of Spanish America, in the Viceroyalty of Peru, or the Viceroyalty of Mexico, or the Captain-Generalcy of New Granada.

Hornblower re-read the letter, and while he did so the dismal clangor of the pumps, drifting aft to his ears, made more acute the worries which instantly leaped upon him.

He thought of his battered, leaking ship, his sick and wounded, his weary crew and his attenuated stores, of the rounding of the Horn and the four thousand miles of the Atlantic which lay between him and England.

And more than that; he remembered the supplementary orders which had been given him when he left England, regarding the effort he was to make to open Spanish America to British trade and to establish an Isthmian canal.

"You are aware of the contents of this letter, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

The Spaniard was haughty, even brazen about it.

"Can you explain this most unfriendly behavior on the part of the Viceroy?"

"I would not presume to explain my master's actions, sir."

Hornblower drew himself up, yet his tone was polite, even conciliatory.

"And yet they are in sore need of explanation. I cannot understand how any civilized man could abandon an ally who has fought his battles for him and is in need of help solely because of those battles."

The Spaniard replied with the cold formality of one delivering a prearranged speech.

"You came unasked into these seas, sir. There would have been no battle for you to fight if you had stayed in those parts of the world where your King rules. The South Seas is the property of His Most Catholic Majesty, who will tolerate no intruder upon it."

"I understand," said Hornblower.

He guessed that new orders had come out to Spanish America now that the government of Spain had heard of the presence of an English frigate in the Pacific. The retention of the American monopoly was to the Spanish mind as dear as life itself.

There was no length to which the Spanish government would not go to retain it, even though it meant offending an ally while in the midst of a life and death struggle with the most powerful despot in Europe.

To the Spaniards in Madrid the *Lydia's* presence in the Pacific hinted at the coming of a flood of British traders, at the drying up of the constant stream of gold and silver on which the Spanish government depended, at—worse still—the introduction of heresy into a part of the world which had been kept faithful to the Pope through three centuries.

It did not matter if Spanish America were poor, misgoverned, disease ridden, nor if the rest of the world felt the pinch of being shut out at a time when the Continental System had ruined European trade.

IN A clear-sighted moment Hornblower foresaw that the world could not long tolerate selfishness carried to these lengths, and that soon, amid general approval, Spanish America would throw off the Spanish yoke. Later, if neither Spain nor New Granada would cut that canal, someone else would step in and do it for them. He was minded to say so, but his innate caution restrained him. However badly he had been treated, there was nothing to be gained by causing an open breach. There was a sweeter revenge in keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Very good, sir," he said. "My compliments to your master. I will call at no port on the Spanish Main. Please convey His Excellency my lively sense of gratitude at the courtesy with which I have been treated, and my pleasure at this further proof of the good relations between the governments of which we have the good fortune to be subjects."

The Spanish officer looked at him sharply, but Hornblower kept his face immobile while bending his spine with studied courtesy.

"And now, sir," went on Hornblower dryly, "I must, much to my regret, wish you goodday and a pleasant journey. I have much to attend to."

It was irksome to the Spaniard to be dismissed in this cavalier fashion, but he could take no open exception to anything Hornblower had said.

He could only return Hornblower's bow and walk back to the ship's side. No sooner was he back in his boat than Hornblower turned to Bush.

"Keep the ship hove-to, if you please, Mr. Bush," he said.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Bush, regarding his captain narrowly.

The *Lydia* rolled heavily, hove-to, on the swell, while her captain resumed his interrupted pacing of the quarterdeck, eyed furtively by those officers and men who had guessed at the bad news this latest despatch contained. Up and down, up and down, walked Hornblower, between the carronade slides on the one hand and the ring bolts on the other, while the clanking of the pumps, floating drearily on the heavy air, told him at every second how

urgent it was that he should form some new decision.

First of all, however, before even the question of the condition of the ship arose, he must decide about stores and water—every ship's captain had to consider that problem first.

Six weeks back he had filled his storerooms and his water barrels. But since that time he had lost a quarter of his crew.

At a pinch, even allowing for a long time to refit, there was enough food to last them back to England, therefore; especially as the easterly rounding of the Horn was never as prolonged as the westerly one, and (now that all need of secrecy had disappeared) if necessary St. Helena or Sierra Leone or Gibraltar would be open to him to replenish.

That was intensely satisfactory.

He could devote his whole mind now to his ship. Refit he must. The *Lydia* could not hope to survive the storms of Cape Horn in her present condition, leaking like a sieve, jury rigged, and with a sail fothered under her bottom.

The work could not be done at sea, and the harbors were barred to him. He must do as old buccaneers did—as Drake and Anson and Dampier had done in these very waters—find some secluded cove where he could careen his ship. It would not be easy on the mainland, for the Spaniards had settled round every navigable bay. It would have to be an island, therefore, and one not too far away.

Those Pearl Islands on the horizon would not be suitable, for Hornblower knew them to be inhabited and to be frequently visited from Panama—besides, the lugger was still in sight and watching his movements.

