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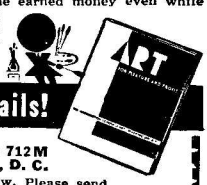

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29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
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5.50-17	3.35	1.75
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29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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Fast and Loose

By MARCO PAGE

FOREWORD

THE lady and gentleman opposite are Joel and Garda Sloane, the gay and attractive hero and heroine of Marco Page's "Fast Company," and its present sequel, "Fast and Loose." As a book, "Fast Company" won Dodd Mead's $10,000 mystery prize. It was a best seller for months. The film version convinced a million movie-goers that not since Dashiell Hammett thought up Mr. and Mrs. Thin Man had such a delightfully dizzy pair mixed a merrier finger in mystery and mayhem.

MGM is filming "Fast and Loose" for release almost any minute; and in it you will see, as our picture may suggest, Robert Montgomery as Joel, and Rosalind Russell as Garda.

A word about the Sloanes: Joel, in case you didn't know, is a young and occasionally solvent dealer in rare books. It was his book business, in fact, that got him mixed up in the Brockler Case, in which violence and villainy entered the field of museum-piece literature. Garda claims that Joel only "blundered" into a solution of that one, but his success as an amateur criminologist convinced him that sleuthing is his real forte. He dismisses Garda's interference-running in the Brockler Case rather more lightly than it deserved, scolding her for her "deplorable lack of technique."

Nevertheless, between them, they managed—a little to their own amazement—to solve a baffling puzzle and trap a killer only slightly less ruthless than a sabre-toothed Bengal tiger.

Aside from his addiction to criminology—and excepting extravagance, irresponsibility and occasional moments of irrationality—Garda is Joel's only vice.

That's as near as we can come to a coherent explanation of the Sloanes. They are really inexplicable—a bewildering phenomenon of the age we live in; keeping fast, and dangerous, company; playing fast and loose with forces that the rest of us would label TNT. You'll have to read about them for yourself. . . .

CHAPTER I

HANGOVER HALL

THE phone had been ringing for about five minutes, with no visible sign that anybody intended to answer it, but it was a persistent little gadget and went right on with its clamor. The living-room of Joel and Garda Sloane was a mess. Over the door hung a gentleman's opera hat, with an arrow through it, the ashtrays were running over, glasses, empty bottles and ice-buckets were everywhere, and a couple of large trays, dotted here and there with a solitary canapé, gave proof through the light that there had been a party in these premises only a little while before.

In the bedroom, Garda Sloane writhed luxuriously in her bed, then as the clamor of the phone broke through the six layers of hangover around her head, she muttered, "Joel!"

Joel Sloane opened one eye. "What?"

"The phone's ringing."

"I hear it," said Joel, and pulled a pillow over his head.

"Aren't you going to answer it?"

"No." This was muffled.

"Why not?" Garda was reasonably awake now and listening to the phone with interest; critically, as though it were the world premiere of a new work of music.

"I made a New Year's resolution," said Joel.

"It might be important," ventured Garda.

"Probably is," said Joel.

"Maybe the building is on fire," hazarded Mrs. Sloane, who was enjoying herself now.

"I hope so," said Joel, pulling up more covers. "I'm cold."

"So am I," said Garda hopefully, looking his way. A deep and sonorous snore

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was her reward. She looked hurt. "I think I'll answer it," she said. "Joel!"

"What?"

"I'll play you a game of casino for who answers the phone."

"I never gamble," said Joel.

"Oh, all right, but you have to answer it next time." She reached out a slender, bare arm.

"Hello . . . Oh, good morning, Mr. Oates . . . Joel is right here . . . Wait, I'll see if he's alive . . . Joel!"

Joel's head popped out. "What?"

"It's for you. Christopher Oates."

"What a way to start the new year." Joel took the phone, though, and said, "What's on your mind?"

While Oates told him, he blinked, yawned, stretched and smiled fondly at his wife. "Oh, all right," he said into the phone. "I'll come down to the office. See you there in an hour." He hung up, sat up in bed, pushed down the covers and swung out. Then he made a wry face.

"How do you feel?" asked Garda.

"All right, I guess," said Joel dubiously. "What did we eat last night—fried carpet?"

Garda sat up and swung out of bed. "I feel as if I swallowed Benny Goodman and his band in the middle of *Tiger Rag*. She put on a negligée. "What did Oates want?"

"He wants to see me."

"I know, but what about?"

"I don't know." Joel pattered into the bathroom, and was methodically stropping a razor when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

He jumped back two feet at the sight of his rather frowzy, hangover countenance, then crept stealthily on the reflection in the glass. "I don't know who you are, my friend," he said, waving an ominous forefinger, "but if you'll hold still a minute, I'll shave you!"

IN THEIR office an hour later, Joel was busy removing the Christmas wreaths and similar trapping with which

the suite had been decorated for the holidays, while Garda worked at the desk, checking a substantial stack of bills. Joel took down a wreath from the door, sighted carefully along a wavering forefinger, then tossed the wreath neatly over the coats and in the corner.

Garda looked up. "Not bad," she said approvingly. "You're in good shape."

"A sound mind in a sound body," said Joel grandly, "and sound money in a sound bank. That's the secret of my success." He picked up a small Christmas tree from the window-sill, carried it to the wastebasket and carefully dropped it in. "It's a good thing I studied janitorial work in college."

Garda nodded. "You might have to do it for a living," she said pointedly, indicating the bills.

Joel winced. "The audit," he said hesitantly, "she does not look so good?"

"The audit," replied Garda firmly, "she looks—how do you Americans say—rotten!" She looked at the checkbook, turning to the last stub. "When our bills are paid, we'll be about six weeks ahead of 77-B."

"Better find out how to cook a wolf," said Joel sadly. "What's happened to the rare book business, anyway? Where are the rich collectors of yesteryear?"

"We've got one," said Garda. "Christopher Oates."

"He's screwy," said Joel. "Where is he, by the way? See that, he's probably forgotten all about our appointment."

"He's just as rich as he is screwy," insisted Garda. "If you care to look at the records, sire, you will find that Mr. Oates, in his screwy way, has given us some very profitable commissions. You ought to handle him with a little more consideration, Joel."

"What do you want me to do—make love to him?" Joel slumped down in a chair. "What do you suppose happened to all that money we made out of the Brockler case? The large reward that was paid for recovering all those stolen books."

"I can tell you in three words—we spent it. The first party you threw after the check came in lasted forty days and forty nights. Most of the guests were total strangers, too. There were people there who thought it was the Lonely Hearts Ball."

Joel smiled in fond memory of the event. "It was a lovely party," he said. Then he got up, bent over his wife, and kissed her fondly. "Don't worry, dear. When things look darkest, remember that you've still got me. Maybe some insurance company will retain me soon to track down a stolen book, or an Old Master purloined from its rightful owners."

"You couldn't find a stolen ferry boat," said Garda scornfully.

"At police headquarters," replied Joel, with great dignity, "they say that Joel Sloane on a case is like sterling on silver. Just think back on my previous exploits."

Garda nodded. "And all the trouble you got yourself into. Letting perfect strangers shoot at you, as if you were a duck in a shooting gallery. Let's concentrate on Christopher Oates, Joel; he may be screwy, but he's not dangerous."

The buzzer went off just then and Garda went out into the anteroom to answer it. She greeted Christopher Oates warmly, as befitted a man with his possibilities as a customer, and politely ushered him into the private office.

THE aforementioned Oates was a medium-sized, thin, absent-minded man, who had in an absent-minded way accumulated a good many millions of dollars in the successful operation of a cross-country chain of grocery stores. *Oates for Eats* was the dynamic slogan on which this prosperity was founded.

In his declining years, when he was retired from active leadership in his firm largely because he couldn't remember from day to day where the offices were located, he had taken up the collecting of rare books. His specialty, and an expensive one, was poetry and drama of the Eliza-

bethan period—a hobby likely to drain any plutocrat's resources. As one eminent collector in this field has sadly commented, "There isn't money enough in all Hell to pay for a collection of 17th Century writings."

Oates had brought to this activity the same absent-minded zeal and enterprise which had made his name one to be feared and respected in the grocery business, and since he was possessed of apparently limitless resources, his entry into an auction room or bookshop made the proprietor jump for joy. He had warmed to Joel as an honest, able bibliophile, who had on several occasions saved him from a gypping at the hands of less scrupulous agents and dealers.

He was vague and inarticulate in speech, rather dazed in manner, and neither his clothes nor his appearance gave a hint of his imposing Dun & Bradstreet rating.

He shook hands cordially with Joel, and murmured, "Hello, Garda," then turned to Garda and said, "You're looking well, Joel."

Garda blinked, while behind Oates, Joel's expression read: *I told you so.* "Look, Mr. Oates," said Garda, "that's Joel over there. I'm Garda. See?"

"Bless my soul, so you are!" said Oates, very pleased with himself for detecting this. "So you are." He beamed. "Hello, Garda." He sat down, put his hat on the floor, stepped on it absently, then picked it up, dusted it carefully, put it down and stepped on it again. "Nice day," he said amiably.

Joel sighed. "It's snowing," he said.

"So it is," said Oates. "I meant before it started to snow." He beamed again.

"No doubt you want to buy something," said Joel hopefully.

"No," said Oates, at which the faces of the firm noticeably fell. "Not exactly, that is. I need your help, Joel."

"You shall have it. At a price."

"Money is no object," said Christopher Oates, recklessly. "Look at this." He fumbled in every one of his pockets, smiling vaguely, as he groped for "this," then finally dismissed it, and said, "Well, I'll tell you about it instead. I had a telegram this morning from Nicholas Torrent in California."

"Good for you," said Joel cordially. "Was it a birthday greeting?"

"Happy birthday to you," sang Garda lustily, "happy birthday, dear Oatesy, happy birthday to you."

"Thank you, thank you," said Oates beaming, then he frowned suddenly and said, "My birthday isn't until August 5th. . . . What is this nonsense? Oh, yes, the telegram. Well, the gist of it was that Nicholas Torrent is ready to sell his Shakespeare manuscript.'

JOEL sat upright in his chair and looked at Oates incredulously. "You're day-dreaming," he said. "Torrent schemed and planned for years to buy that manuscript and he would just as soon sell you his right eye."

"Is that so?" said Oates heatedly. "Well, I spoke to Torrent on the long distance phone and he wants to sell the manuscript."

Joel laughed scornfully, and Garda said, "What's this all about a manuscript? I'm in a complete fog."

"So is Oates," said Joel. "The manuscript he refers to so carelessly is merely the only specimen of Shakespeare's writing that exists in the whole world."

"I adore Shakespeare," said Garda soulfully. "Ah, Romeo," she quoted, "Wherefore art thou, Romeo? Let's buy it," she added very casually.

"Sure," said Joel, "as soon as we have a loose million dollars, I'll run right down to the corner and bring it back in a paper bag."

During this dialogue, Oates was chewing his fingernails in a perfect lather of excitement. "If you're through joking now," he said, "you can get your things together. We leave for California tomorrow night."

Joel looked at him intently. "Did you really talk to Torrent? You're sure it isn't a practical joke?"

Oates snorted. "Do you think I could be taken in by a joke? I spoke to Nicholas Torrent personally and he wants to sell the manuscript."

Joel's forehead puckered. "I've heard rumors," he said, "that Torrent was in hot water financially, but I never dreamed he'd sell the manuscript. Why this may be the biggest thing since Babe Ruth was sold to the Yankees.'

"Bigger than that," said Oates recklessly. He stood up and absently said, "Well, I'll send the ticket around to your apartment."

"Tickets," said Joel, "not ticket."

"One for you and one for me," said Oates. "I can't go alone on a deal this big. You'll act as my agent."

"We'll act as your agent," Joel said, indicating Garda.

Oates frowned. "What would you do with a woman on this trip?"

Joel grinned. "I'll think of something," he said.

Oates shook his head. "No," he said, "this is business. I don't want your wife along."

"As a matter of fact," said Joel pointedly, "I must have at least one wife with me all the time. No wife," he added, "no trip. No Garda, no Joel. No Joel, no sale." He folded his arms on his chest. "I have spoken," he said.

"But this is strictly business," protested Oates. "I'm not taking my wife."

"You haven't got a wife," said Garda heatedly.

Oates seemed dazed. "Well if I had a wife, I wouldn't take her."

"And I've never been to California," said Garda reproachfully.

"Come, Oates," said Joel, "be big. What's the price of one more ticket in a deal this size?"

"It isn't the money," said Oates, "I just know that you won't keep your mind on business if she goes with you. No women," he said with great finality.

"Suit yourself," said Joel, "you go out there alone and the chances are they'll skin you out of your bank account and you'll probably come home in a barrel."

"I can't understand you," said Oates. "Are you going to let this woman rob you of a chance to become famous? This Shakespeare manuscript is the most famous thing of its kind in the world. Think of the publicity! Think of the money involved!" He turned to Garda. "It would only be for two weeks," he said coaxingly.

"Now don't take advantage of my wife's good nature," said Joel. "I'm not going and that's all there is to it. You can take that Shakespeare manuscript and make paper airplanes out of it for all I care."

Garda shook her head. "You can't pass up this chance," she said soberly. "Oates is right."

"Of course I'm right," said Oates, pressing his advantage. "Your wife is a very sensible woman, Joel."

Joel looked doubtfully from Oates to Garda and said, "You really think I ought to go?"

Garda nodded.

"Alone?" asked Joel.

"You won't be alone," said Garda, "you'll have Mr. Oates for company."

Joel shuddered. "A fate worse than death," he said. "But I'll do it."

CHAPTER II

WESTWARD HO!

AS THE hour of departure drew near, Joel Sloane sat gloomily on a chair in his living room and gazed without enthusiasm at his wife who was bustling around the apartment packing last minute items. Then she came and sat on the arm of his chair.

"You're all packed now, my pioneer," she said fondly. "Shall I put a tag around your neck or will you stay sober long enough to tell the conductor where you're going?"

"I won't touch a drop," said Joel earnestly. "I'm going to sit in a corner and brood about leaving you here." He put his arm around her. "I hate like the

devil to do this," he said softly. "Curse Christopher Oates and all book collectors."

"You've got to do it," said Garda, "and anyway, it's only for two weeks."

"I'll write you every day," promised Joel, "long letters full of acute misery."

"I'll write to you too," promised Garda. "I'll tell you everything I do every day."

Joel grinned. "I hope you won't think I mistrust you," he said, "but I've hired some detectives to follow you around while I'm gone."

"I hope you hired cute ones," said Garda. "You've been watching me like a hawk ever since we were married, with the result that I barely know an unattached man." She looked at her watch. "It's pretty close to train time, darling."

"To hell with it," said Joel.

"After all my packing?" said Garda. "You'll get on that train if I have to drag you."

"I'll go," said Joel dolefully, "but my heart isn't in it. You're sure you won't come to the station with me?"

"No," said Garda. "I'll probably break into tears and make a scene at the gate. We'd better say goodbye right here."

"Let's start now," said Joel, and pulled her down on his lap. He kissed her violently.

"Why, Mr. Sloane," said Garda, obviously very pleased.

"Don't you want something to remember me by?" asked Joel wistfully.

"A lock of your hair," said Garda. "I'll wear it in a locket around my neck."

"You ought to wear me around your neck," said Joel. "I'm very becoming to you. Like a silver fox and much cheaper."

"You'll miss your train," said Garda.

"All right," said Joel, and let her go. He put his bags near the door, snuggled into his overcoat and stood in the open door with Garda. "Now remember," he said, "take good care of yourself. Don't go out without your rubbers if it's raining; get plenty of sleep, fresh air and good wholesome food." He kissed her once more and left.

Garda watched him go and when she saw the elevator door close on his farewell wave, she dashed back into the apartment and started to pull bags, apparently all packed, from the closet. She put on her coat and fixed her hat, humming blithely all the while. Then she turned to the open door when she heard a knock.

The elevator man stood there, cap in hand, and said, "The car is waiting to take you to the airport, Mrs. Sloane."

"Thanks," said Garda. "Give me a hand with these bags."

WHEN the *Chief* pulled into Los Angeles at Friday, noon, Joel was really down. Alternate waves of sorrow and remorse swept over him and he dumped his entire load of grief on Christopher Oates.

"That's a frightful thing you made me do," he said bitterly. "Just think of my poor little wife, alone in the big city. Helpless and frightened."

Even Oates was touched by that. "I'm sorry," he said. "Tell you what," and he beamed—then frowned. "I had a wonderful idea," he said, "but I've forgotten it."

Joel groaned and reached for a bottle of whisky.

"I have it," said Oates. "Tonight you can call her up—at my expense. It'll be just as if you were together."

Joel gave him a bitter look. "Sure it will," he growled.

"But you can talk to her," protested Oates. "Tell her how much you love her."

"I'd rather show her," said Joel coldly.

The porter came in for their bags which he piled in the vestibule, and then tossed them off for the descent. Joel and Oates trudged gloomily after the red-cap who carried their baggage, and when they were at the gate leading to the station proper, Joel suddenly stopped short.

"Look!" he said breathlessly. "That's marvelous!"

"I've seen it," said Oates. "I've been here before."

"That's my wife," said Joel.

He broke into a run and made the

waiting room in nothing flat. Garda was standing there, and he was too happy to ask questions. When Oates caught up to them, they were in a very close embrace.

"Somebody you know?" asked Oates politely. As he got a glimpse of Joel's partner, he stopped short. "Garda?"

"Sure," said Garda. "You remember me? The girl you left behind."

"How did you get here?" asked Oakes.

"Yes," said Joel honestly, "how did you get here?"

"I ran all the way from New York," said Garda. "Look how heavily I'm breathing." She looked at Joel's concerned countenance. "Oh, darling, don't be mad. Just as you walked out, by a lucky coincidence, I found an airplane ticket in my purse. Then I looked in the closet and the seven dwarfs must have packed all my bags while I slept, so I did the natural thing and got on the plane."

"Followed me, eh?" Joel glared. Then he grabbed her and hugged her tight. "Let that be a lesson to you," he said sternly.

Oates groaned. "Exactly what I was afraid of. Now that you've got her, you won't even think of business."

"Sure I will," said Joel, "soon as we finish the celebration."

"Nothing doing," said Oates. "We've got to call up the Torrents right away."

"We'll call them," said Joel. "There'll probably be a telephone booth in the bar."

"You're going to call the Torrents this minute," said Oates, sternly. "Then we'll all go somewhere and have a cup of tea to refresh us after the journey."

Joel grinned. "All right," he said, "I'll make the call and then we'll go and have tea. But I warn you," he said, "that the tea is going to taste an awful lot like scotch and soda."

They walked together to the telephone desk. Joel got the number of the Torrent house, then disappeared into a booth.

"NOW, Gerald," said Mrs. Nicholas Torrent to her only son, "I've given you all the money I can spare this month. You'll simply have to wait now."

Gerald Torrent was a tall, handsome, young man in his early thirties but his face betrayed many evidences of weakness. His mouth was now set in a sullen and surly line.

"I can't wait," he said. "I've got to have the money right away."

"Surely you can wait a month or two," said Mrs. Torrent plaintively. "Just scrape along on your allowance somehow and as soon as I can manage it I'll let you have a few thousand dollars."

Gerald paced the floor nervously, "I'm in trouble," he said abruptly, "I need a lot of money—I need it right away."

"You've been gambling again," said his mother reproachfully.

Gerald flared up, "What if I have!"

"But you always lose," protested his mother mildly. "How much do you owe Nolan this time?" she asked with a sigh.

Gerald looked down at the floor and swallowed nervously. "Fifty thousand dollars," he said.

Mrs. Torrent blinked. "Fifty thousand dollars?" she repeated. "How on earth could you lose that much?"

"Because I had rotten luck," growled Gerald. "Now, don't lecture me, Mother, because it's too late. I've lost the money and I've got to pay."

"Can't you talk to Nolan?" said his mother. "Surely he will wait a little while. Your father is planning to sell the Shakespeare manuscript, you know; and that should bring a great deal of money."

"We'll never see a cent of that," said Gerald bitterly.

"Now, Gerald," said Mrs. Torrent placatingly, "don't talk like that. Your father plainly promised me that when this manuscript was sold he would let me have a portion of the money for my own expenses."

"He's got other ideas now," said Gerald. "He and Vincent Charlton are making plans this minute to use this end of the money for his business."

"Are you sure?" asked Mrs. Torrent.

"Positive," snapped Gerald.

"I'll talk to him,' said his mother thoughtfully. Her wan, thin fingers drummed restlessly on the arm of her chair. "We've a right to part of the money," she said. "I'm sure your father will do the fair thing, Gerald."

"Well I'm not," said Gerald hotly.

"I don't want you to do anything rash," said Mrs. Torrent uneasily. "I countenanced your taking some books from the library because you were in a great deal of trouble but I don't want you to take the manuscript."

"Would you rather see it go to strangers?" snapped Gerald. "and never see a penny of the money?"

"No," said his mother firmly. "I'll have a talk with your father and find out exactly what he intends to do."

"Don't say a word," said Gerald. "I've got an idea that will get me all the money I'll need, pay off Nolan, and Father can still sell the manuscript."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mrs. Torrent.

Gerald smiled. He seemed sure of himself now and his mood was one of complete geniality. "I'll tell you later," he said, patting his mother affectionately on the shoulder. "I want to go downtown and see Nolan right away."

He started for the door and his mother called after him, "Gerald, I'm worried. I want you to tell me this minute what you're up to."

Gerald smiled fondly on her. "Now don't give it a thought," he said. "Our troubles are just about over."

VINCENT CHARLTON leaned back in his chair, a drink balanced in his lean, strong hands. Seated on the other side of the desk between them, Nicholas Torrent was talking on the phone and Charlton walked idly around the library. It was a high-ceilinged room with no windows other than the French doors which opened directly onto the terrace; and, since the desk was a good distance from this only source of illumination, they sat in a rather restful gloom.

Charlton was a thin, wiry individual, carefully dressed in neat, rather sober, clothes. His forehead was quite high and thick. Graying hair was brushed sharply away from this. His features were thin and patrician but determined.

Nicholas Torrent said, "Very well, Mr. Sloane," into the telephone. "We'll expect you and Mr. Oates tomorrow afternoon—goodbye." He replaced the telephone on its stand and turned to Charlton. "Well, I've just been talking to the first of the customers, Vincent."

Charlton frowned. "You're actually going through with the sale of the manuscript?"

"If I can get my price," said Torrent, "or anything near it."

"The thing that worries me," said Charlton thoughtfully, "is the effect of this sale on outsiders. It's such a precious thing that a great deal of publicity will be given the transfer of ownership. In business circles the natural conclusion will be that you need money."

Torrent smiled sadly. "I do," he said quietly. He was a tall, robust man, more than six feet tall, and heavy even for this generous height.

"Have you thought of a loan?" asked Charlton.

"Not only thought of it, Vincent—but I've borrowed—quite a bit—more than I can pay."

Charlton shook his head sadly. "That's too bad," he said. "I know how much you love your books and what the ownership of that manuscript has meant to you. Let me make you a loan—or let *me* buy it from you and leave it in your possession."

"Thanks, Vincent," said Torrent with a grateful smile, "but I need too much. I expect to get half a million dollars for the manuscript and even that won't clear me entirely but if I spread it around it will keep my creditors patient until there's a turn in the market."

Charlton whistled softly. "I didn't know you were in that deep," he said thoughtfully.

The library door opened just then and a tall, slim, lovely girl of perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three came in. She wore a riding habit, carried a crop, and she rapped sharply on the desk with this as she came up. Both Charlton and Torrent rose. Torrent put his arm around the girl's shoulder and said: "Hello, Chris."

Christina Torrent said, "Hello, Dad." She smiled at Charlton and said, "Hello, Mr. Charlton." Then she turned back to her father and severely said, "Business is over for the day. You're coming for a ride with me."

"I can't," said Torrent. "Vincent and I have some business to talk about."

"I'm not going to like having you for a father-in-law," said Chris to Charlton. "You'll be dragging Phil away from me to talk business."

"I'll try not to," said Charlton.

Torrent said, "Run along, Chris and perhaps I'll join you later. Possibly Gerald can ride with you," he added.

"Gerald just took the car and dashed off to the city. It doesn't matter," she said, "I'll go alone." She waved to both men and went out.

When the library door was closed, Torrent stared at it for a moment, then sighed and turned back to Charlton. "She's a grand girl," he said.