Hornblower went down below and got out his charts; there was the island of Coiba which the *Lydia* had passed yesterday. His charts told him nothing of it save its position, but it was clearly the place to investigate first.

Hornblower laid off his course and then went on deck again.

"We will put the ship about, if you please, Mr. Bush," he said.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE!

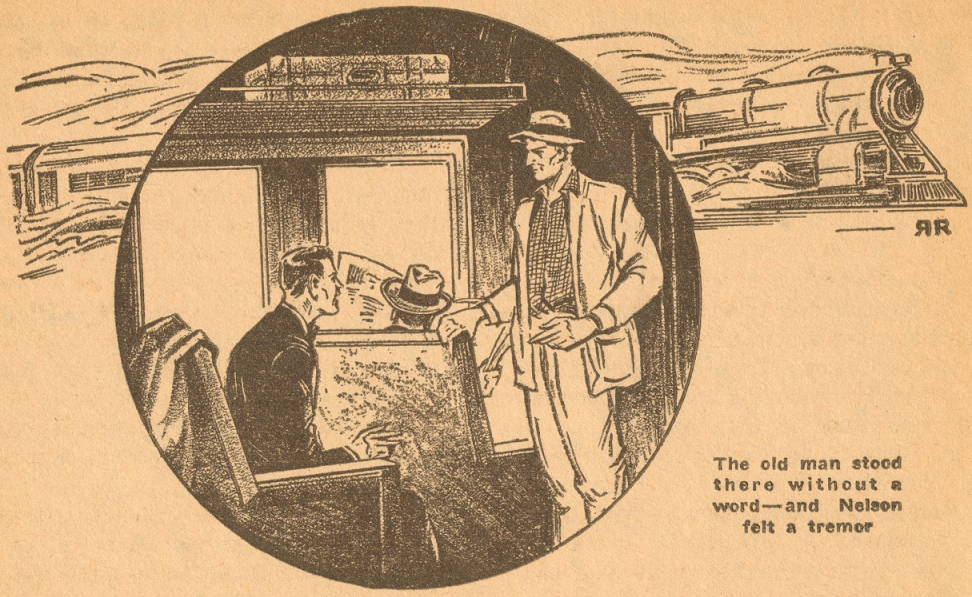
Although the late returns are not yet tabulated, there is no longer the slightest doubt that the following are the most popular novels ever serialized in this magazine:

THE SHIP OF ISHTAR
by A. MERRITT

2. TARZAN OF THE APES
by Edgar Rice Burroughs
3. THE MIRACLE MAN
by Frank L. Packard
4. STEAMBOAT GOLD
by George Washington Ogden
5. LIGHT OF THE WESTERN STARS
by Zane Grey
6. THE GOLDEN KNIGHT
by George Challis
7. ANNAPOLIS, AHOY!
by George Bruce
8. THE UNHOLY THREE
by Tod Robbins
9. WAR FOR SALE
by Max Brand
10. THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS
by John Buchan

Thousands of readers have been clamoring for another chance to read A. Merritt's fascinating and unforgettable story. Finally, because a majority of today's readers have had no opportunity to read this brilliant tale and because it is no longer obtainable in book form, we break ARGOSY'S iron-clad rule of "No reprints!" Need we say more? None of you will want to miss

A. Merritt's THE SHIP OF ISHTAR
Beginning in the ARGOSY for October 29



The old man stood there without a word—and Nelson felt a tremor

The Man from Painted Arrow

By PAUL ERNST

Author of "The Gentle Gunman," "Highway to Hell," etc.

No train ever stops at a ghost town—but one night the fast express had to

THE train drummed over a culvert and rounded a curve, with cliff-wall rising sheer on one side of the roadbed and falling straight on the other. It dived into a short tunnel and emerged onto a pleateau that made the string of cars look like a small worm on a large table-top.

In the middle of the second day-coach, Harry Nelson sat staring at a landscape chiseled by the beams of the dying sun. He had made the trip from Silver City to Ogdensville a hundred times, but always the scenery held him with its wild ruggedness.

At present the landscape was wilder even than usual. It was storm-battered and streamed water in rivulets that looked like blood in the sunset. All day a spring storm had torn at the Silver City region as though trying to wrench it from the map. One cloudburst had followed another.

Nelson grimaced. The light overcoat at his side was drenched. His suit was dank and uncomfortable. He had made his sales calls in Silver City by taxi, ducking from cab to store entrances, but still he had been soaked when the day was done.

He shrugged and stared out the window at the streaming world—a world in which much damage must have been done that day by flood and gale. His body swayed easily with the train's motion, and beside him on the seat his well-worn briefcase swayed, too.

To the west, mountains rose high and black. Higher and blacker drifted the storm clouds; Nelson glanced at their re-

treat without really seeing it. He was thinking of the place the train would soon pass—a place that, for a ridiculous reason, was always the high point of the trip for him.

That was the deserted village, the ghost town, known as Painted Arrow.