"Both my son and I agree with you," said Charlton promptly.

"Are you bringing him down this weekend?" asked Torrent.

"I don't see how I can keep him away," said Charlton with a smile. "He moons around the office like a sick calf for a full day before and after every date he has with Chris."

Torrent grinned. "Young love," he said. Then he frowned. "I'm afraid this won't be a very pleasant weekend for me."

"I guess not," said Charlton. "Do you want me to act for you in the negotiations with these people?"

"If it isn't too painful a task," said Torrent.

"Of course not," Charlton replied. "I'll do anything I can—you know that."

Torrent smiled. "Thanks," he said. "I expect Henry Durant in from Chicago and Christopher Oates is coming down with his agent. I rather expect Oates will be the customer. He's a very rich man and terribly keen about his library."

Charlton nodded. "I know something about Oates. Isn't he rather an eccentric?"

"He's an extremely rich one," said Torrent with a smile. "Frankly," he continued, "I would much rather deal with him than with Durant. Durant has the means to buy the manuscript but he's extremely sharp and given to sly, underhand practices of which I don't approve."

Charlton stood up. "We'll talk the whole thing over tomorrow. I'll be down for lunch and we can make our plans before the others arrive."

THE Torrent's ancient, quavery butler was waiting at the door with Vincent Charlton's somber bowler hat, out of place in the warm sunshine which bathed the terraced lawns of the estate. Charlton took the hat, and asked, "Where is Mrs. Torrent, Craddock?"

"In her room, I believe."

"Thank you." Charlton turned to the stairs.

"Shall I announce you, sir."

"Never mind."

Charlton went up the stairs. He knocked at the door and, at Mrs. Torrent's languid, "Come in," he opened the door and stepped in.

"Hello, Grace."

"Oh, it's you." She didn't seem pleased.

Charlton came further into the room, and stood by a chair near the lounge on which his hostess was reclining. "May I sit down?"

A polite gesture indicated that it was all the same to Mrs Torrent.

Charlton sat down, put his hat on his knees, and said, "This is very difficult for me, but I felt that as a friend of the family and one who has known you all for so many ye—"

"What do you want?" asked Mrs. Torrent bluntly.

Charlton twisted his hat-brim in both hands. "The other day," he began, " a dealer offered me a book—"

"You know books don't interest me," said Grace Torrent, pained. "Why don't you talk to Nicholas about it?"

"I think that when I've finished you'll be glad I haven't," said Charlton coldly.

Mrs. Torrent looked at him narrowly.

"The book I was offered," said Charlton, "was an early English psalm book. Not terribly valuable, but worth possibly a thousand dollars. It was offered to me at $400.00. I bought it. Then I learned it came from the library downstairs."

"From this library? You're sure?" Grace Torrent looked away nervously after she asked the question.

Charlton nodded gravely, "I'm sure. My first impulse was to notify the police, but then I determined to talk to you first."

"Why?"

"I traced the book to a dealer I have seen in Gerald's company."

Hatred and resentment flared up in her face as Grace Torrent heard this. She stood up, her hostess gown trailing behind her. "What if a miserable book was sold from the library? Must we sacrifice everything to keep that gloomy pile of books intact?"

"Did you sell the book?" asked Charlton pointedly.

She bit her lips. "No, it was Gerald. But I thought the poor boy did exactly the right thing. Nicholas has been unbearable about money the last few months, and the poor boy simply had to have some cash."

"I happen to know," said Charlton stiffly, "that Gerald's allowance is quite ample. Is he in any trouble?"

"Of course not. He had to have some money . . . for his clothes, his clubs, and the poor boy wanted to take a little trip."

The words "poor boy" were beginning to grate on Charlton now. "Gerald is past thirty," he said wryly. He sighed. "How many books have been stolen?"

Mrs. Torrent flared up. "How dare you say a thing like that? The books are Gerald's as much as they are anybody's."

"How many has he taken?" asked Charlton quietly.

"It's none of your business."

"Very well." Charlton stood up and turned away.

"Wait."

He turned back again. "Only a few," said Grace Torrent plaintively. "Not really valuable books and what difference can a few books make in that enormous library?"

Charlton nodded. "We feel differently about these things, Grace. You may count on my discretion, but I need not add that I would urgently advise Gerald to seek some other means of augmenting his income." He bowed. "Good day, Grace."

MR. NOLAN'S private office, in a separate wing of his up-to-date emporium of chance, was hardly typical of professional gamblers. It was a large, carefully furnished room, and everything in it was in very good taste. Notably strange, in such an office, were the two large bookcases, the books within being obviously of a very expensive nature.

Francis Xavier Nolan, as his pious parents named him, was known to the customers and the trade as "Lucky" Nolan. He was a thin, medium-sized man, of wiry build. His features were lean, and attractive in a hard way. As incongruous as the books in his office, were the horn-rimmed, professorial glasses he wore. He had thick, greying hair which was combed back sharply from the high forehead. In general his appearance was that of a second-rate professor in a second-rate college, and his plain, unfashionable clothes accented this type. He leaned back in his chair now, completely at ease, in marked contrast to Gerald Torrent, who was markedly nervous and self-conscious.

"I tell you," said Gerald, "I've done everything I can to get the money!"

"Apparently not," said Nolan, "or you'd have it."

"I'll get it," said Gerald. "You've got to give me time."

Nolan's voice was smooth as silk. "When gentlemen win money in my rooms, Mr. Torrent, they take their chips to my cashier and whether it's a dollar or fifty thousand dollars, I pay cash." He paused. "When gentlemen lose—I expect cash."

"I got in too deep," said Gerald.

"You might get in deeper," snapped Nolan. "Six feet deeper."

Gerald caught his breath suddenly.

"One of the most serious diseases a man can have in this town," said Nolan, "is welshing. In nearly all the cases, it turns out to be fatal."

"I tell you I'll pay," said Gerald. He hunched forward over the desk, and said, "I'll get it somehow. I'll have it in a couple of weeks."

"How?" asked Nolan coldly.

"I'm going to see Clifford," said Gerald. "He's helped me get rid of some books, and now I've got something big."

"What?" asked Nolan.

Gerald hesitated. "That Shakespeare manuscript," he said. "I know how to get hold of it."

Nolan looked at him with a pitying, contemptuous smile. "You damn fool, you might as well steal Yellowstone Park. What do you think you'll do with it after you get it?"

"It's insured," said Gerald. "The insurance company would lose four hundred thousand dollars if anything happened to it."

Nolan's smile faded, and he looked genuinely interested now. "Say," he said slowly, "that's not a bad idea."

"You see," said Gerald eagerly, "I'll have the money for you in no time."

Nolan nodded. "I'll wait a while."

Gerald stood up. "Thanks, Lucky," he said gratefully. "You'll see, I'm not a welsher."

"I hope not," said Nolan, and added, "for your sake."

Gerald winced, and extended his hand. After a moment's hesitation, Nolan took it. Then Gerald took his hat and went out.

CHAPTER III

THE LADY KNOWS HER PLACE

IN THE living-room of their suite, the next morning, Garda was busy pouting. Joel standing near the window was knotting his tie and putting the finishing touches to a speech.

"Now that you're in California, Mrs. Sloane," he said, "I want to remind you that you made the trip by some very underhanded methods, and in conclusion, let me say—mind your own business."

"As if I ever do anything else," said Garda hotly.

"As if you ever do anything but not," said Joel. And as he saw Garda's lower lip trembling, he softened and said, "Now, honey, I'd like to take you down to Santa Barbara for the weekend, but Oates and I've got a big deal to pull off and he would have ten fits if I dragged you along."

"I hope you boys will be very happy," said Garda icily.

"Now that's a very unreasonable attitude," said Joel.

Garda beamed. "I was only fooling, darling. I wouldn't think of asking you to take me for the weekend. As a matter of fact, all the major studios are fighting to give me screen tests and by the time you come home on Monday, I'll be a big star with a salary that runs well into two figures."

Joel said, "I don't believe in careers for women. A woman's place is in the home. . . . If you see what I mean."

Garda smiled. "You're a beast," she said cheerfully. And as Joel came over and sat down on the edge of the bed, she said, "Now don't worry about me. I won't give you any trouble on this trip. I'll do just as I'm told, and I wouldn't dream of interfering with your business trip."

Joel looked at her suspiciously.

"Don't you trust me?" asked Garda plaintively.

"In one word," said Joel, "no."

"Now that's a very unreasonable attitude," said Garda and might have said

more, but Christopher Oates broke into the room then, out of breath, and terribly agitated.

"Joel! Garda! Everybody! Guess who I just saw downstairs in the lobby?" he asked.

"How many tries do I get?" asked Joel.

"My guess," said Garda, "is that you don't remember now who it was you saw in the lobby."

Oates looked pained and then bewildered. "Of course I remember. Let me see it was . . . it was . . ." He hesitated completely at a loss, but then it came to him. "Henry Durant," he said.

"Congratulations," said Joel cordially.

"But you don't understand. I mean Henry Durant, the collector. He must be on his way to Torrents' to buy the manuscript."

"Not if we buy it first," said Joel sagely.

"But Durant has millions."

"So have we," said Garda. "You can toss a coin to see who gets the manuscript."

Oates slumped down despondently in a chair. "I don't like the idea of having Durant around while we're doing business with Torrent," he complained. "He's a dreadful sharper, plays all sorts of dirty tricks, and I've just got a feeling that he'll queer it for us somehow."

"Be calm," said Joel. "Torrent will probably have every collector and dealer in the world bidding for that piece but you've got something none of the others have."

"Really? What?"

"You've got me," said Joel calmly.

There was a mocking noise from Garda and Joel turned to look at her. She was putting on her hat.

"Where are you going?" asked Joel.

"Out for a walk," said Garda airily. "Is Oates telling the truth, Joel? Is this Durant really such a heel?"

Joel nodded. "He's a pretty shifty customer and I've seen him do some pretty dirty things at auctions and sales but I'll take care of Mr. Durant personally."

Garda said, "Well, I'll be running along."

"I'll go too," said Joel.

Oates said, "No, you can't go. You've got to stay here with me so we can talk over our plans."

Reluctantly Joel nodded. "I hate to admit it, but he's right. Will you be back before we leave for the weekend, Garda?"

"Maybe," said Garda. "Don't wait for me though. Goodbye, boys." She went out and closed the door.

Oates turned to Joel. "What's wrong? She seemed a little peeved."

"Just hurt, I guess," said Joel, "because we wouldn't take her to the country for the weekend."

"This is a man's job," said Oates firmly. "Especially with Henry Durant down there for competition. We'll have to be thinking of business every minute."

"I could learn to loathe a man like you," said Joel with marked distaste, but he pulled up a chair and sat down with Oates to thrash out their plans for the campaign.

Down in the lobby of the hotel, Garda was talking to the clerk at the desk.

"Let me see," said the clerk. "Mr. Durant is about fifty-five, I guess, tall, and pretty heavy-set. He was wearing a— Why, there he is now. Just coming out of the café!" He motioned to a man who answered the description pretty well, moving toward the door. He was alone.

"Thanks," said Garda. She took her compact from her purse and made a few fleeting retouches, then moved in the direction of the enemy. As she passed Durant, apparently unaware of his existence, she dropped her purse. She bent down for it immediately, but the Midwest plutocrat was quick on the draw. He came up with the purse, just as Garda straightened up with a grateful smile.

"Thank you."

"Not at all," said Durant, raising his hat.

Garda took the purse and with a winning smile, went to the revolving door. As she

went through, she dropped a glove on the lobby floor. Mr. Durant was after it like a bloodhound.

THEIR discussion concluded, Christopher Oates retired to his own room to pack, while Joel moped around the suite wondering what had become of Garda. He had a drink, which told him nothing, and was rather disconsolately throwing some things into a bag for the weekend when there was a knock on the door.

"Coming," sang out Joel enthusiastically, but his mood was dashed to earth when he opened the door and found on the threshold not Garda, but a tall, rangy individual, who said, in a matter of fact tone, "Joel Sloane?"

Joel nodded, holding the door wide open.

His visitor stepped in. "My name's Hilliard," he explained. "Joe Hilliard. I'm with the Great Western Insurance Company out here."

"Welcome," said Joel heartily. "In a way, I'm one of your own boys."

Hilliard nodded. "We've paid out enough money to make you one of the family."

"Drink?" asked Joel.

"I never touch the stuff," said Hilliard briefly, and walking to the table where the whisky was on tap, he poured himself three of Primo Carnera's fingers.

"Neither do I," said Joel, and had one, too. "How did you know where I was?" he asked.

"Our New York office wired me. You're out here to make a bid for Torrent's Shakespeare manuscript, aren't you?"

Joel frowned.

"It's okay," said Hilliard. "We carry the insurance on the whole library—five hundred thousand on the manuscript alone."

"I'll touch a match to it for you," promised Joel.

Hilliard grinned. "Ordinarily, we make Torrent keep it in a vault, but he took it out yesterday and had it sent up to the house. It's a nice place, you'll have a good time up there."

"Thanks," said Joel. "I know you'll pardon my bluntness, but have you got anything up your sleeve?"

"I'm a little worried about the Torrent library," admitted Hilliard. "Naturally, I'd hate to see anything happen to that manuscript, or any of the other books we carry insurance on, so I don't mind telling you I was relieved when I found out you'd be down there while the manuscript was on display."

"Have you had a loss lately?"

"We didn't pay anything, but I think the library is short a few books. Just a hunch. There's a collector out here, a friend of Torrent's, who bought an early English psalm book recently and sent us instructions to add it on the itemized schedule. Well, we turned it over to the fellow who values this stuff for us out here, and he reported it as being identical with a copy we had insured for Torrent. I went to see Charlton myself. He didn't seem to like the story much and told us to forget the whole thing."

"Did you?" asked Joel politely.

"Sure. I just happened to think of it this minute. Here's a little background on the Torrent family. The old man, Nicholas Torrent, is an ace. A swell guy, and right now he's in financial hot-water up to his—"

"Ears," suggested Joel.

"Up to his ears," assented Hilliard. "I suppose you guessed that much since he's selling his pride and joy, that manuscript." Joel nodded.

"There's a son, too. A lovely, upstanding boy, with hardly any vices except liquor, gambling, and women."

"Doesn't use snuff?" asked Joel. "That's nice."

"My guess is that he popped the book from his old man's library."

"You ought to be sure," said Joel chidingly. "When this friend of Torrent's sent you the book, didn't he send along a bill, or any other proof of purchase?"

"No. We've done business a long time

and we waive these things in little items. This only came to a few hundred dollars. When he knew it was hot, he wouldn't say a word about where it came from."

"Who are the crooked book dealers out here?" asked Joel.

"One of them," said Hilliard, "is a guy named George Clifford. Now get this: He and Gerald have been palling around lately."

"I'm only an apprentice sleuth," said Joel, "but damn, if that doesn't sound like a case to me."

"You're way overboard," said Hilliard. "As long as nobody makes a claim, it's none of my business if Gerald swipes a book or two. We'd never have to pay on it even if the old man does know what's going on because he wouldn't want us prosecuting his son and heir."

"Have a drink," said Joel. "Then get to the point."

Hilliard poured himself one. "We've done you favors, you do us one. The company will feel much better if somebody down there this weekend is keeping a sharp eye out for that manuscript."

Joel said, "I'll use my sharpest eye."

Hilliard stood up. "That's good enough for me. Say, you're in this racket, what the hell makes it so valuable? I looked at it once when it was in the vault and it was just two dirty sheets of old paper with some screwy writing."

"It's the only scrap of Shakespearean manuscript in the world," said Joel. "Any collector would give his eyeteeth to own it."

"Well, I guess it takes all kinds to make a world," said Hilliard reaching for his hat. "You won't forget about keeping that eye on what goes on, will you?"

"Listen," said Joel. "If anything happens to that manuscript I'll pay you out of my own pocket." He put his hand in his pocket, frowned, and added, "I say, old man, could you let me have about two dollars for expenses?"

"You're a funny guy," said Hilliard dourly. "Here's my phone number—home and office."

Joel took the card and walked to the door with his guest.

WITH his sixth Martini, Henry Durant became exceedingly voluble, and really warmed up. "I'm going to get that manuscript if I have to buy the whole library, the house, the grounds and the shrubbery," he thundered, pounding on the table with a heavy fist. "These Eastern wise-guys won't even have a look-in."

"Bravo!" said Garda cordially. She lifted her glass. "Drink up, Hank."

"You're a very sweet little girl," said Durant gravely, and raised his glass. "What time is it?"

Garda looked at her watch. It was 2:15. "One o'clock," she said. "You've got plenty of time."

"I want to get down there ahead of Christopher Oates," said Durant confidentially. "The porter tipped me off that he and his agent are leaving at three."

"His agent?" asked Garda.

"That Oates is such a dope he hasn't got brains enough to open a window," said Durant scornfully, "so he carries around some guy named Sloane—he's a detective, or something."

"You mean Joel Sloane," said Garda. "I've heard of him. Detective!" She laughed scornfully. "He couldn't catch Man Mountain Dean in a telephone booth."

"That's rich!" said Durant, roaring his amusement. "I'll tell him that when I meet him down at Torrent's."

"Sure," said Garda. She signaled a passing waiter. "Two more," she ordered. Then she turned back to Durant. "You're not going to let this guy Sloane get in ahead of you, are you?"

"I should say not," said Durant emphatically. "I've got a little scheme cooked up that will put him in hot water the minute he gets there. I doubt if Torrent will even let him in the house."

"You're a pretty cute article," said Garda.

As Durant turned his head for a moment she poured her own drink in a potted

palm, then summoned the waiter again.

"Two more Martinis," she ordered. "Make them strong."

DR. BLAYLOCK'S Rest Home was on the outskirts of Los Angeles, shielded from the outside world by a high, stone wall. As the taxi pulled up through the curving driveway to the main entrance, a uniformed orderly came down the steps and opened the door. Garda Sloane stepped out, dejected, dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"Are you the lady that phoned up about her husband, lady?" asked the attendant.

Garda nodded, her frame racked by obviously phony sobs, and pointed to the interior of the cab where Henry Durant was stretched out. The orderly looked at him closely, to make sure he wasn't dead, then motioned to another man on the stairs. "Hey, Joe, gimme a hand with this package."

The other man came down, together they got Durant out of the cab and negotiated him up the stairs and into a waiting room. Dr. Blaylock was waiting there, and when he saw Durant and Garda he made, "Tsk-tsk-tsk."

"And tsk!" said Garda vehemently.

"You poor girl," said the doctor tenderly.

"Oh, Doctor," said Garda. "Nobody knows what I've been through. The demon rum has taken complete possession of my poor husband. He tries and tries and tries, but he just can't leave the horrid stuff alone."

"We will save him for a useful life," said the Doctor piously. "Just fill out this card."

"I want to warn you," said Garda, reaching for a pen, "that in this condition his mind wanders—he has the delusion that he has to go somewhere in a hurry."

"Not an uncommon reaction," said the doctor. "I can promise you that he won't go anywhere for fourteen days, at any rate."

"Oh, doctor, thank you so much." Garda passed the card across the desk, then stood up and looked down sadly at the prone figure of Henry Durant. "Oh, Wilmer," she said softly, and dabbed at her eyes again.

"There, there," said the doctor consolingly. "He'll be all right."

As if to offer his own reassurance, Durant began to snore.

"My poor Humphrey," said Garda.

Dr. Blaylock jerked. "Humphrey!"

Garda caught herself. "I mean Wilmer. Humphrey is just a pet name I have for the poor darling.

"Oh. But on the card his name is Henry?"

"Short for Humphrey," explained Garda. She stood over the body of Durant, pulled her corsage of gardenias from her dress and dropped it tenderly on Durant's chest. "Farewell," she said solemnly, and walked out, her head bowed.

CHAPTER IV

FAMILY PORTRAIT

THE Torrent family, complete but for Gerald, was having tea on the broad terrace that overlooked the rolling lawns of the estate, and as was not unusual when husband and wife were together, the conversation had taken on a wrangling tone.

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Torrent stiffly, "that I try to be a gracious hostess at all times. I'm sure it isn't too much to ask that I be at least notified when you are expecting guests."

"I've told you, Grace," said Torrent wearily, "that it slipped my mind. These people are coming on business. A matter about the library."

"More books, I suppose." His wife sniffed.

"No, my dear," said Torrent. "As a matter of fact, I may sell some things."

"High time," said Mrs. Torrent. "It's rather selfish of you, Nicholas, to subject your entire family to all sorts of petty economies rather than sell a single

book from that horrid library of yours."

"Have you been economizing, Grace?" asked Torrent dryly. "I wouldn't have thought so from the size of the bills I got this month."

"I have certain expenses," said Mrs. Torrent stiffly.

"Eight hats," said Torrent, "six pairs of shoes, and Lord only knows how many dresses." He was aroused now. "I must congratulate Gerald on his own self-control, too. A liquor dealer downtown called me today about a bad check Gerald signed for some two hundred dollars."

"Leave Gerald out of this," said Mrs. Torrent hotly. "What if he—"

"Did somebody mention my name?" said Gerald coolly, advancing on the group from behind.

"Yes," said Torrent hotly. "I want to know what you mean by—"

"Father!" said Christina pleadingly.

Torrent hesitated, glaring at his son, then shifted his glance and picked up his tea again. Gerald sat down and said, "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Torrent. "Tea, Gerald?"

Gerald shook his head, and Mrs. Torrent, in rather placating tones, said, "How many of these book-dealer persons are coming, Nicholas?"

"Three," said Torrent mildly. "A Mr. Christopher Oates, his agent, Mr. Sloane, and I imagine Henry Durant, whom you know, will be along soon."

"Oates?" said Mrs. Torrent, with interest. "Christopher Oates, the grocery millionaire?"

Torrent nodded.

"Only three men," Mrs. Torrent turned to Gerald. "We'll have plenty of room for your friend, Gerald."

Gerald shifted his gaze uncomfortably. His mother seemed surprised.

"Have you invited someone here this weekend? demanded Torrent.

Gerald's gaze shifted to his mother, whom he sent an imploring look.

"Surely, Nicholas, the boy can invite his friends to his own home."

"I particularly requested you," said Torrent coldly, "not to ask anyone here this weekend."

"But, Father," protested Gerald. "You'll like this chap. He's a book dealer."

"A book dealer?" repeated Torrent, ominously.

"Sure. His name is George Clifford. He has a shop downtown in Los Angeles."

"Damn it!" said Torrent passionately. "How on earth I ever had a blockhead like you for a son is beyond me."

Gerald squirmed uncomfortably, and Grace Torrent was about to take up the cudgels for her son when Christina spied Vincent Charlton, and his son, Phil, coming out on the terrace from the house.

"Please!" she whispered, as she waved to them, "not in front of Mr. Charlton and Phil. Please, Daddy."

Still glaring at Gerald, Torrent subsided. Chris got up to greet the newcomers, especially Phil Charlton, who was a man of about twenty-eight. The type of rich man's son who could make a girl forget about his money.

THE car in which Joel and Oates traversed the road to Santa Barbara was making very good time. Joel sat rather despondently in his own corner of the roomy tonneau, not trying very hard to make conversation. Oates sat up, bright and alert, a notebook in his hand, and every once in a while he jotted down something.

'What on earth are you doing?" asked Joel finally.

"Jotting down good locations for grocery stores," said Oates finally. "In my organization I am known as—" He fumbled for what he was known as, then triumphantly said, "as the best location picker in the firm."

"Good grief!" said Joel. "Don't you ever forget business?"

"Not for a minute," said Oates.

"You forget everything else, though."

"Not business. I think of business every minute. You ought to do the same thing, and that's why I insisted that we leave

Garda behind. She's a nice girl, and you know I'm fond of her, but when she's around you don't think of anything but—"

Their car lurched suddenly, as a large sedan shot by them perilously close, and their driver swerved to avoid an accident. In the car ahead, the lone occupant of the back seat, turned with her face to the rear window, and waved.

"Fool women," said Oates irritably, picking himself up. "There ought to be a law to—"

"That's my wife!" cried Joel excitedly.

"What?"

Sure enough, the car ahead was pulling over to the roadside, and slowing up.

"Stop!" called Joel to the driver, and they pulled up behind the other car.

Garda, very cool and poised, was already out of the other car, walking back toward them. "What are you doing here?" he asked coldly. "Where are you going?"

"Santa Barbara," said Garda airily, "a resort on the Pacific Ocean which is famous for its—"

"Now look here, Garda," said Oates. "We can't take you, and that's final."

"He's right," said Joel. "Now you turn your car around and go right back to the hotel."

Garda smiled indulgently. "I happen to represent Mr. Henry Durant, the well-known Midwestern bibliophile. What's more," she added, patting her purse, "I have the papers to prove it."

Joel looked at her with a gleam of interest. "Where's Durant? What did you do to him?"

"Nothing," said Garda. "He expired a short time ago from natural causes. I held him in my arms before he died, and above the battle's roar he whispered to me, 'Garda, see that those Eastern slobs do not get the manuscript.' " She winked at Joel. "Those were his last words."

"And he's not coming to Torrent's?" asked Oates gleefully.

"Not for fourteen days," said Garda. "It'll take that long to get all the gin pumped out of him."

"Good for you!" cried Oates.

Joel opened his arms wide. "Come to papa," he said, with a grin.

Garda made it in one jump.

WHILE Nicholas Torrent signed the mail which his secretary had laid out for him, he chatted casually with Vincent Charlton who sat in a chair nearby. "No sign of Durant as yet?" he asked.

"Haven't heard a word," said Charlton. "Oates is on his way, however, with agent and unless I miss my guess, he's pretty anxious to buy."

"I hope so," said Torrent. He signed the last letter, gathered up the mail and pushed it toward his secretary.

Arnold Wilkes was a neat, retiring little man in his middle forties but horn-rimmed glasses and a thin face gave him an appearance older than his years. He picked up the letters but did not move away from the desk. He stood there uneasily, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and as he coughed discreetly, Torrent looked up.

"What is it, Wilkes?" he asked pleasantly.

Wilkes looked pained. "I see that the manuscript has been brought from the vault," he said uneasily, shooting a glance at the open door of the wall safe. "And I heard you talking about a customer."

Torrent looked at him narrowly. "Well?" he asked.

"I just wondered," stammered Wilkes, "if you were going to—that is I mean—" he hesitated again, then burst out. "Is it the manuscript you're selling?"

Torrent frowned. "Why do you ask, Wilkes?"

The little man stepped closer to the desk, and the passion and sincerity in his voice seemed to lend him stature. "You can't do it, sir," he said. "You can't sell it."

Torrent seemed startled and Vincent Charlton stood upright in his chair eyeing the little librarian curiously.

"It belongs here," continued Wilkes. "It's not like a house, a block of stock or a thoroughbred horse that you can

sell in cold blood to raise money. It's part of our library." And he stressed the word *our*.

"*Our* library," replied Torrent coldly. "Aren't you forgetting yourself, Wilkes?"

The little man glared, then crumpled under Torrent's icy gaze. "Yes sir," he said meekly. "Sorry, sir." He turned and shuffled from the room.

Torrent stared after him and Vincent Charlton too sat in a thoughtful silence. "I'm amazed," said Torrent finally. "Did you hear the little beggar tick me off?"

"Startling," said his friend. "I never thought Wilkes had gumption enough to talk above a whisper."

"I suppose it's only natural," said Torrent indulgently. "He's been my secretary and librarian from the day I started to collect books. He probably feels the manuscript is as much his as mine."

"He's an odd chap," said Charlton drily.

The library door opened just then and Craddock entered to announce the arrival of Mr. George Clifford.

"Clifford," repeated Torrent vaguely, and then noticed that Charlton was staring at him quite openly. "Oh, yes," said Torrent, "Mr. Clifford. Show him to his room, Craddock and tell Mr. Gerald he has arrived."

Craddock said, "Very good, sir," and withdrew closing the door.

"George Clifford here?" asked Charlton when they were alone.

"A friend of Gerald's," said Torrent.

"He's a book dealer, you know," said Charlton.

Torrent nodded. "So I heard," he said glumly.

"Did you also hear that he hasn't a very good reputation in the trade?" asked Charlton.

Torrent snorted. "I shouldn't think so being a friend of Gerald's," he said. "Still it was easier to let him come than to have a row about it."

"Yes," said Charlton, "I can see that." He looked off through the doors opening onto the terrace and said, "There's a car coming up the drive. That must be Oates and his party."

"Let's go out then," said Torrent, and stood up.

"MY, AIN'T it big?" said Garda ungrammatically as she alighted from the car. "Looks a lot like Grand Central Station."

"Just a little shack," said Joel deprecatingly. "Why it only has two ballrooms."

Garda sniffed. "Social climbers," said Garda.

Oates clutched at Joel's sleeve. "That must be the library," he said excitedly, pointing to the small stone building adjoining the main house.

Craddock appeared with two footmen to help with the baggage, and behind him Joel saw Torrent and Vincent Charlton coming down the stairs.

"The butler looks like a fugitive from an embalming college," whispered Garda.

"Quiet," warned Joel. "Here comes our host."

Torrent came up and extended his hand first to Oates. "I'm Nicholas Torrent," he said cordially. "Mr. Oates, I believe."

"No," said Oates, promptly as he shook hands. Then caught himself, "I mean yes. Yes, of course." A little flustered, he turned to Garda and said, "May I present Mr. Oates, Mrs. Sloane." Then caught himself again and said, "May I present Mrs. Sloane, Mr. Oates." Then gave the whole thing up and let Joel introduce himself and Garda while Torrent did his best not to laugh out loud.

They went up on the terrace where Christina Torrent and Phillip Charlton were sitting and were introduced there too.

"You'll want to wash up, I presume," said Torrent.

"If you can spare a little water," said Joel, "that would be nice."

Torrent laughed and said, "Craddock will show you to your rooms. Dinner is at eight. Black tie," he added.

"What did he mean, black tie?" whis-

pered Oates as they went into the house.

"He meant black tie," said Garda.

"Black tie," said Joel, "get it?" prodding him in the ribs.

CHAPTER V

BEFORE THE HORSE IS STOLEN

"LIKE my dress," Garda asked Joel who was working on the black tie specified by their host.

Joel turned around and blinked. "Is that all of it?" asked Joel.

"It's very fashionable," said Garda, "and quite modest."

"In comparison with a bubble, I guess it is." As an afterthought, he added, "How much?"

Garda told him and he winced.

"Why don't you pin all those dollar bills on yourself. It would be cheaper and there would be less exposure."

"Stop nagging," said Garda. "I can remember when you screamed like an eagle if I wore a dress that cost less than eighty-three fifty."

"That was long ago," said Joel. "I'm tired of you now. How's my tie?"

Garda looked at it critically. "A very nice Buster Brown effect," she told him. "Bend down and let me have a whack at it."

"No strangling," Joel cautioned her.

While she worked at the knot with deft, practiced fingers, he said, "The daughter is a very nice girl. I wonder if she's married."

"Don't let that stop you," said Garda curtly.

"It won't," he assured her. The tie tied he straightened up. "Thanks. Seriously though, I'm much more interested in the son."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Scientifically," said Joel with a grin. "I've heard some interesting things about that boy. His name is Gerald and when he's a little short of cash, he steals books from his father's library."

"Very nice," said Garda. "Does he pull the wings off butterflies?"

"Probably," said Joel. He told her about the visit from Joe Hilliard of the insurance company and of his promise to keep an eye on things at the Torrent home.

"I knew it," said Garda wearily. "We're not in the house a full hour and you've got a mystery on the fire."

"Forget it," said Joel. He looked at Garda critically. "Aren't you afraid you'll catch cold in that air-conditioned dress, dear?" he asked tenderly.

"No," said Garda, hesitantly backing away. "No, Joel. I don't want to be kissed. I want my dinner."

"Always thinking of food," said Joel. "Don't make a god out of your stomach."

But Garda won her point and Joel reluctantly followed her downstairs.

They heard voices in the dressing room and the clink of ice in a shaker. Naturally enough they turned that way but Garda stopped short at the sight of a medieval warrior fully clad in gleaming armor.

"Those were the days," said Joel with a sigh. "Knighthood was in flower, men were mean and women mere slaves. If a wife refused a husband anything there was always a dungeon waiting to receive the body."

Garda paid no attention to him but regarded the suit of armor with interest. "It's a pretty little thing," said Garda. "Is it alive?"

Joel knocked politely on the cast iron chest. "Apparently not," he said after a reasonable interval.

"Turn your head, Elmer," said Garda sharply to the armor. "I have to fix my stocking."

Joel grinned, reached up and twisted the helmet around until it faced the other way. "Go ahead," he said and modestly averted his own head while Garda made the necessary adjustments.

CHARLTON had requested the visitors to say nothing about the manuscript other than in private conversation with Torrent or himself and consequently the conversation at dinner was quite general in tone. Mrs. Torrent was cool and distant

to everyone but Gerald whom she manifestly adored, and to Christopher Oates whose millions gave him a great aura of charm.

Christina sat between Joel and young Phil Charlton, but Charlton got the best of it. George Clifford on the other side of Joel seemed to have a great deal on his mind, was very quiet and spoke only when spoken to.

Gerald Torrent at the foot of the table also seemed preoccupied. He drank a good deal with the dinner, drawing occasional frowns from his father, and smoked incessantly. Things took a livelier turn, however, when Phil Charlton excitedly remembered where he had seen Joel before.

"You're the fellow who was mixed up with that bloody business in the bookstore in New York. Aren't you?"

George Clifford stopped with his fork in mid-air but recovered quickly and went on eating.

"I remember all about it now," continued Phil. "You solved the murder of the old book dealer and recovered all those valuable books that had been stolen."

Joel beamed happily, safely out of reach of Garda's slipper.

"Did you really?" Chris Torrent looked at Joel for confirmation but he only grinned and went on eating.

"He's an impostor," whispered Garda very audibly.

"You're awfully modest for a detective," said Chris. "Are you saving it all for your memoirs?"

"Christina," said Mrs. Torrent imperiously. "I'm sure Mr. Sloane would rather not discuss murders at the dinner table."

"He's waiting for a chance to get you on the back porch later and lie his head off about what a hero he is," said Garda. She smiled at Phil Charlton. "See that he doesn't."

Charlton did his best to change the subject. "Is this your first trip to California?" he asked Christopher Oates.

"Yes," said Oates promptly. "That is, no, I've never been here before." He beamed absently on Charlton.

"You ought to take some little trips along the coast while you're here," said Mrs. Torrent graciously.

Oates looked straight at her and said, "Why?"

Mrs. Torrent seemed startled. "Oh, just to see the sights," she said.

"I've seen them all," said Oates. "I've been here lots of times."

Mr. Oates was a dear, kind man, Mrs. Torrent was sure; and of course so pleasantly rich. But he was just the smallest bit difficult to make dinner conversation with. Or, more properly, at. Mrs. Torrent held in a sigh.

A startled silence fell on the company after this.

"Mr. Oates is a grocery tycoon," said Joel, "and he can't enjoy scenery unless it looks like a good location for one of his stores. On the way out, he planted his flag in the Grand Canyon and claimed it on behalf of his grocery chain."

"That's not true," said Oates hotly. "I just thought it would be a wonderful thing to have some advertising slogan painted on one side of the Canyon."

"I'm sure you can tell us some very interesting things about the grocery business," said Mrs. Torrent desperately.

And since this was the one subject on which Oates could really discourse coherently, he launched into a long and frankly told exposition of chain-store problems. When Mrs. Torrent pushed back her chair finally, all present rose to their feet.

"We'll leave the gentlemen to their cigars," she announced, and followed by Garda and her daughter, swept majestically from the dining room.

AS GARDA moved past Oates, she poked him slyly and whispered, "No dirty stories, mind you, Christopher." With the result that Oates, startled, knocked over a tumbler, a wine glass, and a cup of coffee.

"I understand, Mr. Sloane," said Vincent Charlton, when the ladies had gone, "that you've been quite successful with stolen book cases in the East." He addressed himself to Joel Sloane, but George Clifford had the uncomfortable sensation that Charlton was looking directly at him. He looked down at the inhaler in which his brandy had been served.

"Slightly," said Joel. "I help out the insurance companies on rare occasions when some book or picture takes wings."

He made it sound amusingly casual, and was happy that Garda wasn't there to hoot at him.

"I didn't know you were a detective," said Torrent. "How interesting."

"First, last and always," said Joel Sloane firmly, "I'm in the rare book business. The other is a sideline, just to take up the slack in the dull season."

"Do you find it necessary to have a sideline in the dull season, Mr. Clifford?" asked Charlton politely.

Clifford looked up, startled out of his reverie. "No," he said quickly, then smiled easily. "I've been fortunate enough to build up a small but steady clientele." He turned to Torrent. "Beautiful grounds you have here," he murmured. "I couldn't help but notice as I drove through today that—"

But Vincent Charlton wasn't quite ready to have the subject changed. "I've often wondered what steps a dealer takes when he is offered stolen property. Suppose a book were offered to you that you recognized as coming from—let us say—this very library. What would you do in such a case, Mr. Clifford?"

Clifford shifted uneasily. "Oh, I don't know. Notify the police, I guess."

For just an instant his eyes met Vincent Charlton's. Then he looked away again quickly, down at his plate. But his face remained expressionless.

"What nonsense is this, Charlton?" said Torrent. "Nobody is going to steal my books, and anyway"—he smiled broadly—"Mr. Sloane is right here to protect us." He stood up, and the others followed his example, notably George Clifford and Gerald, both of whom rose with considerable alacrity and exchanged a worried, puzzled look.

Joel had a cigarette in his mouth and was fumbling for a match as he passed out of the dining room, and Vincent Charlton struck a light for him. Under cover of this, he whispered, "Join us in the library as soon as you can, Mr. Sloane. Bring Mr. Oates, of course."

"Right," said Joel.

So it was all settled now.

Behind them, but out of earshot, George Clifford and Gerald Torrent were walking together. "I want to talk to you," said Clifford sharply. "Right away."

Gerald nodded. "On the terrace, behind the library."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

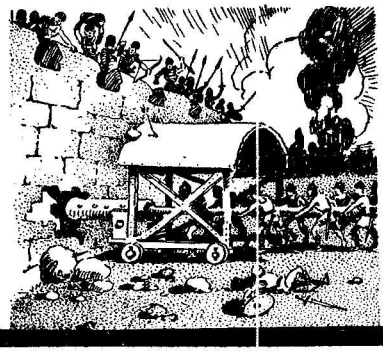
ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

·AIGUILLETTE·

During the Spanish-Netherlands wars, the Duke of Alva, enraged at a rout of his Flemish allies, swore to hang the next who fled, regardless of rank. The shamed Flemings agreed this was just and, to facilitate the order, each man offered to carry a rope and a nail on his shoulder. Their subsequent conduct was so excellent, the Duke ordered the rope replaced by a braid of passementerie, and this became a badge of high honor.

·SIEGE OPERATIONS·

The first army to capture cities by other methods than starving them out, was the ancient Assyrian which used battering-rams, siege-towers etc.



WELLINGTON'S ·OWN·

The only British regiment named after a commoner is the Duke of Wellington's.

·FIRST RIFLE· REGIMENT

Oddly enough, the first British rifle regiment was raised in America and actually composed entirely of Americans. It was the 62nd Loyal American Provincial, 1775.

"In this axe," Caedmon intoned solemnly, "rests all the future safety of England. Its name is Bretwalda"

The Axe Bites Deep

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "Wagons West," "Galleons for Panama," etc.

'Twas the mightiest weapon the eyes of man had ever beheld; its mystic name meant "Ruler of Briton." And from over the Northern Sea came a Viking's thrall—the only man in the world who could wield that fearsome steel—to save good King Alfred and the homeland he scarce remembered

I

FOR six days Caedmon the Briton had labored at his forge and now, on Easter-eve, his work was about finished. Perspiration glistened on his bald pate and his great shoulders heaved as he thrust the metal into the coals of the fire. "Blow, lad. Blow," he commanded the bellows. And while the fire grew red, Caedmon watched the metal closely.

A large crowd had gathered around his forge for word that Caedmon was nearing the end of his work had spread throughout the village. It was a motley crowd; a curious crowd. For the time being, all thought of rank was forgotten. Thane, churl and slave mingled; questioned one another about the great axe Caedmon was making, for Caedmon was close of mouth and had talked little of his work.

To one side stood Ethelred, *ealdorman* of the village, a tall, heavily bearded man, broad of shoulder and with arms almost as thick as Caedmon's. Near him was Regnault, close friend and companion of

The stranger lifted Regnault and flung him to the ground. A mighty shout went up

King Alfred, who was now in hiding from the Danes somewhere in the woods of Somersetshire. Regnault was as tall and as broad of shoulder as Ethelred, but he was much younger and his eyes strayed often from Caedmon to Lady Ethelda, Ethelred's youngest daughter, who stood just beyond her father.

There was a stir among the people as Caedmon drew the great axe from the fire and bent over it. The crowd moved closer. And then suddenly one of the thanes at Caedmon's shoulder uttered a startled cry and pointing at the axe, shouted, "Look! Look! The name!" Others took up the cry and looked at one another with wonder in their eyes. For every man there was ready to swear that no name had been inscribed on the great axe when it had been thrust into the fire.

Ethelred pushed up close to Caedmon. "I would see the name," he announced.

Caedmon stepped back, a broad smile on his face. "The name," he answered, "is *Bretwalda.*"

Others in the crowd gathered around the axe which now lay on the huge block of iron before the forge and even as Caedmon had said, the name *Bretwalda,* could clearly be seen. It was deeply inscribed just above the cutting edge of the axe.

"Bretwalda," Ethelred muttered. "Such was the name given to Briton's kings, long before our time. Its meaning is *Ruler of Briton."* Then turning suddenly to Caedmon, he asked, "For whom has this axe been made? Who ordered you to make it?"

Caedmon shook his head. "I do not know for whom the axe is intended. I was ordered to make it in a vision. I was told by a voice which came to me that in the axe which I would make would rest the future safety of all of England."

"But such an axe, man," Ethelred answered. "Who is there that can wield it?"

Caedmon made no answer and there was no answer from the crowd. That same question each man there had asked himself for the axe was like no common axe.

Head and handle were of steel, welded into one piece through the heat of Caedmon's forge. And the steel which had gone into the making of the axe was of a fine, bluish quality, seldom before seen. None knew where Caedmon got it.

The head of the axe was a full six hands broad and its curved, cutting edge, might have struck off four heads at once. Above the name *Bretwalda,* a dozen blood-red jewels were deeply imbedded in the steel. The handle was long and curiously engraved.

THERE was a sudden commotion at the edge of the crowd. Staring that way, Ethelred caught his breath and reached a hand to his sword. A dozen paces away stood a tall, fair haired stranger. Over his red woolen shirt he wore a coat of mail and his helmet was adorned with the wings of the raven. A long sword was belted at his side. Everything about the man labeled him as one of the hated Danes, who two years before, in 876, had overrun all Wessex, defeating King Alfred and driving him into hiding.

The men who had drawn away from the stranger were glancing about, searching for his companions; Ethelred looked from side to side. He saw no other strangers and that surprised him. Danes did not usually venture alone into communities like this, where loyalty to Alfred still ran high.

Ethelred was about to move toward the stranger when Regnault caught his arm and whispered, "Let me handle this."

The *ealdorman* hesitated. As the person of highest rank in this village, the responsibility was his. But Regnault was close to King Alfred, and his hatred for the Danes was a consuming fire. His prowess as a fighter was a matter of legend, and this stranger looked no weakling.

The *ealdorman* nodded and, moving over to where his daughter stood, said to her, "Watch, Ethelda. You have heard stories of Regnault. Today you may see how he fights."

Striding swiftly forward, Regnault stopped before the stranger, stared into his face. "Why have you come here?"

The stranger looked down at his questioner. Though Regnault was tall, he was the taller and his shoulders were just as broad. He stood very straight and there was a touch of arrogance in the set of his head. His eyes were level and direct and as he answered Regnault, a slight smile curved his lips.

"Why have I come here?" he repeated. "Why because this is my home."

There was a faint Danish accent to the words. Ethelred caught it; and Regnault, too, must have noticed it for he laughed tauntingly, dropped a hand to his sword and cried, "Your voice betrays you, Vandal. I would see the color of your blood."

SWIFTLY Regnault drew his sword. It flashed in the air, cut viciously at the stranger's neck above his coat of mail. But the blow was short. The stranger had stepped back out of reach.

With an angry shout, Regnault charged and what followed happened so swiftly that Ethelred caught only a blurred impression of the struggle. It was quickly ended. Ducking under the slashing sword the stranger laid his hands on Regnault's body, lifted him aloft, whirled once, and then threw Regnault to the ground much as a man might cast a sack of grain.

A sharp cry escaped from Regnault's lips. He seemed to try to get up but before he could make it the stranger had moved over to where he lay, had drawn his own sword and held the point of it above the stunned man's chest.

The crowd had started to surge toward him but as they saw the stranger hesitate, the movement stopped.

Staring from side to side, the stranger asked, "Who is there to claim the *wergild* —the atonement-money for this killing? Who is his next of kin?"

Ethelred moved forward. He was a little dazed at what had happened but not so dazed that he wasn't more surprised at a Dane referring to the *wergild.*

"Who are you?" he bluntly demanded.

With his free hand the stranger removed his helmet. Sunlight glinted against his hair, turning it bronze. There was a sharpness to his features, Ethelred noticed, but not the sharpness of the Vandals from the north. His face bore the look of a man whose sole reliance was in his own strength.

"Who am I?" repeated the stranger. "Not a Dane surely, though I have lived with them for many years. As a boy I was carried away a captive. That accounts for my manner of speech, for my clothing."

Ethelred frowned. Such a story might be true, he knew, for the Danes had harried the coast of England for years and had carried off many captives. Few captives, however, had ever returned and those who had, brought back such stories of hardship and slavery that it seemed unlikely that any man such as this would have been allowed a chance to get away.

A sudden thought struck Ethelred and he said, "If you are not a Dane, what think you of King Alfred?"

"I am hunting for him that I may give him a message."

"That man at whose breast you hold your sword is one of his followers," said Ethelred.

The stranger immediately sheathed his sword. "Then I am sorry for what I have done."

The people were pressing closer, now, curiously following every word of their conversation and Ethelred, suddenly conscious of his responsibilities as *ealdorman* and liking the stranger in spite of his suspicions, said to hm, "Suppose you come to my house? I would question you further. What is your name?"

"Wilton," answered the stranger.

Ethelred nodded. Wilton was a good Saxon name but that alone told him nothing. "Come," he suggested.

But Wilton shook his head and answered, "In a moment." Then pushing forward he walked up to Caedmon's forge and stared down at the axe which the Briton had made. As he looked at it his eyes brightened and the fingers of his hand twitched as though itching to clutch the handle.

"What think you of it?" asked Caedmon.

Wilton smiled. "There," he murmured, "is a weapon for a man. A truly great weapon."

For several minutes he looked down at it while the people in the crowd watched him breathlessly, half expecting, perhaps, that he would try to lift it. But he didn't. Turning away at last he walked over to Ethelred's side and said, "I am ready. Which way do we go?"

II

AS THEY turned down the road toward the *ealdorman's* home, Wilton could not get his mind away from thoughts of the great axe he had seen at Caedmon's forge. In him there was a love for fine weapons. The sword which he wore had been given to him by Ragnor Lodbrok, whose whim had lifted him from a position of servitude in the country of the Danes and made of him a warrior. It was a fine sword, a mate to the swords Lodbrok had given to each of his sons, Halvdan, Hubba, Ivar Boneless and Hrothgar. But it was still not so fine a weapon as the axe which Caedmon had forged. He felt a sudden longing to get his hands on that axe, to feel its power as he swung it.

The house of the *ealdorman,* though larger than the rest, was a low, crudely built structure; but inside, rich tapestries covered the walls and the furniture was of the finest. In the front room there was a sturdy table and several high-backed benches. Fresh reeds covered the floor.

Turning to him there, Ethelred said, "I should like to hear your story, Wilton. It is not often that slaves have escaped from the Danes."

Wilton shrugged. "But I was not a slave for long. For some reason or other, just why I do not know, Ragnor Lodbrok, the

man to whom I was sold took a liking to me and had me raised with his own sons. They were older than I, of course, but as a youth I was quite tall and strong. With them I have been many places."

Ethelred frowned. "Ivar Boneless," he said slowly, "is the name of him who defeated King Edmund at Hoxne; who captured him and, when he would not submit to his demands, had him tied to a tree and shot to death with arrows."

Wilton nodded. "I have heard the story."