UNTIL twenty years ago Painted Arrow had been a thriving community. Then the lead deposits in the hills had given out and its inhabitants had moved away. Trains no longer stopped there. Houses and station and general store had become lifeless shells.

However, to Nelson, Painted Arrow was colorful with fancied activities, peopled with folk created out of his imagination. It was one of his secrets; almost a guilty one. A wholesale groceries salesman, he supposed, had no business being fanciful. But he seemed to be that way about Painted Arrow.

He had filled the lifeless old town with life, had put into its buildings people who walked and talked and watched the trains go by as they do in any village. The other passengers might get a glimpse only of rotting boards and emptiness as the cars flashed past, but to Nelson the place had vitality and he looked forward always to passing through it.

As the train neared the Wedge Watershed he would begin to look out the window more often, for then Painted Arrow was drawing near. From the watershed to Sling's Tunnel was only a few miles. After leaving the tunnel, the train thrummed around a long curve, went straight for half a mile, and then leaned to a long right turn. In the center of the great S, with Sling's Tunnel behind it and lofty Diamond Trestle spanning Silver River Gorge ahead of it, was Painted Arrow.

A ghost village? Nelson smiled to himself.

In every one of the decaying buildings he had people living and working. There was a storekeeper in the ruin of the general store. There was a station agent in the station where trains had not stopped for eighteen years; and loafers—or, rather philosophers—sitting on the loading platform to stare at the passing express.

A village quick with life as Nelson imagined it.

The first thing the train passed, on leaving Sling's Tunnel, was a small house that had once been white. It was a hunder feet from the track, fronting it. Three children in clean though faded garments played in the yard before this house. Always they jumped up and down and waved to the train, and always Nelson waved back, furtively, so that none of his fellow passengers would see him gesturing at nothingness and think him entirely mad.

Next came three houses clustered around the grass-grown crossroads. In the biggest of the three houses lived the old lady who was the station agent's wife. Nelson had seen her many times, just as plain. She sat on the porch, usually sewing something, and though she always looked up when the train fled past she did not often wave. Perhaps her husband's official connection with the railroad prohibited such nonsense.

After passing these three houses, the train streaked by the main part of Painted Arrow: the cluster of houses around the general store, with the railroad station off a bit from them, on the edge of the roadbed.

Always the old men sitting on the loading platform ceased talking as the train appeared and lifted their hands in a salute that was almost too dignified to be called a wave. And always Nelson waved back, furtively, with his attention mainly centered on the station agent who leaned in the doorway.

MORE and more Nelson had built up his fanciful Painted Arrow around this man. By now he had every detail of his figure fixed as though he'd actually seen him many times.

The station agent was at least seventy-five years old, but was only a little stooped. He was big and gaunt, with skin

the color of dark oak, and had deep blue eyes set wide apart under a dreamer's forehead. Nelson thought to divine many things from the old man's countenance. He was intelligent but unschooled, shrewd in a native way but from a worldly viewpoint a child. He was a man who could solve a problem of existence, but who probably couldn't work a dial telephone; a man who could advise statesmen but who might stand baffled before an automatic elevator.

He was always dressed in the same clothes: heavy, high shoes with yellow-brown mud on them, faded blue overalls, a faded blue-checked shirt with a dark brown sweater over it, a gray slouch hat on his well-shaped old head, and black, straw-plaited sleeve-protectors that were his one concession to his station duties.

That was the peak of the oft-made trip from Silver City to Ogdensville for Nelson—when he waved covertly to the men on the loading platform and when for an instant his eyes met the widely spaced, calm blue eyes of the Painted Arrow station agent.

That moment still excited him.

After that he would relax a little in his seat as the train ground around the last half of the S curve and picked a ponderously dainty way across the Diamond Trestle; and he usually dozed from there home to Ogdensville, with fragments of the day's sales calls melting in his mind before the gaze of shrewd but naïve blue eyes widely spaced under a calm, magnificent forehead.

He leaned back into the seat, with his moist and crumpled clothes wrinkling to the movements of his body. The train was almost at the crest of the watershed now, and was passing through shale desert.

The black clouds over the mountains were very far off, disappearing into distance, leaving behind them a swollen and water glutted world.

Nelson turned to open his sample-case and check over his order book during the few minutes before the train reached Painted Arrow. Turning that way, he could see a portion of the aisle, and also the feet of a man standing there.

He looked at the feet, at first, only idly, with his attention mainly centered on the straps of the case, which were stubborn with the soaking they had gotten in the deluges of rain. They were the feet of a farmer or country laborer, encased in heavy high shoes splashed with yellow-brown mud. Ordinary enough, but they stirred in Nelson a faint thread of memory, for some reason that didn't at once come to him.

His gaze lifted a little. He saw legs clad in faded blue overalls, and big gnarled hands hanging lax. He saw the sleeves of a dark brown sweater above the hands, and then a faded, blue-checked shirt tucked into the overalls and not quite hidden by the sweater.