"And Halvdan and Hubba are two of the men who have led the Danes into Wessex and who have driven King Alfred into hiding."

"I know that too," said Wilton. "And Guthram is with them. But was not Halvdan killed?"

"Yes, but a few weeks ago."

Wilton stared across the room. "Perhaps," he said, "my story is hard to believe. Let me tell you more. My father, also named Wilton, was the *ealdorman* of Donnershire, two hundred leagues up the coast. When I was but six the Danes landed on that coast and my father and all my family were killed. The village was destroyed.

"I, with a score of others, was carried away into captivity, and but for Ragnor Lodbrok, might have spent my life in the fields of the Danes. Instead, Lodbrok made of me a warrior. Perhaps he thought it a good joke. Perhaps he thought someday to send me against my own people. I know not what was in his mind. Yet, through all the years, but one thought has stayed with me and that thought was that some day I might come back to my native land and take my place with my own people. And with them strike a blow for the freedom of Briton."

For a moment Ethelred was silent. Then he said, "You spoke of a message for King Alfred."

"Yes," Wilton answered. "I must see him."

"What is the message?"

"That, I prefer to give him myself."

Ethelred looked a little doubtful, then suddenly excused himself and left the room.

AFTER he had gone, Wilton moved to the door and stared outside. Beyond the houses across from the *ealdorman's,* as far as he could see, stretched the green hills of England and the sight of them deeply stirred him. From other captives he had heard them described, but they seemed more beautiful today than words could have pictured. Merely staring out at them brought a peace to his soul, and under his breath he murmured, "It's good to be home—good to be home."

A sound behind him caused him to turn and he saw the tall, slender girl whom he had noticed near the *ealdorman* at Caedmon's forge. She had a long drinking horn in her hands and she held it out to him.

"My father," she said, "thought that you might like to quench your thirst."

The tone of the girl's voice was pleasing to Wilton's ears and he liked the expression in her eyes and on her face. He felt a sudden desire to talk to her, to hear the sound of her voice again and as he crossed the room and took the horn he heard himself saying, "Please wait here until your father returns. I cannot remember ever having talked to one of the women of my own country."

A faint smile touched the girl's lips. "You speak as though you were glad to return."

"I am glad. Though things seem strange to me, behind the strangeness there is a familiarity which I can feel as definitely as I can sense a storm in the winds of the sea. I was born not far from here, you know."

The girl nodded. "The walls of the house are thin. I heard what you told my father from the next room."

"And you believe my story?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Why?"

"Your story would not have sounded so strange had it been a lie. And besides,

in spite of your armor you do not have the look of one of the Vandals. Are you not going to try the drink? You will not find a better mead in Somersetshire."

Wilton sampled the drink and found its sweetness pleasing. He said, half humorously, "I will have to learn things all over again, customs, ways of life, even ways of speaking for my words must show a trace of the language of the Danes."

Before the girl could answer, Ethelred came back into the room. He frowned at his daughter; looked suspiciously at Wilton. "I will show you to a room," he said abruptly. "Tonight we will talk about arranging to send you to see King Alfred."

DURING the remainder of the afternoon, Wilton waited impatiently in the room to which Ethelred had taken him. Part of the time he stared out blankly toward the sea, his eyes sweeping the horizon and on those occasions he thought mainly of Hrothgar, the youngest son of Ragnar Lodbrok. Though not so well known in England, Hrothgar was by far the most merciless and the strongest of the brothers. In a way, he was an outcast.

When Guthrum, several years before, had laid before him and the other sons of Ragnor Lodbrok his plan for the conquest of England, Hrothgar alone had refused to have any part in it. Conquest, he favored. But he was not pleased with the idea of settling in the country and making it a part of the Danish lands. There was in him a streak of ruthlessness and a love of battle. Quick raids, fighting, pillaging and then escaping with the loot of a place was more to his liking.

Between Wilton and Hrothgar, since boyhood, there had been a bitter antagonism, yet in spite of that, Wilton had elected to go with Hrothgar on his piratical expeditions in preference to accompanying his brothers on a conquest of England.

When he had made that choice, in the back of his mind there had been the notion of leaving Hrothgar and of making his way to the land of his birth, there to take his stand with his own people. But such escape hadn't been easy. Though apparently one of Hrothgar's companions, he had always been closely watched. His first chance to get away had come a week before, coincident with the arrival of a messenger from Guthrum who had brought Hrothgar word from England and an appeal for the type of help dear to Hrothgar's heart.

Recalling that message, Wilton's lips tightened and he knew a sudden impatience to find King Alfred. It was a clever plan which Guthrum had worked out and unless he reached the king, there was a good chance that the plan would work.

One of the slaves finally summoned Wilton to the evening meal and there he met Ethelred's wife and the daughter with whom he had talked that afternoon.

There was little conversation at the meal and as soon as it was over the women left the room. Wilton followed Ethelda with his eyes. She had hardly spoken to him, but once or twice he had looked up from his food to find her eyes fixed on him and her expression, each time, had caused his heart to beat faster.

When the women were gone, Ethelred said, "I tried to see Regnault when I left you this afternoon but he had left the village. He could have taken you to King Alfred."

"Regnault? The man with whom I fought?"

"Yes."

"He was not hurt, then, by his fall."

"No. He was not. I have sent a messenger after him, asking him to return. I expect him at any time."

"Is there no other way to find King Alfred?"

"No other sure way."

Ethelred moved to the door and Wilton followed him. The *ealdorman* lifted his arm, pointed to the forests to the north. "In that direction, somewhere, lies King Alfred's camp. Only those close to him know just where it is. You could never reach it alone. Bands of Danes have tried to find it but without success."

Wilton shrugged, then asked a ques-

tion which had been bothering him for some time. "Since the Danes have conquered Wessex and all of south England, how is it that they have not bothered you here?"

"They *have* bothered us," Ethelred answered, "but none has been stationed here, permanently. The *jarl* in whose territory this village lies is named Igor and is at Exanceaster. In the north he has great estates. Today, Wilton, the Danes control all of England. The only hope of the Briton lies in King Alfred. He defeated the Danes once, turned them back. But tonight he is a fugitive with only a few loyal followers."

Wilton knew all that to be true. He knew, too, how exacting the Danes could be and how hard must be the lot of the conquered people.

TURNING again into the room, Ethelred related in more detail the story of King Alfred's defeat and the conquest of Wessex and Wilton listened and awaited impatiently the arrival of Regnault.

A sudden knock on the door startled him. Ethelred came to his feet, hurried to the door and opened it. But it wasn't Regnault who stood there. Nor was it Ethelred's messenger. Instead, the man who had knocked was Caedmon, the smith. There was a bright look in Caedmon's eyes and his body was trembling.

"The stranger? Is he here?" Caedmon gasped.

Ethelred nodded. "What is it, Caedmon?"

"The axe is finished," Caedmon answered. "It was finished only a moment ago and as I was about to turn away from my work I had another vision. A bright light shone suddenly from the twelve jewels in the axe, a light as red as blood. And from the light a voice spoke to me."

Wilton had joined the *ealdorman* at the door. He felt strangely excited. "What did the voice say?" he heard himself whispering.

Caedmon looked at him. "The voice said first, 'Find the stranger who is at Ethelred's house. Say to him that *Bretwalda* is ready.' "

Wilton heard Ethelred gasp. "Was there more?" he asked.

Caedmon nodded. "The voice added, 'But warn him that to him who holds *Bretwalda* will come great sorrow and great joy, great victory and great defeat.' That was all. The voice said no more."

Ethelred turned to Wilton. In a low, husky tone he whispered, "Then it is for you. The axe is for you."

Wilton shook his head. Deep in his heart he had the feeling that Ethelred might be right, but he wasn't sure. He was aware of a tingling sensation in his arm as though even now it were feeling the weight of the axe.

Caedmon turned and stumbled away. And Wilton, drawing a deep breath, swung to face the *ealdorman*. "I would like to think that *Bretwalda* had been made for me," he said slowly. "But right now one other thing is more important. I must see King Alfred."

Ethelred looked at him curiously. "Aye, King Alfred," he nodded. "And you will see him if it is his will."

III

THE night moved slowly on while Wilton waited impatiently in his room. Ethelred had left the house to see why no word had come from Regnault; but something in the *ealdorman's* attitude caused Wilton grave concern.

A knock on the door startled him and he went to open it. Ethelda stood outside. She was wearing a gown of some dark material and he could hardly see the outline of her body. Her features were a vague blur.

Surprised, Wilton only murmured her name and stood gaping at her foolishly.

The girl moved a step into his room. In a voice hardly above a whisper she said suddenly, "You must get away from here. At once."

"Away from here?" Wilton gasped.

Ethelda nodded. "Every man in the village has heard of Caedmon's vision. Some still think that you are a Dane. Others, though granting that you are no Dane, think that it is your plan to kill the king. Caedmon's vision has strengthened that belief. The axe is named *Bretwalda* and that name means *Ruler of Briton.*"

"But why must I leave?"

"Because there are in this village many men still loyal to King Alfred. It is their plan, as soon as Regnault returns, to have him lead you to a certain place in the forest where they will lie in wait. Strong though you may be, against so many you would have no chance."

Wilton swiftly considered the girl's words. He could understand how news of Caedmon's vision would have alarmed the loyal supporters of the king. Thinking that the axe was for him, knowing the meaning of its name, and already suspicious of him, it would have been easy for them to assume that it was his plan to kill King Alfred and take Alfred's place.

He nodded his head slowly. "Yes, I must get away from here. But I must also get to the king. There is no more time to be lost."

"But why? Surely—"

Wilton laid a hand on the girl's arm. "I know this much already," he told her swiftly. "King Alfred is hidden somewhere in Somersetshire forest. The exact place is in the center of a bog formed by the junction of the Tone and Parrett rivers. There, on some firm ground, he has built up a fortification, but his greater safety lies in the fact that the paths across the bog are treacherous and are unknown to any but his trusted companions. The name of this place is Aethelingaeigg. It is north from here, I know. Could you tell me how I might come to that place quickly?"

For just a moment the girl hesitated, then she answered, "I cannot tell you but I can show you the way."

"You trust me so much?"

Ethelda nodded. "Wait here a moment," she whispered, and hurried away.

The girl was back a moment later and over her arm was some clothing. She carried, also, a plain, unadorned, helmet. "Change your clothing for this," she suggested. "It is the garb of a Briton and while it will not serve as a disguise, it will at least, not draw so much attention as the clothing you are wearing. This clothing is my brother's. He is now with the king."

Wilton changed quickly in the darkness of the room and a moment later joined the girl in the hallway. Her hand was cool on his arm. "Guards have been placed around the house," she whispered. "I will try to draw them off. Wait at the door for a moment, then slip outside. I will meet you beyond Caedmon's forge."

The girl's tone did not betray any unusual excitement. Her hand slipped from Wilton's arm and she was gone.

Wilton waited. He heard, suddenly, a great commotion from behind the house, shouting, the trample of feet. Opening the front door, he stepped outside. A dozen swift paces took him to the road. Suddenly a vague figure loomed up before him and a voice commanded that he halt. Moonlight glistened on the naked blade of a sword.

Wilton backed away, his hand reaching for his own weapon. He jerked it free of the scabbard, lifted it to meet the blade of the man blocking his way. Twice did he fend off a slash from the guard and once did he strike on his own account. That blow of his, delivered with all the strength of his body, smashed the sword from the guard's hand.

Voices sounded from behind him and Wilton realized suddenly that others must have heard. He half turned to meet those who were coming to their comrade's aid; then, recalling the necessity that he reach King Alfred quickly, he changed his mind and fled down the road.

There were men at Caedmon's forge, men who were standing around the great axe, staring at it in wonder. An almost

irresistible impulse came over Wilton to turn aside and shoulder the axe but with an effort he put it aside. Beyond the forge he waited in the darkness.

Ethelda found him there a few moments later. The girl was breathless and her black hair had come unloosened and hung down almost to her waist. "You got away," she gasped. "I was afraid—"

"Yes, I got away," Wilton replied.

The girl turned into the forest and Wilton followed her.

WILTON was never to forget that journey by night through the green hills of England. Sometimes, in the years to come, a curious, undefinable scent was to bring it rushing back to his memory and always, the soft murmur of rustling leaves was to give him a strange, tingling sensation. Somehow or other, as they hurried through the forest and across meadows and streams and over little knolls, he came to identify himself so closely with this countryside that he almost forgot that he had been a stranger to it for most of his life. Twice he said to the girl, "Stop for a moment." And when she inquired the reason, his only answer was, "I just wanted to look around."

He was to remember the dawn, too, the sun coming up in the east and slanting its rays down through the budding trees while he and the girl rested.

"It's Easter morn," she said to him soberly.

"Easter morn?" Wilton asked.

"Yes. On this day did Christ arise from the dead."

Wilton flushed. His memory of the religion of his people was dim and shadowy in his mind. The Norsemen worshiped Thor and Odin and a whole family of legendary gods.

"Tell me of Christ," he said to the girl. And while she told the story, he listened. Once his hand slipped to his sword. Through a leafy bush his keen eyes had caught sight of a man's face, a dirty, bearded face. But the man withdrew and didn't bother them.

When she was done, he stood up. "We must go on," he said abruptly.

The girl nodded, got to her feet. If she was tired she gave no sign of it but moved ahead rapidly on the trail.

IT WAS about an hour later that the girl suddenly stopped and Wilton heard her call out, "Ethelnoth! Ethelnoth!"

Moving up beside her he saw a tall, dark-featured man standing in the trail some dozen paces ahead. "He is my brother," said the girl swiftly, and then hurrying on, she cried. "Where is the king, Ethelnoth? I have brought a messenger."

Ethelnoth bore a marked resemblance to his father. He was broad of shoulder, long of arm. And his dark eyes shifted from his sister to Wilton, angrily.

Ethelnoth stepped forward. "The king," he said abruptly, "has gone to our village. There is a certain axe there which he would like to examine."

Wilton scowled. "You mean he has gone to the village which we have just left?"

Ethelnoth nodded.

Stepping forward, Wilton said swiftly, "Then we must go after him. There could be no more dangerous place for him than there."

Ethelnoth put his arm around his sister, drew her aside. And then suddenly arising from behind sheltering bushes, a dozen armed men circled Wilton. Wilton heard Ethelda gasp, saw her turn to her brother and start speaking rapidly to him. He saw Regnault step from behind a tree and move toward him, a bared sword in his hand. There was a stubborn determination in the man's face. Angry lights showed in his eyes.

For a moment Wilton didn't move. What had happened he could easily guess. Word of his escape had reached these men and also word had come to them of Caedmon's vision. King Alfred, hearing of the axe, had started for the village to see it. These men, sure that he planned the death of the king, had waited here to trap him.

As Regnault moved forward, Wilton realized that nothing but the truth would sound real enough to these men to make them forget their suspicions. He lifted both hands up before him, empty and palms out. "Wait," he said sharply. "Let me tell you why I have come to see the king. Has it never occurred to you that it is strange that Guthrum sits idly at Ethandun while Alfred, his enemy, roams this forest at will and plots against him?"

Regnault paused, frowning, and one or two of the other men looked suddenly interested.

"I will tell you why Guthrum has done nothing," Wilton continued. "I will tell you what I came here to tell King Alfred. Off the shore of England, just beyond the horizon, lies the fleet of Hrothgar, brother of Ivar Boneless, Hubba and Halvdan. Spies sent out by Guthrum brought him maps of the way to this place but Guthrum knows that your own spies watch his every move and he sent the map to Hrothgar. A great storm which damaged some of Hrothgar's ships has delayed him but soon now, tonight perhaps, his men will land and will sweep this way. They think to find you unprepared. That is what I would have told the king. That is why you must go after him."

For a moment, Wilton thought that his story had convinced these men. He could see a puzzled indecision in their eyes. Then he heard a short laugh from Regnault and heard Regnault say, "A good story, Vandal, but there is no need to hurry after the king. Were all the Danes in Wessex in yonder village, they could never find him. Dressed as a minstrel, our king not long ago visited Guthrum's camp, was even entertained by Guthrum himself. Disguised as a swineherd he has traveled from one end of Wessex to another. Though your story were true, we would not need to fear for him."

Others of the men nodded and Regnault moved even closer to Wilton. Under other circumstances, perhaps, his better judgment would have overridden his suspicions of Wilton; but there was, Wilton could see, a deep pride in the man and his defeat the day before must have rankled bitterly in his heart.

"Do you wear that sword only as an ornament?" he asked sharply.

WILTON'S hand dropped to the weapon at his side. Despite the faith these men had in their king's ability to escape detection, Wilton knew what Hrothgar and his men were like when once unleashed on a community. Guthrum had promised him, as an inducement, whatever slaves and booty he could carry away and Hrothgar was a thorough worker. In Alfred, Wilton knew, rested the only hopes of England. Alfred was a capable ruler. He was well liked, popular. Every report which had come to him about the king had led him to that belief; and he knew, now, that regardless of what these men thought, it was his responsibility to warn the king of Hrothgar's plan

He gave no warning of his intent.

At one moment he stood silently in front of Regnault, in another he had bared his sword and had leapt forward. It flashed up and down, knocking away the weapon which Regnault held and staggering him to his knees.

Another of the men rushed forward and Wilton's sword struck down again. He whirled, swinging the sword around with him. His feet were as the feet of a deer. Rushing first one way and then another, he engaged half a dozen men at once. It was broad and double-edged, this sword which Ragnor Lodbrok had given him, and it was heavy and sharp. The arm which wielded it was like iron. Men gave way before him or went down.

A shout rose to Wilton's throat, a shout which he could not hold back. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Ethelda. Pale-faced, she was clinging to her brother's arm, holding him back from the fight. And then above the cries of all others he heard her voice calling, "Go, Wilton. Go to the king."

Wilton whirled around. There was but one man behind him. He ran toward him

but the man fled out of his way, and Wilton continued—back over the way which he and the girl had come.

He was unmarked from the fight. His very quickness had taken the men by surprise. Another time he might not have come off so luckily. He realized that, as he ran along the trail. He realized, too, that those men would follow him but that fact bothered him not at all. Once he could reach King Alfred and talk to him, his mission was over. After that, what happened to him mattered little one way or another. He would have struck his blow for England.

The sun reached its zenith and started down the western sky. Shadows lengthened. How far he had to go, Wilton wasn't sure. But suddenly he topped a little hill and staring south his eyes caught sight of the sea. At first he saw nothing more. Then, just as he was about to move on, the top of a square sail caught his attention. For a long moment Wilton stared toward that sail and as clearly as though he had been six paces away, he knew the ship.

It was the ship of Hrothgar. The Danes were moving in from the sea.

Wilton was never afterward sure whether he really heard the voice or only imagined it, but whichever the case may have been, three words went singing across his mind: "*Bretwalda* is ready."

He straightened, drew a deep breath, opened and closed his hands. Already, it seemed to him, he could feel the weight of the great axe. With a grim smile he hurried onward.

IV

IT WAS farther to the village than Wilton had supposed and long before he reached it, darkness had crowded down from the sky, thickening the shadows of the forest. Twice he lost his way and blundered into thickly wooded places where passage was almost impossible. He had hoped, shortly after sighting the distant square sail of Hrothgar's ship, to reach the village before the Norsemen could disembark; but a shaft of light, reaching up into the sky just ahead of him, made him realize that Hrothgar had already landed. For Wilton knew what that light meant.

Always, when raiding a town, one of Hrothgar's first measures was to set some building afire. It accomplished two purposes. It helped strike fear into the people of the village and it gave the Vandals light by which they could continue their work of destruction.

Shortly after sighting that light the faint, distant sounds of battle came to his ears, hoarse shouts, weird screams, the clamor of sword against shield.

Wilton ran faster, down the trail through the forest. By the sounds which came to him he could measure the course of battle.

For a few moments it raged fiercely, then the sounds, though louder, took on a thinning note and he knew that the defense was broken. The light from the burning building was now directly ahead of him and its flames were visible through the branches of the trees. Suddenly, a little to one side, he could make out the shape of Caedmon's forge and a moment later he came to a spot from which he could see into the main part of the village and beyond it, to the harbor.

Hrothgar's *dreka,* or dragon ship, was anchored close to the crude pier which stretched out into the bay, and around it were the other ships of his fleet, fully thirty of them. More than a thousand fighting men were carried on those ships, more than a thousand chosen warriors who followed Hrothgar's example with a ferocity that knew no bonds. From several of the ships, men were still landing but most of the Vandals were already on shore and as Wilton paused for just a moment breathing deeply, he saw flames lick up the sides of several more buildings and he heard the clarion sound of Hrothgar's horn as the chieftain blew it, summoning his men to general assembly. That meant, Wilton knew, that the resistance in the village was indeed at an end.

The leaping flames threw the picture

before him into a strange relief. Here and there he could see roving groups of the Danes turning in and out of the houses. Bared swords were in their hands. Where there was any kind of resistance at all, those swords were put to immediate use. But the men, women and children who did not resist were being herded into the center of the village, for Hrothgar was a canny man and in his fleet he numbered three *kjolls*—high, broad ships with halfdecks in the prow and stern. In the undecked middle part of these ships he would load his captives, later to sell them into slavery in some Gothic or Mediterranean port.

All that picture, Wilton's eyes caught during the moment of his pause at the edge of the forest. He saw here and there the silent, motionless figures of those who had been slain and his thoughts turned to King Alfred. There was a chance, he knew, that the king might not have reached this village, or that if he had, there was a chance that he might have escaped slaughter or capture. But it was up to him to discover just what had happened and with that in mind, Wilton hurried on toward Caedmon's forge.

NEAR it, the body of a man lay across the trail and as Wilton was about to pass, the man moved, made an attempt to drag himself onward. The movement caught Wilton's eye and something familiar in the figure made him pause. He saw then, that the man was Ethelred, the *ealdorman,* wounded near to death.

Bending over him he called the *ealdorman's* name and turned him so that he could look into his face. "Where is King Alfred?" he demanded.

Ethelred stared up at him blankly.

"It was because I knew of this raid that I wanted to see the king," Wilton said swiftly. "I knew that it would come soon but not so soon as this or I would have warned you, too. In the forest I learned that the king had started for this village. Where is he?"

Ethelred's lips moved and bending closely over him, Wilton heard him say: "He was taken captive with others—here near the forge. I tried to get away. I wanted to bring help. I thought—"

"How shall I know him?"

"He is clothed as a swineherd. There is a bit of red on his hat. His staff—" Ethelred's voice choked. His eyes glazed. A tremor ran over his body and then he was still.

Standing, Wilton looked toward the center of the village. There, in a group, the captives had been gathered. They were under heavy guard. Soon they would be transferred to a ship, and then all hope of rescue would be past.

Hrothgar's horn sounded again; near the place where the captives had been herded, the Vandals were gathering, bearing armloads of loot, rich tapestries, heavy boxes, a miscellany of things which had caught their fancy.

Wilton moved on to the forge. The huge axe Caedmon had fashioned still lay on the block of iron. It had either remained unnoticed thus far in the raid or had proved to be too heavy to be moved. For a moment Wilton stared at it, at the curious carvings on the handle, at the twelve blood-red jewels set deep in the head, at the engraven name *Bretwalda.* Then, as naturally as though the axe had always been his he reached out his hands and took hold of it.

CLOSE behind him sounded an angry shout and to his ears came the shuffling of feet. Wilton whirled around. A group of Norsemen were hurrying forward. Grim, black-visaged men. In their eyes was a wolfish light, and blood dripped from the swords in their hands.

Wilton was unaware of the great weight of the axe as he swung it above his head and sprang forward. He did not hear the shout which burst from his own lips. But he saw the first bite of the axe, saw three of the figures which were before him go down under its swing. Again he swung it aloft and again he sprang toward the Norsemen. They gave way before his charge. Swords were as straw before

Bretwalda's keen edge; armor was little more protection than cloth. The Norsemen broke and fled.

Lowering the axe, Wilton stared after them. He saw others join the fleeing group, saw them slow down, look back; saw them stop and saw still more men join them.

A rush of footsteps from the forest behind caused him to turn. Coming his way, breathless with their haste, were Regnault and Ethelnoth and a score more Britons.

He gave them no time to speak. "Men of Wessex," he shouted, "your king is a captive of yonder Vandals. Which of you will follow to his aid?"