It was then that Nelson forgot all about the straps of the briefcase and stared with all his attention. Heavy high shoes splashed with yellow-brown mud! Faded blue overalls and blue-checked shirt! Dark brown sweater! Why, he had seen that outfit many times, or rather, had *thought* to see it. It was the costume with which he had fancifully clothed the fancied Painted Arrow station master.

It was all right, he told himself, running his tongue over lips that were suddenly as dry as dust. It was all right. He hadn't gone crazy. High shoes and overalls were certainly no novelty in the country. Brown was a common color for a sweater, and there were thousands of blue-checked work shirts. This was simply a rather startling coincidence.

For quite a few seconds Nelson sat that way, looking at the familiarly clad body. Only the black, straw-plaited sleeve protectors were missing.

HE FELT the man's stare on him. He had to look up, had to look at the face, sometime. He forced his gaze upward, and his hands closed tightly, involuntarily, on themselves.

The face of the man standing in the aisle, plainly to be seen under the rim

of a gray slouch-hat that was also fantastically familiar — the face of the Painted Arrow station agent. Incredulously Nelson gazed into widely spaced blue eyes, at a seamed face weatherbeaten to the color of dark oak.

"Howdy. Mind if I set?" said the man.

Nelson glanced dazedly around. Most of the seats in the car were filled—with none of the occupants paying any attention to the old fellow. He heard himself say, rather thickly. "Of course, sit down here."

He moved his sample-case and overcoat. The old man seated himself in a tired way. In a world that seemed to spin around him like a hollow top, Nelson clutched at a fact that offered stability. The seat sagged under the man's weight in a thoroughly satisfying manner.

The man looked at him. "Anything wrong, son?" he said. His voice was a little blurry with age, but quiet and strong. Precisely, indeed, as Nelson would have imagined the voice of the Painted Arrow station agent to be.

"No," Nelson replied, in a voice that was still not quite natural. "Nothing at all."

"You seemed upset, a minute ago."

"No. I'm all right."

"I thought you looked at me kind of starey as I stood in the aisle," the old man persisted.

"It seemed for a minute that you were some one I—have known," Nelson said. "But that's impossible."

"Impossible?" the old man repeated. "Mebbe not. I've met a heap of folks in my time, and I've seen a heap more for a few seconds at a look."

"No, it's impossible," Nelson said. He was feeling such better. He could even smile a little at this odd coincidence. "You see, I thought you were the station master at Painted Arrow, up ahead of us. And of course Painted Arrow doesn't even have a station—"

The look on the old man's face stopped him. "But I *am* the station master at Painted Arrow," he said.

THE train topped the water shed. Nelson felt it subsconsciously because the backward press of his body against the seat ceased and the cars took on a free motion as they began to coast down the long grade on the other side.

"You—*are* the station agent?"

"Yes, sir. I have been for forty years. There wasn't any railroad when I came to Painted Arrow, and there wasn't any station beside the track when I started working for the road."

"But you—" Nelson moistened his lips and began again. "But there ain't any agent at Painted Arrow. There isn't any one there at all. It's a deserted ghost-village. No one has lived in it for years."

The old man chuckled, and it was a pleasant thread of sound. "Did you ever get off the train at Painted Arrow? Ever look through the place?"

"Why, no."

"Did anybody else you know ever get off and look for themselves?"

"No. The trains don't stop there."

"This one will stop. For me. And you look around Painted Arrow real close, son."

Nelson's fingers slowly unclenched. He was profoundly relieved and at the same time disconcerted. It is disconcerting to find that you have painted a picture, not on blank old canvas, but over a previous picture needing but a little restoring and investigation to bring it to light. So Painted Arrow was not entirely a ghost town after all! A few old-timers still took shelter in the wrecks of buildings they had once known as well-kept homes. He felt cheated.

He continued to be disconcerted as his vivid imagining of the station agent was explained. On some earlier trip he must have seen this oldster on the station platform. Then he hadn't seen him any more, and had forgotten the one glimpse. But in his game of peopling Painted Arrow with imaginary inhabitants he had cast the station agent in the image once briefly seen and then lost to memory.

"It certainly had me going for a minute," he breathed.

"What?"

"Nothing. Where are your black straw sleeve-protectors?"

It was rather a stupid question, but it popped out before Nelson quite realized it. The sleeve-protectors were the only thing missing from the man's oft-seen costume.

"My sleeve-protectors?" repeated the old man. "Left 'em in the station, of course. I don't travel around with sleeve-protectors on. Why'd you ask?"

"Why, I—no matter. So you work for the road at Painted Arrow. You don't have much to fill your time, do you?"

The old man shook his head placidly. "Not much. But I'm still the station agent."

Nelson was steadier now.

"There aren't many people left in the place, are there?"

"Only a few."

Nelson wondered why he had never seen any of them, or had never seen such evidence of residence as, in wintertime, smoke coming from the tumbled chimneys. Then he thought he understood. The old folks quite possibly were living in places that did not belong to them—homes which long since had been foreclosed. Squatters there, they might be wary of showing themselves because they feared eviction.

However, this man beside him looked as if he did not fear anything.

"Where do you stay?" he asked. "In the station?"

"Only during working hours," said the old man. "I go home after that to my wife, of course. You wouldn't expect me to live in the station, would you?"

"Working hours?" repeated Nelson.

The old man looked at him calmly.

"Painted Arrow's only a lost speck on the map, all right, son. But just the same I'm important to the railroad." Nelson stared from the frayed brown sweater and faded overalls to the shiny surroundings of the air-conditioned daycoach. Then his gaze returned to the old man, who sat with his battered slouch hat pushed back from his high forehead.

"I have no doubt you're important to the road," he said gravely.

He could not have spoken in a different tone, ludicrous as the man's claim sounded. He couldn't help being drawn to him. In a way he still seemed a product of Nelson's own brain, a child of his fancy, and hence almost as touching to him as a real offspring. Besides, the old fellow seemed so sure of himself, so serenely contented that his tenancy of the dilapidated station was of importance, that it would have been unforgivable to smile.

"You're coming back from a visit to Silver City?"

The old man nodded. "It's been a long while since I was there. A long while since I went anywhere. So I took some time off for a trip. My, how Silver City had spread in the last twenty years!"

"It must have spread a little more this afternoon," Nelson said with a laugh. "I never saw so much rain fall in so short a time. I hope you didn't get soaked."

"No, I didn't."

Nelson stared at him for a moment with his laughter fading as he thought of something. "It has been twenty years since you've been to Silver City?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How long since you've ridden on one of these trains?"

"The same. Twenty years."

Nelson recalled the old man's statement that this time the train would stop at Painted Arrow, to let him off, and he stirred uncomfortably. "How in the world," he said, "could you get a ticket from Silver City to Painted Arrow? Did the ticket agent find one at the back of some pigeon-hole?"

The old man sat a little straighter.

"Ticket?" he repeated, with quiet indignation. "I don't need a ticket. Didn't I tell you I worked for the road? Employees don't need tickets. I just stepped on the train at Silver City—I'll just step off at Painted Arrow."

"If it stops."

"But of course it'll stop."

NELSON stared out the window at the flying landscape. He was more disturbed than he'd have cared to admit by the expression of placid confidence on the old gentleman's face. "What arrangements did you make to have the train stopped?" he inquired. "Did you see the conductor about it?"

The old man looked at him with a faint frown. "No."

"Suppose he doesn't stop for you? It's a long way from Ogdensville, the next real station, back to Painted Arrow. Have you friends that could drive you back?"

"Son," the station agent said, "mebbe you didn't hear me straight a minute ago. As I said, I'm an important employee of this road. Everybody knows me, and knows I belong in Painted Arrow. I don't have to make arrangements to have the train stopped. My being on board will be enough."

Nelson was silent. Through the door, up in the front end of the next car, he could see the conductor slowly swaying down the aisle as he collected tickets. The old man beside him said with a contented sigh:

"Getting pretty near Sling Tunnel." He looked out at the sodden landscape. "There'll be four inches of water running through it, I reckon. Storm like this does lots of damage."

Nelson said nothing. He was wondering. Wondering about the old agent's peaceful conviction that the train would stop for him at Painted Arrow. "Just a lost speck on the map." Yet he supposed the man must know what he was talking about. After all, a train must have paused in the first place to let him get on.

"There's Dodhead Rock," said the agent, waving a gnarled big hand toward a clump of red stone lifting against the red sky. "We're sure highballing. Not like the old trains. I'll bet the express hits Painted Arrow at sixty, most days, curves and all."

"Yes, we ought to be there in a few minutes," said Nelson. "Your wife will be glad to see you safely back."

"I reckon she will," was all the old man said. "Do you travel this run often, son?"

"About once a week." Nelson spoke abstractedly. He was beginning to get uneasy again. The train, four minutes late, was skimming the down-grade with loose brakes. It wasn't even slackening for the tunnel, as it usually did. It seemed to him that if the engineer had orders to stop the express at the ghost town, he'd be slowing down by now.

"Hitting the tunnel," observed the station agent. "We'll be slowing in a minute for Painted Arrow."

"Of course," said Nelson. He wished he were as sure of that as the old man was.

He fidgeted as the train raced with padded thunder through Sling's Tunnel. It had slowed a little, now; say from seventy miles an hour to sixty. But Painted Arrow was very near.

"There must be some danged young cub in the cab who's trying to show off," fumed the old man. "He'll clip almost into Painted Arrow and then stand the engine on her nose."

"Suppose — just suppose — he either hasn't orders to stop, or has forgotten them?" Nelson said hesitantly. It was hard to speak even hestitantly in the face of the old fellow's absolute conviction.

He cleared his throat. "You might have to spend the night at Ogdensville. If you do, I'll be glad to put you up at my house. That's where I live."

Which would be an odd one, he thought. He imagined a station agent, among other imginary residents of a ghost town, and brought him home for the night.

However, the old man's confidence was unshaken. "He'll stop for *me*," he said.