The road through the village was black with Norsemen and more were coming up from the shore. For all that any of the Britons might see, only a quick death lay ahead for them if they followed Wilton. Yet, with scarcely any hesitation at all, Ethelnoth and Regnault stepped forward to Wilton's side and following after them, came the others.

Wilton jerked around to face the Vandals. The thought came to him that this one moment was worth all the bitterness of the past. Here he stood on English soil and at his back were a group of Britons ready to follow his lead. Raising *Bretwalda* aloft his voice sang out, "For Alfred and for country!"

Regnault and Ethelnoth took up the cry and charged after him as Wilton ran forward. Other Britons hurried abreast of them. Not a single man in that group knew that they were making history this night, not a man of them could have known that this fight of theirs was, in the years yet ahead, to be made the topic of many a minstrel's lay. Wilton had one thing only in his mind and that was that if they could make this attack threatening enough, King Alfred might possibly escape.

ONCE more the clash of arms sounded above the crackling of the flames from the burning building.

Norsemen blocked the road but a V-shaped wedge cut into the heart of the Vandals. At the head of that wedge, *Bretwalda* slashed the way, driven by Wilton's powerful arms. Strength seemed to flow into him from the handle of the axe. And with each sweeping blow his shout sounded above the din of the battle.

Somewhere or other he had lost his helmet and his yellowish hair, bronze-tinted by the fire, streamed to his shoulders. To the right and left of him, Regnault and Ethelnoth were striking mighty blows; Regnault, grim-lipped and scowling, Ethelnoth grunting with deep satisfaction every time his sword cut through a shield or struck sparks from a helmet.

Through that mass of men, more quickly than he had ever dreamed possible, Wilton and the Britons cut their way. Over to one side stood the chieftain Hrothgar, his horn now silent, a heavy scowl on his ugly face. Beyond him the prisoners were huddled in a group, still closely guarded. Those guards had started away, drawn by the fight in the street, but Hrothgar had ordered them back. Wilton had seen as much but a few moments before.

Turning now toward Hrothgar, Wilton shouted his name and pressed forward, *Bretwalda* clearing a path before him. Hrothgar stood before a low roofed building. He might have waited there to meet Wilton but the press of men giving way before the Britons gave him no chance. He was swept to one side.

Wilton turned again as an angry chorus of voices arose from behind him. A new group of warriors, he saw at once, had charged into the fray. Under their assault, first one and then another Briton gave way. At his side, Ethelnoth staggered and Regnault was puffing heavily from his exertions.

Swinging *Bretwalda* aloft, Wilton shouted, "Back, Regnault! Back Ethelnoth! Against the building. The rest of you, too."

From every side at once the Danes seemed to be charging forward. The edge of a sword gashed Wilton in the scalp and a spear cut into his thigh. He laughed mockingly at the two men who had succeeded in wounding him, and with *Bret-*

walda ended their lives at almost the same instant. That great axe of Caedmon's became as an armor around him and again the rush of the Vandals stopped.

Hrothgar's bull voice arose above the cries of the wounded and the angry shouts of the Norsemen; at his command, the Norsemen backed away, lowering their swords. Wilton shot a look behind him. Grouped against the building were five of the Britons. Some were sorely wounded but no fear showed in any man's eyes. Wilton lowered his axe and with one hand pushed his hair back from his face. Its natural yellow was now streaked with blood, and crimson from his wound stained his face and the shirt which Ethelda had brought him to wear over his coat of mail.

Leaning heavily on *Bretwalda*, Wilton stared around at the men facing him. They had not quit, he knew. They were not of a type to quit. They had drawn back only because Hrothgar had ordered it, and knowing Hrothgar, Wilton knew what to expect. Hrothgar might have let his men continue the fight, it could not have lasted much longer. But since he had stopped it, Wilton knew that some devilish plan had entered the man's mind.

He waited grimly to learn what it was.

Behind him he could hear the heavy breathing of the Britons and over to the side he could see the prisoners. A deep scowl came to his face. Several men were dragging a girl forward to be added to those under guard. The girl was tall and had long black hair and as her face turned his way Wilton recognized Ethelda. She must have followed the men back here to the village, arriving almost as quickly as they. And now she was in Hrothgar's power.

Still looking over toward the prisoners Wilton's eyes suddenly were attracted to the stooped figure of one man, dressed in ragged clothing. He carried a staff and in his battered hat there was a bit of red cloth. Ethelred's dying words came back to Wilton's mind. Instinctively he straightened. That stooped figure, he knew, could be none other than King Alfred—his king.

Hrothgar's voice cut sharply across his consciousness and turning back, Wilton faced his old enemy.

V

IN MANY ways, Hrothgar and Wilton were much alike. Both were tall, and if Wilton had a slight advantage in height, Hrothgar's shoulders were more broad. A golden helmet worked into the figure of a raven covered the Vandal chieftain's head, and a gold rim circled his leather-covered shield.

Moving forward, Hrothgar said sharply, "I once pledged my father never to lift my hand against you. Tonight, however, if Ragnar Lodbrok were here he would be the first to bid me fight. Wilton, make ready."

With the suddenness of a striking serpent, Hrothgar's sword slashed through the air. So quick a blow might have caught another man unprepared despite the warning. Wilton, however, sprang backward and laughed. With the same movement he raised Caedmon's axe and brought it down. Hrothgar's shield raised to meet the blow but *Bretwalda* bit through it as though it had been paper. The tip of the axe cut the Vandal's arm to the bone.

A gasp of astonishment went up from the men crowding around. None had a shield so fine as Hrothgar's. It had withstood many a stout blow, yet before the axe in Wilton's hand it had been of no avail.

The two parts of the shield fell uselessly to the ground as Hrothgar released his hold. A startled look came into his eyes, a look which might have been the mirror of fear. Again his sword swept up and down. Legion were the men who had fallen before that sword of his and before the might of his arm, still, in mid-air, *Bretwalda* met that swinging steel and the sword broke in two, half of it flying over Wilton's shoulder and falling to the ground at Regnault's feet.

Wilton's laugh had a deep, mocking note. He took a step forward and raised

the axe again. For a moment he held it poised high above his head. He could bring it down before Hrothgar could manage to get out of the way. And Hrothgar knew it. In the Vandal's eyes, Wilton could read that knowledge. Wilton moved forward again, as though to make the blow more sure. But he did not strike. Instead, his voice rasping harshly, he commanded, "Hrothgar, order the guards to turn the prisoners free."

Hrothgar straightened. There was a cunning look in his eyes. He shook his head. "I have no fear of death, Wilton. Hrothgar listens to the command of no other man."

Wilton still hesitated. If he killed Hrothgar, all was lost. Against so many enemies he had no chance. It would be merely a matter of time until they cut him down.

Then Hrothgar spoke again and the cunning of the man was clearly shown by his words. No one had ever before vanquished him in battle and his hate for Wilton sought some deeper satisfaction than Wilton's death.

"I would make a bargain with you, Wilton," he said clearly. "If you think so much of these miserable prisoners, I will let them go in exchange for you and for your pledge to take their place."

Wilton blinked at the man standing before him. He well knew what was back of that offer. Should he agree to it he need have no fear of death. Hrothgar would take an insane delight in selling him into servitude in some foreign port or perhaps an even greater delight in placing him with the slaves in the Norsemen's country. He could hold to no thoughts of escape, either, for Hrothgar would see to it that he would never again have a chance to escape.

Wilton lowered *Bretwalda* and moved a step backward. There was no point, now, in holding the axe over Hrothgar's head. He could see that the thought of the exchange had gripped the Vandal's imagination and he knew even then what his answer would be.

"These men who fought with me, too?" he asked bluntly.

Hrothgar nodded. "Those too."

Turning his head, Wilton glanced at the prisoners. The stooped figure with the bit of red in his hat was looking at him and for just a moment, Wilton stared into the face of his king. There were kindly lines around the man's mouth, yet his face was stern and there was a square, stubborn ruggedness about it which made Wilton feel the worth of the man's character. England would be safe under the rule of such a man, he thought, and as he stared at him, Wilton had the feeling that someday King Alfred would triumph over his foes; that some day again, all of southern England would be freed from the yoke of the Dane.

"Well, how about it, Wilton?" Hrothgar asked.

Wilton turned his eyes away from the prisoners. "Release them," he commanded. "You have my pledge."

SITTING on a box in the space between the two halfdecks on one of Hrothgar's merchant ships, Wilton watched the dawn of another day. His wounds troubled him sorely and a great weariness had settled over him.

From time to time he smiled; and had he been asked, on such occasions, why he smiled, he might have told the story of the releasing of the prisoners. For Hrothgar had kept his word and had let them go; and King Alfred was safe. In spite of the greatest odds, Wilton had struck a blow for England that was to change the course of history. For, a short time later, King Alfred was to meet with the men of Somersetshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire and was to lead them to a great victory over the Danes at Ethandun, a complete triumph that which was to free the south of England from the invader.

Wilton couldn't have known that but he must have felt it deep in his soul for he had no regrets for the course he had taken. And now, as the first rays of the morning sun reached down into the ship and

touched him, he turned his glance toward Caedmon's axe. He had brought it with him when he had been taken to the ship, hardly conscious of the fact that he carried it. What use he would find for it in the life which lay ahead for him he didn't know. But his eyes brightened as he looked at the axe and he got up and walking over to where it leaned against the side of the ship, he rested his hand against it.

The sound of voices caught his attention and glancing toward the stern of the vessel he saw a figure being lowered to the space between decks. At the first sight of that figure Wilton thought that he must be dreaming for it looked like Ethelda, the daughter of the *ealdorman.* A moment later he saw that it was she, for casting off the ropes by which she had been lowered, the girl moved toward him. Her cheeks were slightly flushed.

Wilton stared at her first in amazement, then with a sudden anger, directed not toward the girl but toward Hrothgar. "You were with the prisoners," he said sharply. "You were to have been released. How came you here?"

The flush on the girl's cheeks deepened but she looked directly into Wilton's eyes. "I am here because I chose to come," she answered, "because I asked to come."

Wilton's astonishment deepened. "You asked to come? You know what it means?"

The girl shook her head. "Perhaps. I am not sure. But with you I will not be afraid."

ETHELDA laid a hand on Wilton's arm and Wilton found himself trembling. He had felt a strange compulsion drawing him to this girl since the first moment when he had seen her. Deep in the forest the day before he had felt very close to her, and the same feeling of closeness gripped him now.

"The axe—you have it with you," the girl said suddenly.

Wilton nodded.

"Do you remember the warning which came to Caedmon and which he brought to you?"

Again Wilton nodded. "He told me that to the man who held *Bretwalda* would come a great victory—"

"You saved your king."

"—and a great defeat"

"You have sacrificed your liberty."

"—a great sorrow—"

"Never again to live in the England you love."

"—and a great joy."

The girl was silent for a moment, then looking up at Wilton she said, "I cannot answer that promise but perhaps together we can find the answer—even if we are together for only as long as the voyage may last."

Wilton drew a deep breath. What other woman, he wondered, would have followed a man along the road which lay ahead for him. He reached out and covered Ethelda's hand with his own. "I know the answer," he replied. "You have brought it with you."

Ethelda's eyes had again dropped to the axe and she suddenly exclaimed. "Look! One of the jewels is gone."

Glancing down, Wilton nodded. Where there had been twelve jewels before there were now only eleven. One had somehow or other been lost during the fight the night before. He thought little of the lost jewel, however. "It is a great axe," he murmured.

Looking at him, Ethelda said, "A weapon for a man."

Wilton smiled and again his hand rested against it. He stared out to the north.

Ethelda was still watching him. There was nothing of the look of a captive or the look of a slave or of a defeated man in Wilton's eyes and she knew suddenly that there never would be. No matter what might lie ahead for them, Wilton would always rise above any defeat.

The girl smiled and turned and stared with him to the north.

This is the first of a series of novelets of the axe Bretwalda and its wielders. The next will appear in an early issue.

Harvard came lurching into the cave. He was all in, done for

Cape Stiff

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "Seven Came by Sea," "Return to Glory," etc.

At Harvard, Stevens didn't learn all there is to know; Red Hook hadn't taught Dugan everything, either. It was at the stormy junction of two oceans that Fate finally handed them their diplomas

ALL his rage was gone, Michael Dugan realized. He could stand here calmly beside Gerald Stevens. But somewhere in the back of his head a gong kept beating all the time. The cops had started it last night with their nightstick blows. Now as Henry Stevens spoke the booming echo of it blurred the words.

Stevens sat behind the broad mahogany desk staring at his son and then at Dugan. "You seem," he said, "to be in equal need of a drink." He took a bottle from a drawer, filled three glasses. "But which one of you is going to tell me about last night?"

Gerald Stevens laughed as he drank. "Talk to Dugan," he said. "He's your hired man."

Dugan glanced slowly sidewise at him. The lad was still cocky, he thought. Last night hadn't been enough for him.

Here in this dark-paneled office Gerald Stevens made a jaunty figure. One tail of his evening coat had been ripped off.

There were bloodstains on his shirt front; both his jaws were bruised blue. Yet he was still handsome, completely self-assured.

"All right, Captain," Henry Stevens said. "Take your turn first. What got you two into night court and jail together?"

Dugan stood straighter, his powerful body gathered. "I was to a wake in Red Hook yesterday," he said. "Me best friend died, and there was a bit of whisky." He was silent then, the memory pressing in on him again.

He saw that room in Red Hook, the stark, pale faces of the women who sat keening about the coffin, the frightened and motionless children in the corner. He'd drunk a lot of whisky there, he remembered, and more after he left. But it was not until hours later that he had met Gerald Stevens in Manhattan.

He looked over at Gerald Stevens. "I came upon this lad," he said, "in a bar buyin' champagne for all hands. Spendin' more in a night than me Red Hook pal made in a month. He would buy me a drink. I told him no, and he give me a quick answer. So I yanked the fancy tie off him. He took a crack at me and I cracked him. Then the waiters gave us the heave out into the street. We were having a go at each other there when the coppers got us."

Gerald Stevens grinned, but the lines were tense about his mouth. "Tell it straight, Irish," he said. "You didn't take a crack at me until I told you I knew who you were and that I'd have my father fire you."

"Sure," Dugan said. "But I'd ha' socked ye anyhow. Ye had me sore already."

"Where," Henry Stevens asked quietly, "did this happen?"

"In Jack's," Gerald Stevens said. "Rather unfortunately, the waiters were quite impatient. Last Fall they flung me and all the rest of the Harvard varsity out into the street. Your skipper may be a tough man, but when they used the flying-wedge on us we went out fast. Then, as Dugan says, we met the police."

DUGAN was moving to the window. Past Brooklyn Bridge in the gray and glistening river he could see his ship. Topsails had been loosened on the fore and main, but cargo was still going into the holds. He turned and faced Henry Stevens. "That's the straight about last night, mister," he said. "Now, if I've still got me job, I'll be getting back aboard. They're about through loading."

Henry Stevens once more let his saturnine eyes play over both of them. "You've got your job yet," he said. "But I've just decided to send Gerald with you in the *Polaris*. He's seen a good sight too much of New York. 'Frisco can be his stamping ground for a while."

"I've heard," Gerald Stevens said, "that the whisky's red and cheap in San Francisco. You can't be sending me out for that."

"No," Henry Stevens said. "Not quite . . ."

He got up and walked around the desk and to the big Mercator charts on the wall. With a slight gesture he indicated those of the South Atlantic and Pacific. "You're not much younger than Dugan, and yet it won't be long before your chance to make a Cape Horn rounding will be gone. This is 1910, and the Canal will be finished pretty soon. There won't be any place for wind-ships like the *Polaris* after the Canal is open.

"So Dugan will show you now how hard it is to make a dollar on the sea. Then when you get to 'Frisco you'll be ready to step into the company office and do some work."

Gerald Stevens did not speak; he was motionless, rigid. It was Dugan who said, "Ye're handing the lad quite a passage, mister. This here's the bad time of year for Cape Stiff."

"I appreciate the fact," Henry Stevens said. "Old Man Merrick, of the *Bianca*, was in to see me yesterday. He's pushing off for 'Frisco today and wanted to pick up more cargo."

"He's no man," Dugan said slowly, "to come to a big line looking for consign-

ment. He must ha' found little else around the town."

"No more than a couple of hundred tons." Henry Stevens' voice was flat-edged. "The old goat really came here to find out when you're sailing. He hopes to beat the *Polaris* into 'Frisco. There isn't much cargo left out there for wind-ships, either. But he can pick up a full load if he beats you in."

"Ah," Dugan said. "Ye mean for me to know that unless I get the *Polaris* to 'Frisco fast there'll be no cargo."

"I mean," Henry Stevens said, "that unless you beat the *Bianca* you will lose your job. I pay you to carry cargo."

"True enough," Dugan said. "Ye've told me so before." He swung and nodded at Gerald Stevens. "Come on, Harvard. It's time we went aboard."

The tall and handsome man was taking his father's hand. "Thanks," he said, "for giving me a chance at such dandy fun."

"Not at all," Henry Stevens said. "Dugan will show you more."

FORWARD, the men were walking the capstan around, bringing the cable slowly grinding through the hawse. The ship veered, held steady to the tide. " 'Vast heaving!" Dugan yelled at Brock, the mate. Then he crossed the poop to where Gerald Stevens stood.

Stevens was smiling, waving. "Pretty girl in a boat out there," he said. "Nice if we could have her aboard."

Dugan cursed him. "Get back," he said. "Pipe down."

The boat was headed out toward the *Bianca*. Old Man Merrick sat aft in it and Lucy Merrick was beside him. The tarpaulin in the bow covered a pile of baggage. Lucy must be making the voyage to 'Frisco with her father.

Old Man Merrick was on his feet now, shouting. "Keep your own course south, Dugan! I want none of your hard-case tricks off the Cape!"

Dugan took time to answer. He stared away from Old Man Merrick for an instant and at the *Bianca* across the stream. He'd started to sea in that ship, he thought. For years the *Bianca* had been a kind of home for him. But Old Man Merrick refused to admit that the sea was changing and the big companies controlled the cargo routes. So he was taking the *Bianca* out half-loaded; and he hated him, Mike Dugan, for holding command of a Stevens Line ship. Old Man Merrick figured him as a traitor who'd left the *Bianca* to grab a sure-pay job.

"Listen, skipper," Dugan called. "If ye're out to drive the *Bianca* hard, leave Lucy ashore. Ye can't win a race against the *Polaris,* and ye might happen to lose your ship."

The gaunt old man was still. Lucy was talking to him, her words so soft Dugan couldn't hear them. Then she moved around and her voice rose clear. "Don't try to frighten me, Mike. I know the *Bianca,* and I've seen Cape Stiff. If we're still in port, look me up in 'Frisco."

"Ah," Dugan muttered, "ye stubborn little rascal . . ." But the boat was pulling rapidly away. He moved from the rail, stared forward along his own ship. "Heave in your hook, Brock!" he yelled to the mate. "Quick with it. This here's a race."

The *Bianca* was right astern of them in the Narrows, broke out topgallants in the same moment off Sandy Hook. Then the wind fully met them both and they went sweeping south.

Gerald Stevens stood at the quarter rail again. He had shed his stiff collar, put on a turtleneck varsity sweater. "Not so bad, Irish," he said. "I think I'm going to fool my old man and like it fine."

Dugan had been watching how the *Bianca* hauled to the wind, and Lucy's bright head with the sun upon it. He looked around at Stevens slowly, crouching a bit. "I'm skipper here," he said. "When ye talk to me, ye'll call me Captain. That sweater will get soiled bad should ye forget."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Stevens said. He smiled saying it and lifted his hand in mock salute.

NOW the sunlit, splendid days were astern of them. For weeks as they ran down the outer rim of the Caribbean the Northeast trades had held. The two ships had kept course within a couple of miles of each other, studding-sails set below taut royals. Here off the Argentine coast the weather swiftly changed.

The *pampero,* the great, strange wind from the inland plains, came flat over the sea. Aboard the *Bianca* the mizzen royal carried away in a fluttering white snarl of canvas. She headed up into the wind, then lay with her yards aback. Men hunched out along the foot-ropes to get the upper sails off her.

"He can't take it," Dugan said sharply. "We'll be days ahead of him around the Cape."

His words were for Brock, but the mate pretended not to hear him. Brock didn't like any of this, Dugan realized. In the mate's mind, Cape Stiff was no place for a race between wind-ships. But Gerald Stevens hunched at the quarter rail and Dugan called, "How's a real wind feel to you, Harvard?"

Stevens came towards him with lithe strides. He had tanned, grown leaner, more compact during the weeks at sea. For an escape from boredom, he had volunteered to turn to with the port watch, helped them with all their pulley-hauley on the heavy gear. Yet in this moment his smile was nervous, quite forced. "I don't get the idea, Captain," he said. "Why will the wind help us, and not them?"

Dugan gestured forward. "We're in the heavier laden ship. I'm carrying all solid cargo, big pieces of mine machinery. The old guy's got nothing but a lot of loose general stuff. Fair weather, he can hold the same course as us. Weather like this, and weather like we'll get off the Cape, he has to pull down. If he keeps his top canvas on he'll pull the sticks right out."

Stevens stared across the wind-cracked sea at the other ship. "How about the girl?" he said. "Aren't you worried about her?"

"Sure," Dugan said. "But her old man likes his dollars, too. He won't wreck his ship for any crack at a bit of cargo in 'Frisco. Now lay for'd and give the watch a hand. We'll be off the Straits tonight and heading for the Cape tomorrow."

They lost sight of the *Bianca* at dusk. She was far down to leeward and a full northeaster was driving the *Polaris* with a shivering rush.

Near dawn, though, it slacked off, and when Dugan took the watch from the second mate the ship rolled easily through gray-shouldered seas.

"All right, lad," Dugan said. "I want a bearing on Staten Island before I head into the Strait."

The second mate was a young Finn named Raeger who had made the Cape Horn turn a dozen times. He nodded, his tow hair flapping under his cap brim. "No time fer foolin', this time year," he said. "Feller maybe catch fair wind here, but hell inside when them westerlies break."

Dugan's answer was a curse. He had swung around, was facing aft.

No more than a cable length away, the *Bianca* was rearing past. She carried upper topsails and topgallants, and her shape in that slate green dimness was huge, fantastic. Spume kicked pluming white at her cat-head and along her runs. Her canvas had the sound of strangely struck drums, and her wire and cordage vibrated with a clanging echo. Beside the ruddy glow of her chart-shelter lamp Dugan made out two figures.

One, tall and wildly waving, was Merrick. The other was Lucy, and she stood very still.

There was a megaphone in his own chart-shelter and Dugan pulled it out swiftly from the rack. "Merrick!" he yelled. "Haul off! You're carrying too much for inside!"

The shout that came back was vague, blurred by the wind. But the ship held on, lunging deep into the last of the darkness. There aboard the *Polaris* they could see only the pale flicker of her wake.

Raeger spoke in a careful, clipped voice. "Feller," he said, "maybe didn't hear, Cap'n."

"He heard," Dugan said, his hands clamping hard on the shelter rail. "But he figures to beat me inside before a westerly breaks. If it does, he'll founder with the canvas he's got on. Go call the mate and all hands. I want more sail, and quick!"

THEY were inside now, Dugan knew. This was Le Maire Strait, and beyond were the last few desolate islands, then the Cape. He straightened as the ship shuddered up onto a wave crest. "Slack off a point," he told the man at the wheel. "Steady as you go."

The *Bianca* was a mile ahead, just clear of the black cliffs of Staten Island. Her bare mast poles raked raggedly across the sky. Tatters of canvas hung from her lower yards. But it was not the easterly that struck her there. The easterly had fallen, was gusting out. The wind that flung her larruping broadside was out of the west.

Dugan watched her foremast whip and crash as he called the order for his own ship:

"Tops'l hands aloft! Haul back your main, mister! I'm standing in alongside."

Brock came running aft white-faced to him. "You can't do it," he said. "You can't stand in alongside. That stuff you've got below will shift on you. We'll be where he is now. If our—"

Dugan slung him spinning around to the ladder. "You belong for'd," he said. "Rig the lee boat outboard. Find a crew for it."

After that he stood tensely crouching, the wheel spokes in his own hands.

The *Bianca,* he thought. The first ship he had stepped into when he started to sea. Merrick was finishing her now, ripping her to a hulk and sinking her.

And Lucy was aboard. Lucy, with her pale blond hair that was so soft, and so bright when the sun was on it. But she wasn't going to die. Not here, not off Cape Stiff. "Lower away, you!" he bawled at the men about the boat. "I'll keep a lee!"