THE train fled out of the tunnel at a faster pace than Nelson ever remembered before. The engineer could hardly stop before the Painted Arrow station if he begun applying the brakes at once.

He stood up.

"Going to have a look around when she

stops for me?" the old man asked placidly.

Nelson mumbled something meaningless and hurried forward along the aisle. He wanted a word with the conductor. He had to know what the man's instructions were.

The conductor was a little past the middle of the next car, slowly coming toward the rear as he punched tickets. Nelson confronted him, leaning far to the side as the train ground around the first half of the S curve in the middle of which was the ghost town.

"Are you going to stop at Painted Arrow?" he asked.

The conductor stared.

"Certainly not."

"Haven't you orders to stop there?"

"At Painted Arrow? No train has stopped there for more years than I've been with the road. Did you think you could get off there?"

"Not me," said Nelson, lurching as the train straightened from the curve and began clipping down the stretch of track on which was the tumbledown station with its tumbledown accompanying houses a few yards away. He started to say, "A fellow back in the next car—" but didn't.

"The next stop is Ogdensville," the conductor said crisply.

Nelson wanted to protest, but the set of the conductor's face made objection plainly useless. He released the man's arm and walked reluctantly back toward his own car. He entered the swaying vestibule and put his hand on the knob of the next door. He stopped there and looked at his queer seat-mate.

The face of the man from Painted Arrow was twisted with incredulity and dismay. His wide-spaced blue eyes were staring almost tragically at the desolate-looking houses which were streaking past with no letup of speed.

An important employee to the road! All he had to do was get on the train, and they knew they'd have to stop for him at Painted Arrow! Everybody knew him!

Poor old boy, working at non-existent tasks in a ruined station which hadn't seen railroad business for twenty years, buoyed by the belief that somehow the railroad was still cognizant of his existence, that he still "belonged" somewhere. That was probably the foundation of his life—the peaceful conviction that he might be old, but he was still a valued cog in the machine.

And now the train was grinding inexorably past Painted Arrow as if the old fellow didn't exist. It was passing the place up as though the agent were not on board at all. And the man from Painted Arrow looked like a child about to cry—or like an old, old person suddenly to be broken because at length the truth came out that there was no value whatever left in him, really, that he was only human junk.

Nelson saw the old man's hands creep to his lips, saw the way his old mouth twisted, still with unbelief as his destination rushed hearthlessly by.

"Hell," said Nelson, through his teeth.

He reached up and yanked the bell-cord.

EXISTENCE following that impulsive act became a matter of trying to keep from being hurled bodily through the glass of the door behind him, accompanied by a screaming of metal and a shouting of passengers, as the train stood almost on its nose. He heard somebody cursing monotonously, and thought it was the conductor. Then they stopped, halfway around the second curve of the S, a little more than midway betweent Sling's Tunnel and the Diamond Trestle.

Nelson picked himself up off the vestibule floor and started to slip back to his seat. But he hadn't a chance of getting away with it.

A hand fell on his shoulder and tightened there. He turned to see the conductor. A brakeman was running up the aisle of the car the conductor had just left.

"Did you pull the emergency cord?" the conductor demanded.

Nelson said nothing. He glanced at the seat he had occupied. He didn't see the station master. Evidently the old man had gotten off the other end of the car, with his simple dignity mended again, with his sense of his own importance unimpaired, sure the stop had been made for him. Well, Nelson thought, it had been, though not quite as he imagined.

"Answer me!" snapped the conductor in cold fury.

Nelson had a moment's hope that if he said nothing he might go clear. But a man from his own car was coming forward with his jaw out. He got to them. Nelson saw that he was a fellow who had sat across the aisle from him.

"He pulled the emergency cord," the man accused. "I saw him. He got up from his seat and went ahead to the next car for some reason—"

"To ask me if I was going to stop at Painted Arrow," the conductor said grimly. "That was the reason."

"Anyway, when he came back he reached up and pulled the cord. I saw him do it."

The conductor's manner became quieter but not less grim. He took out a notebook.

"You'll hear from this," he said. "This is a felony. I'll hand you over to the police when we get to Ogdensville. What's your name? Where do you live?"

Nelson gave him one of his business cards and gave his residence address. There was nothing else to do. The conductor copied it all down.

"Why did you pull the cord?"

Nelson's lips parted, then closed. He was going to catch it anyway. He didn't think he'd draw a worse penalty for keeping silent. And he didn't want to give the old man away. He might be kicked out of his pathetic shelter in the ghost town.

"Come on," the conductor rapped out. "Speak up. Why in the name of heaven—"

He stopped. Some one was pounding on the steel vestibule door. He lifted the section of flooring covering the stairs and opened the door.

Three men were out there; the fireman and engineer, and a weedy looking little man whose face was white and who was gasping for breath as a spent runner gasps.

"Oh, my God," the weedy-looking man kept panting. "Oh, my God!"

The engineer's face was pale, too. He tried to say something, got out only an incoherent sound, and wiped at his face.

"What's the matter?" the conductor rasped. "Pete, hop the engine and get going. This fool pulled the emergency cord, not me."

The engineer achieved speech. "Oh, no," he said thickly. "We won't get going anywhere. At least not ahead."

"What are you talking about?"

The conductor stared first at one and then another of the three men.

"THE Diamond Trestle is out," said the engineer, looking at the panting little man. "The center section, washed out by the floods today."

"I couldn't get you at the Junction north of the watershed," gasped the little man. "You'd just got past. I ran. I don't know for how long. I climbed down the forge and up—"

"You *what?*" said the conductor. "No man could go down and up those banks in this flood!"

"No other way," gasped the man. "I kept seeing the train going over the trestle. Shooting down—way down—to the rocks. The whole train. So I climbed the gorge, but I knew I was going to be too late. Never catch you—"

The conductor looked at the notebook in his hand. Slowly he tore out the page pertaining to Nelson and slowly he ripped it up. His hands were a sort of grayish color.

The engineer swallowed. "What do we do now?"

"There'll be the old telegraph wire at the Painted Arrow station," said the conductor. "We can tap it and wire back to Silver City for emergency orders."

The four started down the track toward

the station. It was nearly half a mile back. It takes a long time to stop a fast train. Nelson's legs felt a little weak under him. He thought of the spidery high trestle, with Silver River looking no wider than a thread far below. He didn't see the old station agent anywhere; probably he was in the house with his wife, ignorant as yet of what had happened.

They got to the station, and Nelson stared in surprise. The building was even more dilapidated than it appeared from the train. Half the rear wall was gone, and there was no window left whole.

On the loading platform, under the eaves where rain could not get to it, there was thick dust. It lay in a drift across the station doorway, and the drift was smooth and unmarked though it had obviously taken years in accumulating.

The conductor and the other three men walked across the smooth dune of dust to the sagging door. Nelson felt sweat beginning to crawl on his body. Their prints showed, and no others. No others—though the drift had been there for years across the building's only entrance.

He walked to the door himself and looked in. The little man was bending over a warped table on which were marks of a telegraph key that had once been screwed there. There was even more dust in here than there had been outside under the eaves. Dust, thick and unmarked, on the floor. Dust on the windowsills and table. Dust on the things that lay, ready to disintegrate at a touch, on the end of the table where they had been placed many, many years ago—a pair of ancient, black, straw-plaited sleeve-protectors.

Looking Ahead!

RETURN TO GLORY

Saladin was invincible; the Knights of the Cross had forgotten their valor and their faith; but in the Siege of Acre they fought as heroes should. And in that great battle they were led to glory by Hugh d'Ibelin, who alone had kept the Crusader's vision imperishable in his heart. A stirring short novel by

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Captain Thall was known all over Shanghai as a fixer; and so the bright young thing engaged his somewhat shady services to rescue a million-dollar fortune. And the total charge was exactly twelve pounds, five shillings and six. An intriguing, colorful short story by

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COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—OCTOBER 22

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

★ ★ ★

BUSMAN'S holidays have always been a matter for the quizzical speculation of the world. No one apparently can understand why, on his day off, a postman will take a stroll, a motorman go for a brisk run in a trolley, or a movie usher wend his way to the nearest cinema. We've always been more tolerant about this seemingly incomprehensible phenomenon. After all, isn't it a satisfactory life when you're so interested in your job that you will turn to its nearest equivalent on your day off?

But here's a funny one. Believe it or not, we have unearthed a motorist who enjoys reading about motorcycle cops. A woman, of course.

SUE MILLIE REESE

Hurrah for Big Angus and Doggy of the Governor's Escort. As one who travels extensively through the South, I have met them in a dozen states but not frequently enough in my favorite magazine.

Was Henry F. Church himself a motorcycle cop? He surely knows the type.
Greenville, South Carolina

MILTON GLASS

I have been reading the ARGOSY for 15 years and have, to date, only missed one copy.

In all that time I have never read a story as great as Robert Neal Leath's "Karpen, the Jew." Please—more stories by this author.

And what ever has happened to that great author—A. Merritt?
New York City.

AN ARGONAUT of reasonably long allegiance contributes his honeyed note to the general atmosphere of sweetness and light that seems to have sprung up around this office. (For exciting Merritt news, Mr. Glass, turn to page 117.)

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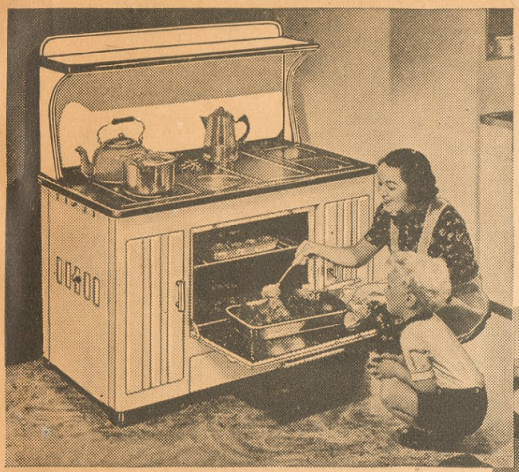