He kept a lee for them while it seemed that the roaring sea and the roaring sky met, closed solid over the ship. He had lashed himself securely with a two-inch manila line after he took the wheel, but his feet were knocked right out from under him. Blood was warm down his face and in his eyes as he saw the boat start back.

It was no more than a faint, shifting ellipse through the spindrift sweep. But he brought the ship steadily down upon it. When a rocket glared up 'midships he could see the faces of the men at the oars. The old man wasn't there in the boat. Lucy was, though. She crouched on the floorboards between the others left from the *Bianca's* company.

He was thinking of her, saying her name over in his brain, as Brock came aft again. "I told you," Brock howled. "The dunnage has broken. The cargo's adrift below. Listen to it!"

The great pieces of machinery in the holds veered with a terrific shock each time the ship rolled. It wouldn't be long, Dugan thought, before they smashed square through the shipside. That was the chance he'd taken, the price for those folks' lives. But the ship was under him yet, slung steeply to the helm.

His left hand steadied the wheel as his right caught Brock's collar. "Down below, swab!" he cried at him. "Try to secure that stuff the way it rides now. I'm going to run for Wollaston Island and the beach!"

He was not sure when Brock left him. The waves were over the poop again, tearing at his eyes. The next man he saw was Gerald Stevens, and then he was part conscious, hanging numbly to the wheel.

Stevens shouted the same sentence several times. "Brock is gone," he said.

"All right," Dugan said. "Then find Raeger. I want a boat loaded with stores. I'm heading for the beach."

"Raeger's gone, too. He was washed overboard, trying to save them from the *Bianca.*"

"The girl?" It was a fierce, violent cry.

"She's aboard. She's safe. But her father was lost, and there aren't a dozen men left from that ship."

Dugan straightened, his head back full in the spindrift. "Tell them for'd to store a boat. Tell them fast, or none of ye will live!"

THE land was there now, somber and steep above the surf. Dugan watched it until his eyes seemed to split in his head. But he could hear the ship hitting, pitching over the outer reef. Wollaston, he thought. Somehow he'd brought the ship in to it. This was Franklin Channel, because the island blocked some of the wind. But under him the ship had begun to drag, roll.

He cut loose the line about him, hurled on his knees and hands along the deck.

The lee poop ladder was under water. He dropped down it to the main deck. Sail boomed and ripped aloft. But the deck was steady now. The ship no longer moved. He got up and shouted.

It was Stevens who answered him. "We're here," he said. "Waiting for you."

They gathered about the one boat left on the quarter skids. There were nineteen of them, ten of his own, and Lucy stood next to Stevens.

"Ye take the oars," he told the *Polaris* men. "But what have ye put in the boat?"

"All that she and I could find in the pantry," Stevens said. "None of this bunch wanted to leave the boat."

Dugan turned to her. "Ye got matches and salt?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "And flour."

"Good. Ye sit aft, beside me. Get in the bow, Stevens. All right, the rest of ye! Heave!"

The tormented white mass of the surf back-lashed on them right beyond the ship. Dugan crouched bracing the steering sweep with every muscle in his body. Twice the boat staggered bow-down, nearly filled. Once, hearing the grinding slide of the ship astern, Dugan thought the masts were flailing over on them. Then the surf split where black rock gleamed. He shouted and the oarsmen leapt, grasped the gunwales, heaved inshore.

He was out in the surf with Lucy in his arms when the boat beached. Rock raked through the bottom planks and sides. But the sailors had the stores, pulled the boat high. "Climb," he told them. "Straight ahead."

They climbed single file along the windy, misted crags. Stevens went first, calling down as they halted. His voice was gay, almost eager. "There's caves here, all along the cliff. Most of 'em seem already occupied."

The caves were deep and from inside came a low, constant growling sound. "That's otter," Dugan said. "Get in there and drive them out. Tomorrow, though, ye'll be after them for food."

Lucy staggered a bit as he released her from his arms. "Steady you go," he said. "Ye have no reason now to be afraid."

She stood staring at him with her slender body rigid in the wind. "While my father was alive," she said, "I learned never to be afraid."

There was a lull in the steady wind beat when Dugan called them together. They stood blinking red-eyed from the hours they had hunched about their fires, but they watched him with an intense gaze. He pointed down over the cliff edge before he spoke.

The ship lay with her starboard side nearly submerged. She had dragged clear within the outer reef, though, and her masts and decks still seemed to hold solid. "Our chance is there," he said. "With the ship. We got no other way of leaving here safe."

Dugan paused then, studying them, wanting to know which man would be their leader. It was one of the *Bianca's* lot, as he had expected.

THE man was stocky and black-bearded. He wore a suit of hand-made oilskins, and there was a sheath-knife at his belt. "Macho," he said, tapping himself in the chest. "Bosun aboard the

Bianca. Why you bother with the ship? Boat's big enough for us. Plenty wood around so we can fix it."

"Did ye figure that out alone, Macho?"

"All hands says the same. No feller wants to stay here."

The man was a Portuguese or a Spaniard, Dugan thought, and probably fast with the knife. He looked gradually around at the others. The lot from his ship and the men from the *Bianca* rested in one close group. Only Lucy and Gerald Stevens stood near him. But their glances were as hard and narrow as those of the men. Right now, for some reason he didn't fully understand, they were all against him. He turned back to Macho with his body tightly gathered.

"So," he said, "ye worked bosun in Merrick's ship. But Merrick's gone, and his ship's gone. My ship is left. Ye and all these lads are going to help me haul my ship off the reef."

"Como?" Macho said, his hand on the knife haft. "How?"

"When the wind swings and we get an easterly again. We'll dump all the cargo out of her. She'll float back light over the reef with an easterly driving."

"You wait long time for easterly," Macho said. "I know. I been here in Chilean ship. But we got boat. That takes us North to Magellanes all right."

Dugan was very slowly moving forward. He kept his eyes unwavering on Macho now, marking the way the man stood, the hand on the knife. "It's a couple of hundred miles to Magellanes," he said. "All the passages are full of ice and bad currents. There's tough Indians where we'd have to land to pick up food. They'd crack us off quick. For us it's the ship or nothing."

"No," Macho said.

"Sure," Dugan said, and swiftly swinging, struck.

Macho hurtled backwards and down, the knife out of his hand. He reached for it and Dugan stamped hard with his seaboot heel. There were steel clips in the heel; Macho hoarsely screamed.

"Ye're not smart, Spiggoty," Duga said. "But are ye sure now?"

"Si, Capitán," Macho said, all his bod but that arm twitching. "Yes, yes."

Dugan took the knife as Macho stag gered away from him. He flicked h thumb across the blade, staring at th other men. "Ye've heard me," he sai "And him. We're staying here until th wind swings and we can right the shi It's a fool's idea to try for Magellane All of ye would be drowned or killed. Bu ye need clothes for yer backs and mea for your bellies. There's otter down belo along the beach. They'll give ye bot when ye catch them. Turn to and fin some clubs. That's your job now."

THEY went down the cliff one b one, carrying their rude clubs of drif wood. Lucy was the only one who staye there with him. But she was silent, mo tionless, and at last he said, "I've don right?"

"Why ask me?" she said. "I can't hel myself. They can."

He moved to look into her face. "I'm sorry about last night," he said. "Abou him, your father, I mean."

"You should be," she said, her voic abruptly fierce. "You helped kill him."

"Ah," Dugan said. "Ye'd have me t blame because he made a race, then san his ship trying to win it."

"No," she said. "I blame you becaus you left him to go and work in a Steven ship. When he made that race, it wasn against you. It was against the Steven Line and all their ships. You were nothin to him but a paid hand under anothe man's orders. He needed the money though. If he won, he was planning to g out to the far islands and trade alon He—"

"Lucy," Dugan said, his hands har against her shoulders. "He could've tol me. You could ha' told me, before."

She thrust him away from her, her fac livid, her eyes very dark and wide. "No body," she said, "can tell you anything Not even those men down there. Th

Bianca men hate you now, and your own will."

Rage got him then and his voice roughly rose. "The *Bianca* men! The bunch of lug-heads 're here and your father's dead because they took his orders, hadn't the sense to stop him. They—"

"They wanted as much to beat you as he did. Don't you see what you've become? You were just a Red Hook boy when you went to sea in my father's ship. He made a sailor out of you. But then as soon as you could you left him."

"Sure," Dugan said. "I had reason. He'd not listen to me. The big companies were cutting him out of his cargoes all the time. He had to drive his ship harder to keep up with them, or quit."

"When you left him, though, you went in a big company ship. Your friends didn't mean anything to you any more. You drove your ship harder than all the others. All you wanted was to be well paid."

"Ye'd rate me," Dugan said hoarsely, "for a turncoat on me own kind. A man who thinks only of the dollars."

"Why not?" she said. "You knocked Macho around in hard-case style. But you haven't done a thing to the boss's son."

Dugan stared from her and at the beach. Then he picked up a club, started down the cliff. "Watch young Stevens now," he said.

There were more than a dozen otter along the beach. The men chased them wildly clubbing from inshore. "Get to seaward of them," Dugan shouted. "Ye'll lose them that way."

He waded out to his thighs, sent the otter back before him onto the shale. Then he turned to watch the men.

All of them had followed him except Stevens. He still stood on the beach. "Tamp onto that," Dugan said. He had killed a big otter with a club blow, rolled it over at Stevens' feet. "Carry it up the cliff."

"You first," Stevens said. "I'm picking my own jobs."

Dugan struck fast and hard. The blow whirled Stevens stumbling to his knees.

"Get up," Dugan said, "before I boot ye."

Stevens stood, then slowly smiled. "These lads know," he said. "They've got jobs for life if they stick with me. You're tough. Try whipping all of us, together. . . ."

"I will," Dugan said. "Now tamp onto that! Get it up the cliff!"

Stevens was thickly blood-smeared, gasping with nausea as he put the otter down before the largest cave. The other men came after him with their kill and he started to move aside for them.

Dugan shoved him backward asprawl across the sticky carcasses. He took the knife from his belt and slung it into the heap. "Open 'em up, Harvard," he said. "There's plenty of guts in them."

Stevens seemed fascinated by the knife. He brought it into his hand, stared at it. Then he wheeled toward Dugan.

Lucy stopped him, moved swiftly to his side. "He'd kill you if you went for him with that," she said. "He has the right by sea law. Just obey him now. It won't be for long."

"Let him be," Dugan said sharply. "The deal's between him and me. He's asked for it."

She did not answer. She had taken Stevens' head within her arms, was shielding him.

DUGAN wasn't sure some times. Maybe, he thought, he and all the rest of them here were crazy. For days, for weeks, the wind had never stopped. Out of the dark abyss of the Western sky gales fell with a terrible, unending fury.

Snow followed sleet, drifted high in the caves and close around the fires. Cormorants clung to the crags, gulls rode the surf, and the great Cape Horn albatross, paler than the snow, swung slanting on the gale. But the gray sea beyond the reefs was empty. They were alone here, alone and lost. . . .

He tried to keep that thought out of his mind during the few hours of wan sunlight. You had to go on, he told him-

self, and keep them going. If you didn't, the whole lot was through. Stevens would jump you once you slacked off. Then they'd head north in the boat, and on the first island they touched the Indians would finish them.

But the ship was still there. She had settled low inside the reef, was sheltered by it. While the westerlies lasted she was safe. And when he got an easterly, he'd take her to sea. First, though, he had to get aboard. The cargo had to be dumped out of her so she would float back into deep water. He needed the boat for that, to reach her.

Stevens stopped him from fixing the boat. With Stevens around, he couldn't take a chance on it. He had too much power over the men right now. They listened to all he said. Lucy was with him, too, and Lucy knew enough navigation to take the boat north.

He began to drive Stevens with implacable, finally desperate hatred. The man had to crack, he reasoned. He wasn't a sailor, had never been trained to this life. Once Stevens was licked, he could get the others to work fast to restore the ship. "Come on, Harvard," he taunted him constantly. "Ye got the muscle, and ye got the varsity sweater. But ye weren't born on a dockside and raised in a scupper. If ye'll take your little boat ride to Magellanes ye must be a real hard man."

Stevens kept silent, did not respond to him at all. He obeyed the commands given him, moved mechanically, his red-rimmed eyes nearly shut. Then one day as they hunted otter he cracked.

Dugan had been at him ever since they had come down to the beach, sent him out repeatedly into the surf. Wading back through the sucking rush of icy water, an otter floundering before him, he suddenly raised his club and hurled it at Dugan.

The heavy chunk of teak just missed Dugan's head. He laughed and lifted his own club, started out after him. But Stevens was staggering up from the surf and toward the trail to the caves. His hands were over his face and he was sobbing. He stopped at the foot of the trail and looked back at Dugan. "Let me be," he said. "Let me be. . . ." The words were babbled, high-pitched with hysteria. "I can't take any more. You—you win."

"All right," Dugan said. He motioned to Macho. "Take him up. Give him to her."

He stayed on the beach during the rest of that day. He didn't want to see Lucy now, he realized. She had fallen in love with that big, handsome lad. . . .

He worked at repairing the boat, Macho and a couple of the other older sailors helping him. "Tomorrow I'm going out to the ship," he told them. "Then we turn to aboard there. But first we finish here. We want plenty of jerked meat for stores. Those otter hides will bring a good price in any port. So we work tonight. You guys slacked enough when Stevens was around."

It was dark before they finished with the boat. They climbed the cliff by the light of torches. But Lucy stood in front of the cave she occupied. There was a knife in her hand, and she held it out as Dugan passed. "Here," she said. "I've been hiding that for some time. But now I'm afraid I'll use it."

The knife blade glittered in the torchlight. Muscles tightened in Dugan's stomach and back. "Ye mean," he said, "that if ye kept it ye'd use it on me."

But she had already gone back into the cave. The knife was at his feet. He picked it up and threw it violently into the sea.

MACHO and the rest of them were nodding with weariness. It was all they could do to drag themselves down the beach after him. "Listen, *Capitán*," Macho muttered when they were beside the boat. "You know feller work hard for you all day, all night. But go out to ship now, no. We stay here, get stores and skins ready. Better day, less wind, we go to ship."

Dugan cursed them slowly and carefully. His own weariness had passed, giving him a strange, feverish feeling of

enormous strength. "Ye're like him up there," he said. "Ye're all fair weather men. But give me that spar chunk. I'll swim out aboard."

He lashed himself to the short, light piece of driftwood, dived right into the surf. Now, he thought, he'd show Lucy. Maybe he didn't own that ship. But he was the skipper, was going to take her back to sea. Then in the North again, up where the sun was warm across you all day long, Lucy would remember. She'd laugh with him at Stevens and the Stevens name.

Thinking about Lucy and the sun seemed to keep the cold out of him. He didn't mind the dully shocking succession of the waves. From their crests he was able to see the ship. Then as one broke he dropped down alongside the submerged starboard rail.

The wind caught him climbing the deck and he began to shiver. But he went on, half swam, half crawled through the ship.

She was as sound as he had hoped, he found. All the cargo was over to starboard, held secure. When that was heaved out, she would right herself. Most of the canvas in the sail locker was still good, and there was plenty of wire and rope for jury rigging.

He took a long time getting back into the after part of the ship. "Ye're sick," he suddenly whispered. "Plenty sick. If they get ye ashore now they'll beat your top off. Stevens'll be able to kick it off himself."

There was a revolver in his room, he remembered. "Strange, Mike," he said aloud, "if ye have to plug the owner's son with it."

He laughed at that while he searched for and loaded it. Then he buttoned it inside his shirt, crawled up on deck. He let the wind take him once he was lashed to the spar again. It whirled him spinning down the deck and into the sea.

They were all there on the beach. It was his impression they were ten or twelve times bigger than normal size and the cliff behind them opened and shut like a hand. But Macho came forward, and Macho carried a knife.

"Ease off, Spiggoty," he told Macho, fumbling the revolver out. "If any of ye's going to get me it's the girl."

Lucy walked steadily through the surf to him. "You're sick," she said, staring into his face. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Sure," he said. "But the ship's still sound and will take us out. Here . . ." He held the revolver up to her. "Once ye gave me a knife. I'm giving ye this to keep them in line."

DUGAN awoke with the bluish red glare of firelight in his eyes. He moved slowly among the otter skins covering him. This was Lucy's cave, he recognized. She sat by the fire, turned when he moved.

"What got me?" he said.

"Something pretty close to pneumonia," she said. Her face was haggard with exhaustion, and she sat stooped, slowly swaying. "You've been in a coma for a week."

He hunched up a bit, listening to the outside sound. The wind was quite low. He could hear the anger-hoarse voices and the curses from the beach. "The boys," he said, "don't seem to be doing a very smooth job together."

"They're doing a very bad one," she said. She rose and crossed over close to him. "I have to tell you now, Mike. I was wrong when we first landed here, and you were right. They had to be handled your way. If I hadn't been shocked by my father's death I would have known it. But since you've been sick nearly all the food and firewood have been wasted. They don't do anything but eat and sleep, argue who's going to command the boat when they leave."

"How about Gerald Stevens?"

Her eyelids flickered, lowered. "He can't stop them. He—he hasn't got any fight left."

Dugan gazed away from her for a time and at the fire. "I'll be all right soon,

girl," he said. "They'll straighten out when I get after them. But ye're sicker than me right now. Go over there and grab some sleep. Have ye still got the gun, though?"

She put the big .38 in his hand. "I trust you, Red Hook," she said. Then she bent and kissed him.

She was deep in sleep when Gerald Stevens entered the cave. He called her name twice before he saw Dugan. "Pipe down!" Dugan snapped at him. "She rates her sleep."

The tall man's hands and face twitched. He breathed brokenly. "I've got to wake her up," he said. "They're getting ready to leave. They've seen fires over on the other islands. Macho says that they're Indians and he can make a deal with them for the otter skins."

"The Indians' deal will be to dump ye in the sea."

"Lucy has told me that."

"Then why aren't ye down on the beach to keep the lot from shoving off?"

Stevens made a vacant, fumbling gesture. "I can't handle them alone," he said. "They're too tough for me. I wanted to get the revolver."

Dugan slid his hand over the revolver, tried the action with his thumb. "The one sure way," he said, "is to put a rock through the bottom of the boat. This mightn't stop them. If it doesn't, ye'll have to fight them with your hands. But take it."

"Thanks," Stevens said. He tried to smile. "I'm gambling that it works."

DUGAN crawled out to the ledge to watch him go down the cliff. Stevens stopped once, lifted the revolver to study it. He's found out, Dugan thought. He knows it's no good. But Stevens went on, the revolver held flat at his side.

He walked slowly in among the men around the boat. For a moment he stood and talked with them. Then suddenly he heaved up a big chunk of shale rock, crashed it through the bottom of the boat.

The first man to yell was Macho. He started running for Stevens, swinging at him with a club. But Stevens brought the revolver level. "Back up," he said in a strained, rasping voice. "I'll kill you if you come any closer."

Macho stood still, lowered the club. Stevens came toward him with measured steps. He hit him with a short uppercut to the chin.

Macho flopped over and part erect. Stevens struck him with the other hand. The revolver was out of sight; he had put it in his pocket. Like that, empty-handed, he went past Macho to the other men. "Leave the boat," he told them. "Go up the cliff or you'll get what Macho got!"

One of them went for him in a springing bound. Stevens smacked him sidewise into the surf. "You heard me," he said. "Go up the cliff. When we leave here, it's in the ship."

They climbed the cliff in twos and threes. The last bunch carried Macho and the man who had been knocked into the surf. Stevens followed them, flexing the knuckles of his bloody hands. He halted where Dugan crouched. "You want it back?" he said.

"No," Dugan said. "It's no good. The action's rusted solid."

Some of the firelight caught Stevens' face, and Dugan saw he tensely smiled. "I found that out," he said, "going down the cliff."

"I wondered," Dugan said. "I wasn't sure ye'd gone."

Stevens stared into the cave. Lucy was stirring, waking. "I had to," he said. "I couldn't go back."

"What do you mean?" Dugan said.

"I knew there was nobody else to stop them if I didn't. But then I remembered your style. . . . Listen. There's your easterly."

* * *

The moon cast broad light over the sea. Where the ship's forefoot plowed the waves fell back softly radiant. Along the deck under the huge white loom of the

sails there was a black stretch of shadow. Lucy rested at the edge of it, leaning against the quarter rail, gazing forward into the night and towards the warm and fragrant land.

For a long time, it seemed, she did not move at all; and no voice spoke.

Dugan watched her as he strode back and forth past the wheelsman. "Go tell her," he kept saying silently. "The Cape's astern now. Ye've brought them through. If ye ask to marry her now she won't say no."

But when he was beside her he did not speak for quite a time. Stevens sat on the hatch coaming beyond. He was very still, Dugan thought, too still for a man in love with his girl near. "Lucy," he said. "Would ye be thinking of him?"

She turned swiftly and her face was oddly flushed. "Yes," she said. "I was thinking of him, and of you."

"Then," Dugan said, "ye can leave me out. There's little I can ever give ye of what ye need. By now, ye should know it, and that he's the man for ye. Back there, he was the lad who saved us, and him who never saw the sea before."

"You helped him," she said. "You showed him what to do."

She was staring into his eyes now, and her slim body seemed to be drawn taut.

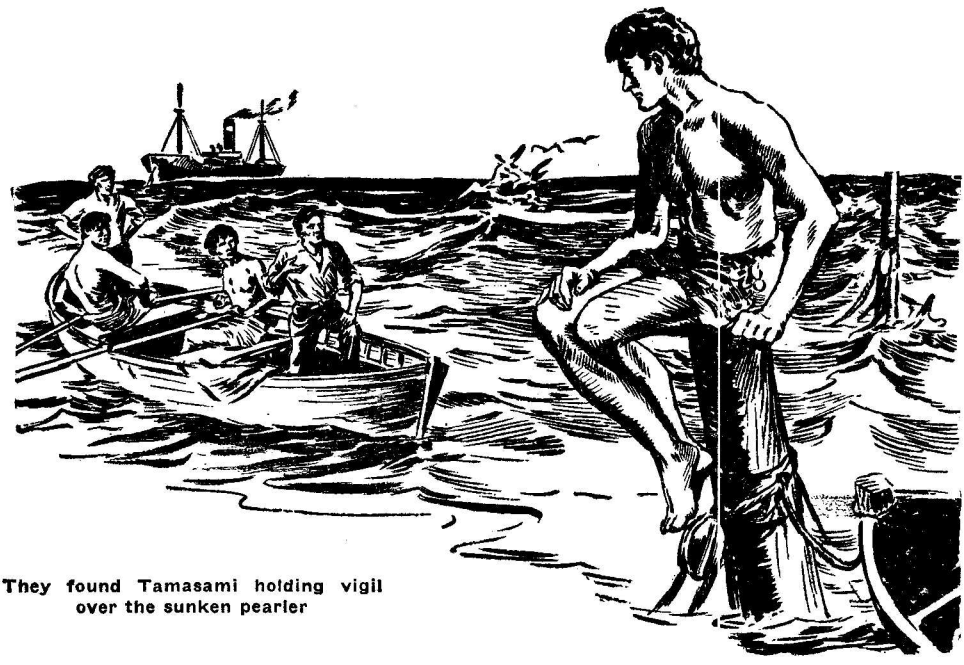
"Ah," Dugan said. "But me fine revolver was no good. He helped himself, proved alone he was a man. There was nothing I could do."

"Why do you tell me?"

"Because he's a proud lad and won't."

Her hand slid along the rail and touched his hand. "But how about you, after we make 'Frisco?"

Dugan laughed, his eyes shining in the moonlight. "I'll get me a ship of me own. I'll have all that I can love. This, the sea."



They found Tamasami holding vigil over the sunken pearler

Lost Harbors

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Begin now this great new novel of adventure and romance in the South Seas

RESCUE arrives at last for the ten-year-old cabin boy who is the only survivor still aboard the *Fairhaven.* But the lad's respite from the angry seas is all too brief; he carries with him a sack of pearls placed in his charge by the *Fairhaven's* dead captain—and their promise of riches drives Reed Darrow, mate on the rescue ship, to mutiny. The cabin boy witnesses the murder of the captain who saved him and himself only manages to escape by leaping into the ocean.

Somehow he manages to live through hours of punishment from the waves, and at last, exhausted and unconscious, he is washed up on the shore of the island of Niu. There the boy is befriended by the kindly natives; they give him the name Tamasami, and he becomes the chief's favorite. Tamasami grows up on that island paradise, content there, and with only a bitter memory of his own race. At manhood he builds himself his own *fale,* and soon the lovely Vaila is to become his wife. Yet occasionally some secret urge that he can scarcely understand impels him to paddle out into the harbor alone, to a place where a single mast reaches up from the ocean floor. Here for a few hours he holds lonely vigil over the only visible relic of the *Fairhaven,* sunk a dozen years before.

IN SAN FRANCISCO the Reed Darrow Steamship Lines have become famous almost overnight. No one knows the owner's past, but he is called Skyrocket Darrow, this man who has become a master of commerce so swiftly. And Reed Darrow, having founded a sea empire on a stolen sack of pearls, is well satisfied; all that he desires now is to marry Celeste Cameron, the beautiful daughter of a great San Francisco family.

Then one day he reads of a mast tip in the South Sea which the newspapers suggest might belong to the lost pearler *Fairhaven.* Reed Darrow suffers a momentary fear, knowing that the wreck holds proof of his own crimes. But it is simple enough for him to order his henchman Ritchie to erase that last clue—the mast tip in the South Seas. . . .

This story began in last week's Argosy

CHAPTER VI

GUARDIAN OF THE WRECK

RITCHIE cleared and steamed south. In due time his shabby little trader crossed the line, delivered a shipment of roofing iron at Christmas Island, then pointed for Rarotonga. The course from Rarotonga to his third port of call needed but slight deviation for the fulfillment of Darrow's errand.

Equipped with an exact memo of the latitude and longitude, Ritchie on a sultry noon sighted the tip of mast. He affected surprise. "Looks like a wreck!" he exclaimed to his entirely honest second in command. Ritchie could hardly doubt that here lay the old schooner *Fairhaven*. The position checked with his memory of an incident eleven years gone by.

"It's a wreck all right, and an old one," the mate agreed.

"Miybe we'd better report it," suggested Ritchie. " 'Eave to close by 'er and we'll 'ave a look.'

The ship eased in to stand by a few lengths to leeward of the mast tip. By that time, however, a detail became clear at which Ritchie's surprise was not affected. He saw an almost naked brown man perched on the mast.

"Blime!" exclaimed Ritchie.

No land was in sight. Why should a native be sitting like a gull on that spike of wrecked rigging?

Nothing to be alarmed about, decided Ritchie. "It's a 'azard to traffic," he told the mate.

The mate was inclined to disagree. On the contrary, he suggested, the mast served as a warning of a high bottom here. Seeing it, other ships would be prompted to steer clear. At the same time the mate thought the wreck ought to be identified and reported.

"We'll 'ave a look, anywiy," directed Ritchie.

A boat was lowered. Ritchie and his mate embarked in it with two men at the oars.

"Wonder wot that nitive's doin' 'ere!" Ritchie murmured as they rowed toward the mast.

The man perched on the mast, he could see now, was young and of robust build. His eyes, staring from under a thatch of auburn hair, flashed something like resentment at the intrusion. Ritchie was impressed by the distinctly Saxon cast of his features.

"A 'arf-caste, I tike it."

A *paopao* was moored to the mast tip. Evidently the young islander had come here of his own accord and was in no distress.

"Wot yer doin' 'ere, boy?"

Tamasami understood the inquiry. However, with only slight practise in English for eleven years, he did not quickly find words to respond.

He was engrossed, too, in a scrutiny of Ritchie. Ritchie had changed less than Tamasami. In a moment the boy knew him—here was that sly little bos'n of the old mutiny.

"Come alive!" Ritchie barked at him. "Yer ain't out 'ere fer yer 'ealth, are you?"

Still Tamasami did not respond. And something strangely familiar about his face began to alarm Ritchie. Somewhere, he thought, he had seen this boy before.

"Know what wreck this is?" the mate asked pleasantly.

"It's mine," answered Tamasami.

"The 'ell it is!" exclaimed Ritchie. His eyes were popping. Sweat began beading his forehead. He remembered his last sight of the old schooner as she drifted away, sinking. He remembered, too, a cabin boy found earlier on the derelict. Could this be the same boy?

Was this a ghost, grown up, arising now from the sea at the scene of an old crime?

"It's my ship," Tama repeated stubbornly.

"Yer ain't, by any charnce, the cabin boy of the *Fair'aven?*" gasped Ritchie.

The boy's prompt nod brought panic to Ritchie. He could no longer doubt. The boy's presence here was too pat. It was the same face, matured but the same.

" 'E's crizy!" gulped Ritchie.

The mate smiled tolerantly. "It's hardly worth a quarrel, is it? If this fellah thinks she's his wreck, let him have her."

"We'll just tike a sounding," Ritchie decreed nervously, "so we can chart this 'ere 'igh bottom. Then we'll be orf."

"Back to the ship for sounding tackle," the mate ordered. Immediately the oarsmen began rowing to the ship.

RITCHIE could breathe with relief only when they were well away. Suppose that boy had started talking! The mate would have been all ears in a flash. Details of murderous mutiny would leak out. . . .

So by all means he must get the mate and the two oarsmen out of earshot of the witness.

"I'll tike those soundings myself," Ritchie announced when they reached deck. "Might send a diver down, too, to mike sure what schooner she is. Detail those two Kanaka deck hands to oar me back there."

Ostensibly he chose the Kanakas because they were the best divers. Actually the selection was because they understood little English.

With his wits assembled now, still another motive ruled Ritchie. Darrow, he knew, wouldn't believe this story. Darrow would consider it utterly fantastic unless Ritchie could show him proof. Proof that a cabin boy murdered at sea had come to life; that the boy was still standing by on the wreck now, just as he had stood by on a derelict drifting in the doldrums.

"I'll 'ave to let 'im see with 'is own eyes," Ritchie muttered. And from his cabin he brought a camera to sling over his shoulder as he re-embarked in the boat. With it he could snap a close-up of the boy on the mast.

Oaring back there with the two Kanakas, Ritchie thought of something else. A vague suspicion had recurred to torment him, from time to time, through all these last eleven years. Had Darrow double-crossed them? Himself, Cuttle, Dicksong and the others? What about those pearls? According to Darrow, the boy had dived with them through a porthole into the sea. Had he?

Only the boy knew. The boy could tell the truth, if he wished, about Darrow.

Once more the boat drew alongside the mast tip and Ritchie faced the boy there.

"Tike a sounding, men," he directed, "and we'll put it on the chart."

The two Kanakas lowered a weighted line to measure depth here. While they were so occupied, Ritchie clicked his camera at Tamasami. The distance was just right to show the tip of mast, with the boy clinging to it, against a background of shoreless ocean.

The Kanakas reported a sounding in which Ritchie had no interest at all.

"Tike a dive, both of you," he ordered, "and see if this wreck's got ary a funnel. If she's got a funnel, she ain't no blarsted schooner."

Again it was only a ruse. Ritchie knew quite well that the wreck was funnelless. But when the two Kanakas dived, it left him for a minute alone with the boy.

"See 'ere, boy. Who got awiy with those pearls? Was it you or Darrow?"

"I took no pearls," asserted Tamasami.

"The mite took 'em?" Ritchie looked at him shrewdly. This boy, he reasoned, had no motive to conceal facts.

"They were locked in the safe," Tama said. "I did not take them."

An oath exploded from Ritchie. " 'E scuttled us, the mite did. Left us 'igh and dry and mide orf with all those pearls!"

Two heads popping from the water kept Ritchie from saying more. The divers reported no funnel; it was the rotting wreck of a schooner, they said. But again Ritchie wasn't interested.

He made them row him quickly back to the ship. "We've wasted enough time 'ere. Get under wiy and look lively."

In short shift the dingy little steamer was under way. Ritchie went to his cabin and primed his indignation with rum. Bitterly he cursed Darrow. Between the word of Darrow and the word of the boy there

could be no choice. Why should the boy lie about it? He had nothing to gain. While Darrow had gained a fortune in pearls.

It was all clear now. Ritchie could see that this command of an old tub had been given him merely as a sop. Cuttle, Dicksong and the others, he remembered, had been appeased with the old tramp freighter which now, renamed and reregistered, was still poking somewhere about the seas.

"'E'll piy fer it, 'e will!" swore the ex-bos'n. "If 'e dawn't, I'll turn that lad loose on 'im and 'e'll 'ang 'igh!"

SMOKE drifted darkly down the sea. Tamasami, on his mast tip, watched until it dissipated and the steamer had dipped beyond the horizon.

Then he unmoored his *paopao* from the mast, embarked and began paddling toward home. The trade wind was at his back and carried him swiftly on along the swells. In only a few hours he sighted the dark green facade of Niu.

By sundown he was shooting through the outer reef there. He crossed the lagoon and beached at the foot of a path which led upslope to his *fale*.

The *fale* was finished now. Tama's face, sober and troubled since the meeting with Ritchie, brightened when he stepped in upon its clean coral floor. It was home. To it, when she was no longer *taupo,* he would bring Vaila. Here they would live, forever safe from all hurricanes and treachery. Men like Ritchie and Darrow could never touch them.

He himself must forget them. But it was difficult. For eternally the ships of white men came to keep fresh those memories. Even now the eyes of Tamasami alighted on a brass chest, salvage from the schooner *Fairhaven,* a thing which itself must always keep those candles of his background burning.

Tamasami opened the chest, took from it a sextant and a compass. Tools of white men who sailed ships. And here were papers in the chest, writings of record still legible because the chest was watertight. Of what use these papers? Tamasami couldn't see that they were any use at all.

Other things were, though. That axe, for instance.

He picked up the axe and looked at its polished blade. Faintly he could make out the name of a ship which was etched there. The name was not *Fairhaven.* Here was something which didn't belong to the schooner. It came from the old tramp of Darrow and Ritchie! Why should Ritchie think that he, Tamasami, had dived into the sea with pearls?

Outside the *fale* a voice called softly. Vaila came from the dusk with dark inquiring eyes. She sat down on the coral at his feet. A hurt was in her voice. "For two days and one night I have not seen you, Tama."

The clouds of trouble faded from his face. He laughed. "But you see me now, Vaila. I go, but always you see me again."

"Where is it, Tama, that you go?"

"I am a man, Vaila," he evaded. "A man goes and he comes home to his woman. Otherwise he is only a child."

"But I saw your face when you came this time, Tama, and there was no smile there."

"The smile is there now, Vaila. Is it not enough?"

She wasn't satisfied. Tamasami, she saw, was kneeling by an open chest. "What are these, Tama?" She pointed to two instruments of brass there, a sextant and a compass.

"They are tools of the cloudbursters," he explained.

"What are they used for, Tama?"

"With them," he said, "one may sail a ship to far lands."

"As far as Tulofa?"

"Much farther, Vaila. With these one may cross all the seas and never be lost."

She sat brooding for a while. Then: "You are weary, Tama. You must sleep, now." She kissed him and ran out into the darkness.

In a hour she returned stealthily. Tamasami lay sleeping on a grass mat with a

bag of shell under his head. Vaila, careful not to awaken him, groped toward the chest. From it she took the sextant and the compass.

She ran to the beach with them and found two large stones there. Placing the sextant on one stone, she began pounding it with the other. Fiercely she beat it, demolishing it into tiny fragments. In the same way she smashed the compass.

Then she gathered the battered bits of metal and threw them far into the lagoon. Tools of the cloudbursters! They could sail to far lands with them, could they? But these would never so serve Tamasami!

CHAPTER VII

A PORTRAIT FROM NIU

RITCHIE docked his ship in San Francisco. In short shift he was in Darrow's office, reporting: "Believe it or not, Cap'n, but 'e's still there!"

Darrow finished signing a sheaf of papers, then looked up with only a mild interest. "Who's still where, Ritchie?"

"That cabin boy yer chised into the sea!"

The ex-bos'n launched it as a bombshell, but Darrow still did not catch his drift. The shipping magnate noticed, however, a curious change in Ritchie's manner. Ritchie seemed a little more cocksure of himself than usual. For one thing he had taken a seat without awaiting an invitation from his employer.

Darrow observed two other details now. Ritchie had come in here fortified with more than a few drinks. Also the man had the impudence to select a cigar from a box on the desk. He sat with it cockily uptilted between his lips.

"What cabin boy? Talk fast, Ritchie. I'm busy."

"The *Fair'aven's* cabin boy, Cap'n."

Darrow stared at him. "You're crazy. He drowned at sea."

"Yer thort the *Fair'aven* went down too. But she didn't. Not all of 'er. A tip of her mast still sticks out."

Darrow remembered, then, the minor errand on which two months ago he ha dispatched Ritchie. "So it does," h agreed. "You broke the mast off, like told you?"

"I sure dic n't, Cap'n." Ritchie blev cool smoke rings and crossed his spindl legs. "Why? Because that schooner's stil manned, Cap'n. And by the sime old one boy crew."

Darrow's face darkened and his eye narrowed. "Just what are you trying t say, Ritchie?"

Ritchie laughed slyly. "Funny 'ov things keep poppin' up, ain't it, just whe everything looks shipshipe and sife! Tik this 'ere cabin boy. 'E was a lad o' ten wasn't 'e? It'd mike 'im a grown man now."

"If he kept alive, yes," admitted Dar row.

"If yer dawn't think 'e kept alive, tik a peep at this." Ritchie crossed to the desk with a well-developed photograph. A camera shop in Honolulu had developed his film for him, and now the details of the boy's face stood out clearly.

Darrow looked at it. He saw what seemed to be a sun-bronzed white boy dressed like a Polynesian islander, and seated on a tip of mast in the sea.

"That's where I found 'im," Ritchie chuckled.

For a long time Darrow stared at the picture. It looked, he thought, very much like that cabin boy grown up. Seen anywhere else there might be a doubt of it. But seen on the mast of the sunken *Fairhaven* there could hardly be any at all.

Darrow dropped the photograph on the desk and moved quickly to a map on the wall. It was a comprehensive map of the entire Pacific area, showing all trade routes and all land even to the smallest charted atolls.

Ritchie reclaimed the photograph and restored it to his pocket. Darrow, facing the map, did not see this. He placed his pencil point accurately on co-ordinates of latitude and longitude which had been noted as the wreck's location. A dot lay not far to the left of it. Using a magnify-

ng glass Darrow saw that the dot was abeled *Niu.*

His mind moved in flashes. "Listen, Ritchie. It means he got ashore at Niu ome way. He must be living there now."

" 'E can still tark the King's English oo," Ritchie warned. "If 'e tarks too blarsted much of it, where'll yer be, Cap'n? Yer'll be 'angin' on a 'igh 'ill somewhere, I'd siy!"

Darrow turned with the muscles of his neck swelling. "So will you, Ritchie."

"Aw, I dawn't know!" Ritchie debated. 'Come a 'urricane, I can duck out and lie low till she blows over. But *you* can't, Cap'n. Yer'd 'ave a 'ard time 'idin', a big swell like you with a fleet o' steamships. And look wot yer'd 'ave to leave behind!"

"You fool! Now get this, Ritchie. It's dynamite for both of us. For Cuttle, Dicksong and the rest of them, too, wherever they are. That boy's got to be handled. Understand?"

" 'Andle 'im yerself, Cap'n."

But Darrow was too concerned over the fact of a living cabin boy to take notice of Ritchie's insolence.

"Here's your orders, Ritchie. Weigh anchor and steam down to Niu. Find the boy. Handle him. Get rid of him. I don't care how, but don't be too crude about it. It can look like an accident. And don't forget it's the devil and the end of a rope—if he ever gets the ear of a cop!"

RITCHIE reached for another cigar and lighted it. He blew rings toward the ceiling and said: "Not me, Cap'n. If yer warnt it done, go do it yerself."

Darrow began to realize, then, that Ritchie had some leverage which hadn't yet been produced.

As he stood glaring, the ex-bos'n calmly produced it. "About those pearls, Cap'n. 'Ow much did they bring?"

"What pearls?"

"The ones yer doublecrossed yer shipmites out of. Yer took 'em out of the sife, 'id 'em, then said the boy'd mide orf with 'em. Which 'e didn't. Because I 'ad a tark with 'im."

"He lied to you," Darrow blurted. His jowls were blue-black. Ritchie should have read the danger signals there. Once again Reed Darrow was the bully mate, towering with clenched, itching hands and ready to crush all opposition.

"Dawn't try that on me, Cap'n."

"So you won't obey orders?" Darrow challenged.

"I've tiken my larst one from you."

"That's right. You have. Now just what do you want?"

Ritchie cupped his hands. "I warnt every shilling those pearls fetched you, right 'ere in these two 'ands."

Darrow's eyes glinted. If he paid this blackmail, more would follow. There'd be no end to it. Best to kick Ritchie out of the office and deny everything. Probably there'd be nothing to deny, unless the boy himself started telling tales. For Ritchie would hardly dare go to the police.

"Whatever happens, we're in the same boat, Ritchie."

"You think so? I dawn't. Arfter all it was you wot killed the skipper, not me. That was the only crime the boy witnessed. 'E saw you do it. 'E didn't see the rest of us do anything but just stand there, skeered out of our blarsted skins. Think it over, Cap'n. Do I get wot I warnt, or don't I?"

"You get this."

Darrow was on him in a fury. His fist caught Ritchie's chin and sent him spinning against the wall. When the ex-bos'n staggered to his feet, Darrow once more battered him down. The outer office help might hear the racket and come rushing in. Darrow did not discount that possibility. But what of it? He could simply tell them he was throwing out a blackmailing bum.

Except for the fact that clerks were just beyond a partition wall, Darrow surely would have killed Ritchie. As it was, he merely beat him down and then kicked him unconscious. A private exit gave from the office into a hallway. Darrow finally opened it and heaved Ritchie out just as he would have heaved a bale of jute.

Ritchie fell in an inert heap there. Darrow slammed the door and stood alone, quivering, the muscles of his neck red and swollen.

With an effort, he calmed himself and set his mind to the hazards promised by Ritchie. From Ritchie himself, he decided, there could be no hazard. That beating would teach him a lesson. Nor would the ex-bosun want to be charged with murderous mutiny any more than Darrow. Therefore there'd be no squawks to the police.

But the boy on Niu Island! He was a living fact—Darrow was sure of it now. Ritchie could never have summoned all that brass without cards and spades in his sleeve.

The boy's photograph! Darrow moved to the desk to look at it again. But it wasn't there. Ritchie, he realized, must have picked it up. Not that it made any difference. Nevertheless Darrow went to the hall door and looked out, with the idea of reclaiming the exhibit from Ritchie.

But the ex-bos'n wasn't out there. He'd gone limping away to cry in his beer at some pub, thought Darrow.

Darrow went moodily to a window. He looked down upon the harbor and at a myriad of masts and funnels there. His own ships of the Blue Ring line. Docks, warehouses, the yacht *Flying Fox* riding gracefully at anchor. All his own. And all to be lost—together with his precious neck—if a witness on Niu Island should give evidence in court.

Sweat broke in streaks on Darrow's brow as he pressed a button. When a clerk answered, he sent for Captain Walts of the *Flying Fox.*

AS EXACTLY surmised by Darrow, Ritchie at this moment was salving his humiliation in a waterfront beer parlor. He sat slumped at a table there, drinking, raging, heaping bitter maledictions upon Darrow.

In a very short while he was maudlin. "I'll see 'im 'anged, I will, 'even if I 'ave to 'ang with him!"

His bones ached, but his pride ach worse. To be beaten and kicked out Darrow was bad enough. Yet that alo Ritchie might have taken. In the sailori business a man had to expect hard knoc If you talked back to a man higher u you could expect to be blasted to the de with a broken head.

But Ritchie had more than a batter head. There was this matter of the pear Darrow, holding up those same pearls a bait to mutiny, had proceeded then cheat his followers from sharing the pri with him. It tortured the pride of Ritch to think that he'd been so gullible.

Pushing his beer aside, Ritchie bawl for rum. He guzzled the rum and his fu flamed higher. "'E bloody well won't g awiy with it! Just wite and see!"

He went out and staggered up Mark Street. Hot in his foggy brain was impulse to report Darrow to the polic To see Darrow gibbeted for murder the high seas! To see Darrow's migh maritime empire crash in scandal a shame!

A blue-coated policeman loomed befo Ritchie. Ritchie's bleary eyes blinked him. Sight of those brass buttons ga him pause. He was a coward. How cou he squeal on Darrow without also squea ing on himself? Ritchie had a neck of h own that needed saving.

Dodging the officer, he shambled in a barroom for another drink. He was stal mated. How could he hurl a poisoned da into Darrow without paying penalti himself?

A hint of the answer came when looked out a window and saw a limousi go by. A chauffeur was driving. In th back seat sat Reed Darrow and a lad She was Celeste Cameron, Ritchie knew and was soon to become Darrow's wife.

"If she knew 'arf the truth, she'd giv that bloke the gite!"

Why not tell her the truth, or half it? Ritchie considered the idea slyly Would she believe? Probably not. Almos certainly she wouldn't go rushing to th cops. Yet it might put Darrow in ba

odor. Even if she didn't believe, she'd be forced to doubt and to wonder.

"A charnce she might give 'im the gite!" concluded Ritchie. He left the saloon and went bowling up the street in the direction taken by Darrow and the lady.

THE Cameron residence was a two-story Monterey deep on a shrubberied lawn. A sweep of broad drive arched through the grounds. Along this came the limousine which delivered Darrow and Celeste to a porte cochère.

Roberta met them at the door.

"Hello, sis. Good evening, Mr. Darrow." The girl tried to make her smile passably cordial. But it was no use. Her eyes couldn't meet Darrow's without clashing.

"Isn't it a shame, Roberta!" exclaimed Celeste. "Reed has to miss all those parties next week."

Darrow gave a wry confirmation. "Yes. Something has come up. A deal in dockage over at Honolulu. I've got to dash over there on the yacht."

"Do hurry back, Reed," urged Celeste.

Roberta suppressed her impulse to say, "No, stay as long as you like." Inwardly she was elated that Darrow was making a trip. It was a respite. Yet a detail puzzled Roberta. Always before, when making a cruise on his yacht, Darrow had invited Celeste and Roberta to go along. Why didn't he this time?

They went to the living room for cocktails. "You'll stay for dinner of course," Celeste invited.

Darrow shook his head. "Sorry, dear. But I must run along. Want to get off tonight if I can manage it."

Roberta smiled. The real reason was, she guessed, that Darrow could never quite find himself at ease in this house. Here he could always feel Roberta's eyes probing him.

It wouldn't need to be this way, Darrow himself was thinking, once he was married to Celeste. He'd make precious sure that Roberta didn't live with them.

"Bon voyage." Roberta smiled.

"Thanks," Darrow said. "Take good care of Celeste."

"Don't worry. And I'll try to keep her from missing you too much."

He smiled grimly. "I'm sure you will. You're good at that, Roberta."

Celeste went to the door with him and he kissed her goodbye. She stood looking fondly after him as he entered the limousine and drove away.

Ritchie watched the car wheel into the avenue. When it was gone he came reeling, with slyness in his red-rimmed eyes and Dutch courage in his heart, from behind an oleander on the lawn.

"I dassen't tell the cops. But I can tip orf the lidy, carn't I?"

With a swaggering boldness he mounted the steps and knocked on the door.

It opened and a severe English butler stood there. The butler's eyebrows arched at sight of a rum-soaked sailor on the steps.

"I warnt to see the lidy of the 'ouse," demanded Ritchie.

"She's not in."

"The 'ell she ain't! I just seen 'er go in, didn't I?"

The door would have slammed shut, but Ritchie got a knee and shoulder in the crack of it. His voice rose shrilly. "Who do yer think I am? A blarsted bum?"

"Quite right," the butler assented frigidly. "Will you please go away? Or must I call the police!"

"There's something the lidy ort to know!" shrilled Ritchie.

His protests rose to a pitch which reached Celeste and Roberta. They were still in the living room. Roberta looked curiously toward the entrance hall. "William seems to be having trouble, sis."

Ritchie's piercing voice came to her again. "If the lidy dawn't 'ear wot I got to siy, she'll be sorry."

"Who on earth is it, William?" Roberta by then was on her way to the entrance. She saw an intruding leg and elbow which William was desperately trying to eject.

"It's a tramp in his cups, ma'am."

Bleary eyes of the would-be intruder

now appeared at the crack. "It ain't 'er I warnt to see," he cried. "It's the other lidy—the one wot's gonna get married."