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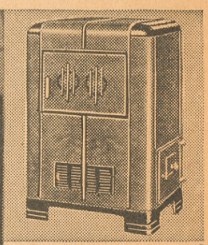

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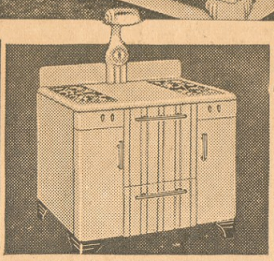

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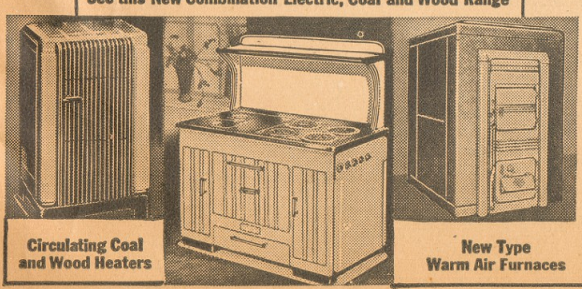

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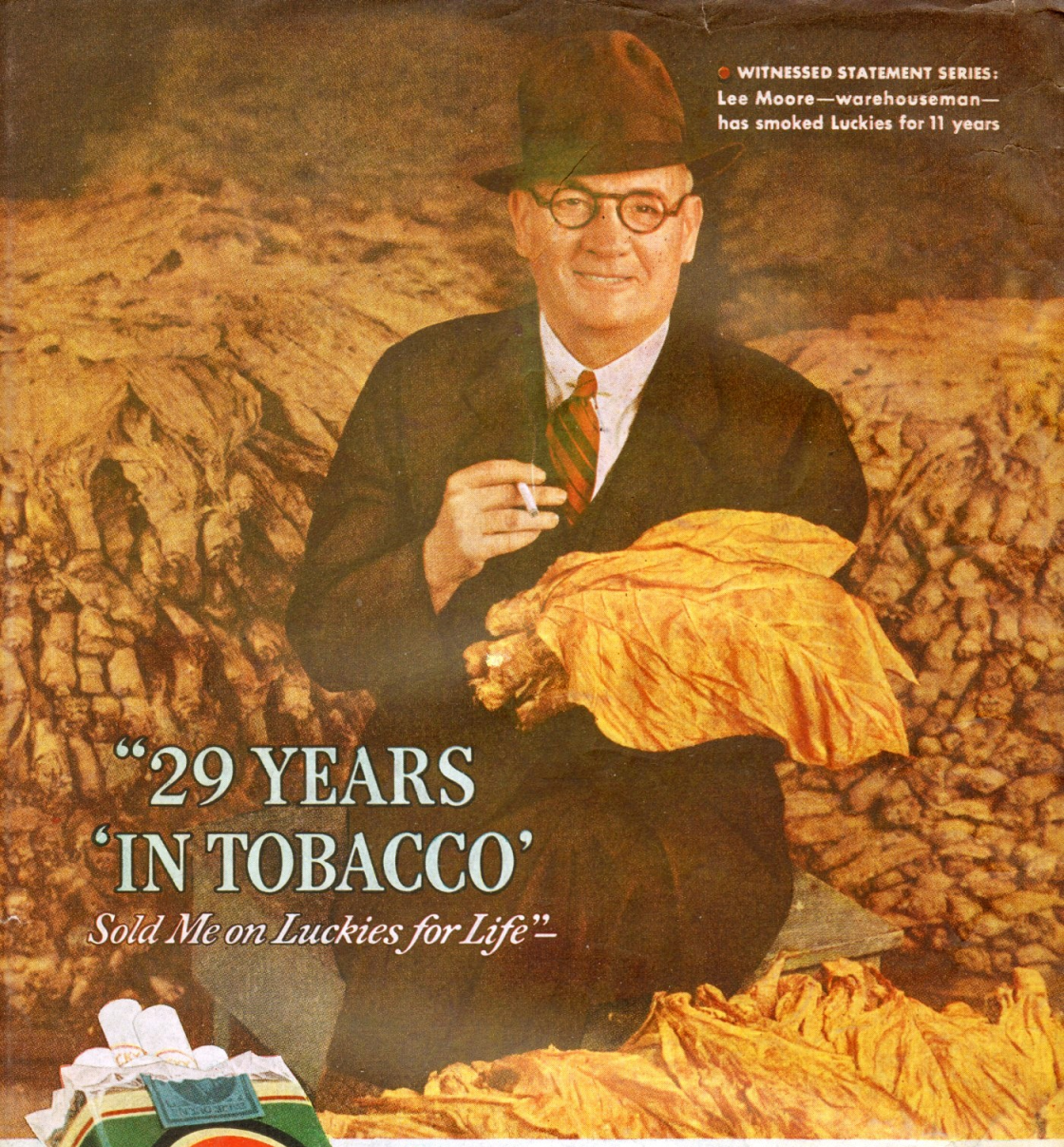

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