Roberta caught this cue and was startled. If the business had anything to do with Celeste's marriage, then it must in some way concern Darrow.

"Show the man in, William."

With a pained reluctance on William's part, Ritchie was admitted. He followed Roberta into the living room and there confronted Celeste. Celeste appraised him with astonishment.

"That is all, William."

The servant withdrew, closing the door.

"Why," Roberta demanded, "do you want to see my sister?"

"To give 'er a tip-off on that bloke Darrow!" Ritchie whined. He was confused now, in the presence of these ladies; but he stood his ground. " 'E's a rotter, 'e is, and she orter give 'im the gite!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE VAGABOND AND THE LADY

"PREPOSTEROUS!" Celeste stood up, pale with indignation. "Send him away, Roberta. I won't listen to—"

"It won't hurt to hear him," Roberta cut in quickly. Already she was alertly attentive. What the man was saying quite corresponded with her own opinion of Darrow.

" 'E ain't wot yer think 'e is, miss," Ritchie insisted. " 'E stole a 'atful o' pearls, once, and 'e murdered 'is own captain in cold blood."

Shock paralyzed Celeste.

"Yes?" prompted Roberta.

" 'E led a mutiny, 'e did; 'e chopped a 'ole in a schooner and sunk 'er to the bottom o' the sea."

Still Celeste could only stare. But Roberta kept probing. "Did you see him do it? Who are you, anyway?"

Here Ritchie grew cagey. Telling on Darrow was one thing, and implicating himself was quite another.

"Where did this happen?" Roberta asked.

Celeste found her voice, then. "Wi liam!" she cried.

The butler appeared promptly. "Yo called, ma'am?"

"Put this horrible man out, William.

William was more than willing. He too Ritchie firmly by an arm. When the ma tried to pull away, the servant grippe his collar and jerked him without cere mony toward the door.

"Put me out if yer warnt to, lidy, Ritchie shrieked as he was hauled away "Just the sime, I'm telling yer the truth about that bloke, so 'elp me!"

Roberta followed to the door.

"How can you!" protested Celeste. She was equally mortified and incredulous "Don't listen to him any more, Roberta."

But Roberta asked one more question "Can you prove this?"

"I could if I warnted to, miss." Just then William reached the door with Ritchie and pushed him out. Ritchie went rolling down the steps. William closed the door, bolted it, then stood militantly there. His sympathy in this instance was entirely aligned with Celeste.

Roberta went to the living room, shutting herself in there with Celeste. Celeste, she knew, would scold her for questioning that man. There'd be a scene, and it was better if William didn't hear it.

Celeste stood with her face white and strained. "I'm ashamed of you, Roberta!"

"I suppose you don't believe a word of it," the girl suggested quietly.

"Believe him? A disreputable, drunken reprobate like that!"

"But we can't just ignore it, can we?"

"Of course we'll ignore it. Would you take the word of a man like that against Reed's?"

"Mr. Darrow hasn't been heard from on the subject. Suppose you ask him, quite sweetly of course, to explain."

"Ridiculous, Roberta!"

It was difficult. How, wondered Roberta, could she follow up without mortally offending Celeste?

"It's perfectly scandalous!" cried Celeste.

"Exactly," Roberta agreed. "So there's only one thing to do." She crossed to a telephone and took the receiver from its hook.

CELESTE fairly flew to catch her arm. In alarm she cried, "What are you doing, Roberta?"

"Calling the police. What else can I do?"

"Call the police? You can't. You mustn't. Get Reed all mixed up in some lying scandal? If you do, Roberta, I'll never speak to you again."

Roberta saw with dismay that she meant every word of it.

"Be reasonable, Celeste. After all we're citizens with a duty to perform. A man comes to our house and reports a crime. Murder. What difference does it make whether we believe it or not? We've got to pass it on to the police."

Celeste pulled her away from the phone. "Please don't. Promise me you won't. We can't insult Reed. That's what it would be—an insult to the man I love and expect to marry. Promise me you won't, Roberta."

She was passionately insistent. And when she broke into tears Roberta could only surrender.

"I'll promise not to call the police, Celeste, on one condition. That you yourself call up Mr. Darrow and ask him to explain."

Celeste protested, but it was the only bargain she could make. In the end she did take the telephone and call Darrow's apartment.

When he answered she said to him: "Oh, Reed, we've had a perfectly outrageous visitor since you were here. He was blind drunk, and he said the most terrible things about you, dear."

Darrow, at the other end of the line, stiffened. At once he knew who the man must be.

Calmly he asked, "What did he look like, Celeste?"

"A waterfront vagabond, Reed. A sly little man who didn't give his name. You never heard such a wild tale!" she said.

Darrow listened to her version of the accusations. He laughed at them. "Don't let it disturb you, Celeste. I think I know who the man must be. A Blue Ring employee named Ritchie. I fired him this morning for general worthlessness. He went out, swearing he'd get even with me. That's all."

"Of course, Reed. You don't think I'd believe him, do you?"

"I hope not, Celeste."

Darrow hung up. His face was set now in a brutal scowl, which to Celeste, if she could have seen it, would have gone far to confirm Ritchie.

To Darrow, Ritchie's entire maneuver seemed quite plain. Ritchie was out to throw a scare into him. He'd gone not to the police but to Celeste. All calculated to make Darrow jittery—and bring about his surrender to demands.

Ritchie would be around in a day or two, Darrow concluded, to collect. The big man went to a desk and took from it an automatic pistol. He loaded it, put it in his pocket. He was ready, now, for Ritchie.

It meant, of course, that he'd have to put off leaving on the yacht for a day or two. Long enough to deal with Ritchie. Ritchie, as things stood, was no less a hazard than the boy on Niu Island.

First he must deal with Ritchie, then with the boy at Niu.

ROBERTA slept but little that night. Of only one thing she was certain. The matter introduced by Ritchie could not be ignored or dropped. She must get to the bottom of it. She'd promised Celeste not to consult the police. But she hadn't promised not to consult again with Ritchie.

She must find Ritchie. She must wheedle details from Ritchie. Even if she could only prove a tenth part of that story, it would be enough to save Celeste. Celeste *must* be saved, at all costs. She must not marry Reed Darrow.

Repeating that thesis over and over in

her mind, Roberta at last went to sleep.

In the morning she drove her roadster to the waterfront. She inquired of a friendly clerk at the Blue Ring docks about Ritchie. Ritchie, she learned, had until yesterday skippered one of the Blue Ring's smaller trading vessels, but was now out of a job.

"He got fresh with the boss, miss; and the boss threw him out."

That much seemed to be well known. But nothing else. Roberta made the rounds of waterfront hotels, rooming houses, pool halls, bars and parks. She covered all the waterfront employment agencies. She overlooked no place where a seafaring man out of work might in likelihood be found.

But the day passed and she did not find Ritchie.

The second day was no less futile. Toward the end of it she noticed that Darrow's yacht, the *Flying Fox,* still rode at anchor. Mildly this puzzled her. Darrow had been in a rush to get off for Honolulu on business. Why hadn't he gone?

Since the yacht lay conveniently alongside a dock, Roberta went aboard to ask Captain Walts about Ritchie. The girl knew and liked Walts. Having made short cruises aboard her with Celeste, on weekends, she knew the entire crew. They were honest seamen, all of them.

"Yes, miss," Captain Walts said. "I know Ritchie and they tell me he just got the sack. Doesn't surprise me much. Not very dependable, that fellow."

"Do you know where I can find him?"

Walts shook his head. "Chances are he's shipped out to China by this time."

"You intended to leave yesterday yourself, didn't you, Captain?"

Walts smiled. "That was the orders, miss. But something's detaining Mr. Darrow. A directors' meeting, I believe he said. But he said we wouldn't wait longer than tomorrow night, at the outside."

"Thank you."

As the girl was leaving Walts called after her: "My compliments to your sister, miss. Tell her I'm sorry the two of you aren't sailing with us, this tim

Roberta gave up her search and we home.

Late the next afternoon she was su moned to the telephone. A famil wheezing voice spoke to her. "Are you t lidy's sister? I mean the one wot didi warnt me thrown out, the other diy."

It was Ritchie.

Roberta answered breathlessly. "Ye Can I see you?"

"That yer can, miss. But not at y 'ouse. I dawn't 'ime to be thrown out my 'ead any more."

"May I come to you?"

"If yer come alone, miss."

"I'll come alone. Where?"

A pause. Ritchie was evidently thinl ing up some discreet place for a meetin

"There's an old ware'ouse opposit wharf 49, miss. It ain't in use now. Ye can find me there right arfter dark to night. Siy about eight bells, miss."

"I'll be there," Roberta promised.

It was risky, she conceded; yet she wa determined to find out whatever wa known by Ritchie. Because the warehous might lack lighting she provided hersel with a flashlight. At half an hour afte seven she drove down to the waterfront The warehouse was dark and apparentl deserted. She parked in front of it.

EIGHT bells were striking from some ship in the harbor when she saw Ritchie dodging through the gloom. He turned into the warehouse. Roberta got out of her roadster and followed.

" 'Ere you are, miss."

She was inside now. Turning on her flash she saw his grinning face against a background of cobwebs there. He appeared to be sober.

"What else," she demanded, "do you know about Reed Darrow?"

"Yer ain't 'eard 'arf of it yet, miss."

"Are you sure," she challenged, "that this isn't just a grudge? You quarreled with Darrow, didn't you?"

"Wot if I did? And yer dead right I owe 'im a grudge. 'E skinned the 'ide orf

me one time. A deal in pearls it was, but that's neither 'ere nor there."

Doubts assailed Roberta. This scamp admitted a grudge. But suppose he did. Facts were facts, from whatever source they came. She wasn't interested in the derelictions of Ritchie but in those of Darrow.

"You say he killed a skipper one time?"

" 'E did that, in cold blood. 'E'd do it to anybody that got in 'is wiy. Me, for instance. That's why 'e s been 'oldin' up this yacht trip for three diys when 'e meant to sail Choosday. 'E's 'opin' to shut me up, miss, with the 'ot end of a bullet."

The girl shivered. But it made logic. Darrow *had* postponed leaving. It was a postponement which hac come quite suddenly after Celeste's bombshell talk with him about Ritchie.

"Why," she questioned, "don't you tell the police?"

"Not me, miss. If I did, Darrow'd get free on bail an' shoot 'ell outer me. I'm scared o' that blighter, miss."

He was scared of the police, too, she guessed. Whatever the crime was, chances were Ritchie was in it as deep as Darrow.

"But you won't need to be afraid of him after tonight," she suggested. "At least not until he gets back from Honolulu."

Ritchie dropped an eyelid slyly. " 'Onolulu me eye, miss! 'E ain't goin' to 'Onolulu. Or if 'e does, it'll just be a blind on 'is wiy further south."

"South to where?"

"To an out-of-the-wiy island, miss, where he figures to do in a boy. It's a lad wot can 'ave 'im 'anged, 'igher 'n a tops'l, if Darrow don't put 'im awiy."

Roberta gasped. "You mean he means to kill this boy?"

"I mean the lad'll ave an accident, miss, not long arfter Darrow gets there. It's the wiy 'e works."

The flashlight was still on Ritchie's face. Slyness was there, and bitter hatred of Darrow. Yet in spite of it the man's words carried a ring of sincerity.

"But we can't let him do that," Roberta protested. "Who is this boy?"

" 'Ere's 'is pitcher, miss."

Ritchie pulled a photograph from his pocket. He handed it to Roberta and she turned her flash upon it. An odd photograph, apparently taken in mid-ocean. A tip of mast showed above the waves. On it sat an almost naked young man with a defiant stare in his eyes. He was good looking, Roberta thought. But why was he perched on the mast?

"It's 'im Darrow imes to do in, miss. Mike no mistike about that."

Harassed and confused, she continued to stare at the boy's likeness.

Then far at the rear end of the warehouse a hinge creaked. A draft of air struck them. The girl heard a footstep crunching on gravel.

"It's the blarsted nightwatchman," Ritchie whispered. "I'm orf, miss."

He was off, dodging out into the gloom of the street. Roberta followed, calling nervously after him. But he was already out of sight.

SHE went to her car, got in and waited there on a chance that he might return. He did not. After a while she knew he wouldn't. More than likely she'd never see him again.

The photograph was still in her hand. Roberta studied the face there. The strong youthful mold of it struck her as fine and appealing. Was he white? According to Ritchie this young man was doomed to death by Darrow. Again the girl shivered. Something ought to be done about it.

Most of all something should be done to save Celeste. How? Celeste was in love and she was loyal. She'd stick to Darrow to the last ditch—unless Roberta found positive proof.

Proof she had none—yet. Only the wild tale of an admitted scamp, Ritchie. The police wouldn't believe it. An influential man like Darrow, a recognized captain of industry, would hardly be arraigned on the word of a rascal like Ritchie. Besides, she couldn't consult the police after promising Celeste she wouldn't.

Roberta started the car and drove dispiritedly up the waterfront. In a few blocks she passed a wharf and saw the *Flying Fox* moored there. Darrow's yacht would be leaving tonight. And according to Ritchie Darrow was embarking on a cruise of murder.

If she believed this, she must act, for no one else could. And in her heart, she did believe it.

A bold plan came with a jolt to Roberta. She considered it, not seriously at first. Yet it was a thing which, with luck, might be managed. Nothing criminal about it, either. If she was wrong, she'd be made a fool of. But if right, the result would be to save Celeste from Darrow.

With Roberta, the last argument outweighed all others. Nothing else really mattered. She came to a decision. On she drove, turning up Market Street toward Nob Hill and home.

At home she garaged her roadster and entered the house. Celeste was reading in the library. Roberta spoke to her cheerily and went on upstairs. It wouldn't do, of course, to confide in Celeste.

Upstairs the girl packed an overnight bag. Then she went to Celeste's room and opened a desk drawer there. From it she took a key. It was the key to the guest cabin on Darrow's yacht.

Celeste did not see Roberta leave the house. The girl went out by a rear exit, circled to the street and hailed a taxi. The taxi took her to a waterfront wharf. The driver, she was sure, did not know her.

Five piers on was the mooring of Darrow's yacht. Deck lights were on and a watch was posted. But Roberta knew every inch of those decks. She approached the pier cautiously, then waited until the dockside deck was deserted.

Suddenly she darted in the gloom across the gangplank and to a cabin door. Her key fit it. She went in, closed the door, bolted it on the inside. It was the guest cabin, luxuriously furnished, equipped with private bath and reserved exclusively for the Misses Cameron.

Roberta went to bed.

CHAPTER IX

STOWAWAY

BEFORE morning she felt engines throbbing beneath her. The yacht was in motion. Which meant that Darrow was aboard and on the way—where?

Would they find her here? There was a reasonable chance they wouldn't. At least not in five days to Honolulu. If her suspicions proved wrong she'd simply have to laugh it off. A lark, she would say. She wanted the thrill of stowing away to Hawaii. Or with luck she could slip off the boat there without ever being seen at all. She could cash a check, couldn't she, and come home on a liner?

And if her suspicions proved correct, what then? Well, there'd be nothing to laugh off. Explanations would be in order not from herself but from Darrow. He, not she, would be on the defensive. She could accuse and confound Darrow. No danger in that, once she had proof. Because officers of this yacht were all decent men. Roberta had played bridge with them, and shuffleboard on this very deck. They'd help her to fight any deviltry of Darrow's.

She had everything she needed here but food—and she knew her way to the galley. More than once before in the dead of night, on cruises, Roberta had raided the well-stocked refrigerators there. She could raid them again. There'd be other hazards, of course. But to save Celeste she would risk them willingly.

The girl closed her eyes and went to sleep. She awoke in gloom. Only a faint light peeped through the shuttered window. The yacht was bucking waves. She went to the window, peered through the shutter cracks at an open sea.

A few chocolate bars were in her overnight bag. On this first day Roberta had no other nourishment than these. Otherwise she found every comfort at her disposal in this cabin. To cheat an atmosphere of gloom she draped a blanket over the window shutters, then lighted a boudoir lamp. On a stand she found

abundant reading matter—magazines and all the latest novels. Hot and cold water in the bath. A deck of cards for solitaire. There was even a tubular ventilator in the ceiling to provide fresh circulating air in the tropics. Everything but maid service, thought Roberta.

Velvet mules made her movements soundless. She read, slept, played cards, sometimes peeping out through the shutter at a flying fish skimming the waves—a stowaway de luxe cruising down into the warm seas.

Sometimes she glimpsed Reed Darrow, in crisp yachting whites, promenading on the deck. A steward passed her door, attending only to occupied cabins. Could she bribe him, the girl wondered, if he should come in here?

By night she was famished. She heard the watch change at eight o'clock, decided to wait until the next eight-bell shift. Those four hours until midnight dragged interminably.

The same flashlight with which she had met Ritchie last night was in her bag. At one bell after midnight Roberta slipped out on the deck. Forward on the bridge she could hear the tread of an officer on watch. Otherwise the decks seemed to be deserted.

She scurried back to a companion which led to the galley one deck below. Peering down she saw that the galley was dark. Her flash revealed no occupant there. Nervously she descended the steep ladder. Again she flashed light, snapped it off and stood breathless at sight of a sleeping Japanese cook. He was on a bunk in an alcove just off the galley.

The girl held still, fighting off an impulse to retreat. Then she began groping. But the galley was shipshape; no eatables had been left exposed. The groping accomplished nothing but a slight rattle as her hand touched the lid of a stewpan.

The Jap on the bunk stirred. Roberta stood frozen, her heart pounding.

Two bells tinkled from the bridge. The girl took a chance and turned on her flash once more. Its beam found the bread bin. From it she took a loaf of French bread. Then stealthily to the refrigerator. Here she found half a leg of lamb and a bottle of tomato juice. There was much more, but she could carry only these.

Up the companionway, then, and furtively to her cabin. Back of its locked door she sat down to dine sumptuously on the loot.

THE *Flying Fox* was three days out when Reed Darrow stopped by the chartroom to see Captain Walts. A radiogram, just received, was in Darrow's hand.

"I'm out of luck, Walts. My bid for that dockage space at Honolulu has been turned down."

He displayed a quite convincing message. Walts was not shrewd enough to guess that Darrow had deliberately baited the refusal by bidding a prohibitive figure.

"It's too bad, Mr. Darrow," Walts sympathized. "I suppose it means this trip'll be wasted."

"Looks that way," agreed Darrow.

"Shall we turn around and go back?"

Darrow scratched his chin, assuming to deliberate carefully. Then he grinned. "When you're dickering on a deal, Walts, it's always a good idea to let the other fellow wait on you. Let him think you're not interested. So we won't answer this message. We'll just let them stew for a week or ten days and then show up at Honolulu with a slightly lower bid."

"Ten days?" Walts objected. "But we'll be there in two."

"No, because I can use the time on another errand that's been on my mind. I've been wanting to see the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific at Suva about trading concessions down that way. So we'll run to Suva, then make Honolulu on our way back."

"Very well, Mr. Darrow."

"One other thing, Walts. If I get these new trading concessions, one of the stations I expect to establish will be at Niu Island. Small place, but it's virgin territory."

"Don't believe I've ever noticed it on the chart, Mr. Darrow."

"It's there, though, if you can find pinpoints. And it's approximately between here and Suva. Tell you what, Walts"—Darrow looked off broodingly, as though an afterthought had struck him—"set a course for Niu and we'll drop anchor overnight there. It'll give me a chance to look the place over."

"Yes sir."

Darrow lighted a cigar and turned away. He strolled smugly down to the cabin-deck and on along the portside promenade. A smile creased his broad, florid face.

Midway along the portside deck a sound made him stop. The sound seemed to come from a shuttered cabin at his elbow. It was a thud, as though a book had fallen in there, or a chair had toppled over.

But it couldn't be, thought Darrow. This was the guest cabin. Built especially for his fiancee and her chaperone, there were strict orders against intrusion there by anyone else.

Darrow tried the door. It was locked. Yet distinctly he had heard a sound. Darrow frowned. The possibility of a stowaway did not occur to him. Yet some man of the crew might be in there. Possibly to engage in a little private drinking between watches, or to nap on a soft bed.

Darrow produced a key ring. He tried key after key, until the yacht's pass key turned snugly in the lock.

The door opened and he saw no occupant. The bed was neatly made. All furnishings were in place. Darrow, puffing his cigar, crossed the room and looked into the private bath. No intruder was there.

It simply meant, he concluded, that he'd been mistaken about that sound. It must have come from some other quarter. With a shrug he withdrew from the cabin and locked the door.

ROBERTA crept fearfully from her refuge in the gown cabinet. She had half expected a steward to come in, and for that reason she had been rigidly neat in her housekeeping. Everything hidden. Not a thread nor coverlet misplaced. Never was the shutter draped except when she was reading. But hereafter she must be more careful about stumbling over the baggage rack.

The girl peered nervously through a crack in the shutter. She saw Darrow at the rail, his back to her. Beyond him the sea and the morning sun. Then she saw that the sun was due off port, at right angles to the ship. Yesterday the sun had been obliquely back of the wake. It meant a change of course—due south instead of southwest.

On the fourth night out Roberta again raided the galley. And on the fifth day she was still at sea. Her fears tightened. It began to look like Ritchie was right. They weren't going to Hawaii. Otherwise they should be there on this fifth day.

Night came and no port. A moon rose directly broadside from the ship. Moons rise in the east, she knew; so the course must still be south.

South it held for another four days.

Terrific heat oppressed Roberta. Only the blessing of an air current from the ventilator kept her from suffocating. This ninth afternoon out she was dozing when she became aware of a slow gliding motion. It wasn't at all like the open sea.

Roberta crossed to the shutter and peeped out. The yacht, she saw, was coasting down a quiet, blue lagoon. A mile away lay an arc of palms. Brown-skinned paddlers were shooting out from it in canoes.

The girl looked quickly to left, to right, to see if any other ships were there. She saw only one. A small, dingy trading steamer lay far across the lagoon, at anchor more than a half mile from the shore.

Darrow's voice drawled from somewhere on deck: "We can take on fresh fruit here, Walts. Also I want a detail sent ashore for samples of the soil and water."

Roberta heard the scraping of anchor chains as the yacht hove to.

Outrigger canoes of the islanders came closer. In a few minutes they encircled the yacht. The crew of the *Flying Fox* leaned over the rails, bantering. Smiling Polynesian girls waved back, with a chatter of greeting unintelligible to Roberta. The girls all wore gorgeous leis and the young men with them in the canoes were strong, clean-limbed fellows brown and bare above the waist.

The yacht, Roberta could easily see, impressed them. Perhaps none of them had ever before seen a craft so elegant as this.

What strange port, Roberta wondered, could this be? Certainly it wasn't Honolulu. Vividly the predictions of Ritchie flooded back to her.

" 'E's goin' down to an island, 'e is, to do in a boy there!"

The girl shuddered. Which boy? She went to her bag and took out a photograph given to her by Ritchie. The face of the young man in it looked much like those in canoes out there. Except that he was a bit more attractive; his features, she decided, were a trifle less blunt and stolid.

What must she herself do? She must get ashore. She must find the boy of this picture and warn him against Darrow.

Could she do anything else? What about consulting Walts? He was a square man. Yet as captain, Walts would be outraged at finding a stowaway on the yacht. He wouldn't believe her. There was still no proof. Nothing but Ritchie's word against Darrow's.

A BOAT was lowered. A detail of the crew went ashore for fresh fruit, for samples of soil and water. An escort of islanders, mostly girls, went along with them. Outrageous flirts those girls. Yet they were gentle people, Roberta was sure. Any one of them would help her warn the photograph boy.

Most of the canoes still lingered by the yacht. Others came out from the shore. Alertly Roberta looked at the face of each paddler. Not this one. Not that one. No face yet matched the picture in her hands.

Darrow came strolling down the deck with Walts, carrying a pigeon gun under his arm. "Send me ashore, Walts," he directed. "I think I'll try for a bag of doves."

"The bush is full of them, I hear," said Walts.

"What I really want to know," Darrow said, "is whether it's full of coconuts too. Anyway it's a good chance to look the place over."

Another boat was lowered. Darrow, equipped with his light, single-barreled shotgun, embarked in it. He was rowed to the beach.

There he left the boat. With startled eyes Roberta saw him disappear into the bush.

In a little while a shotgun banged, deep in there. Faintly the detonation reached Roberta on the yacht. Horrible imaginings raced through her. To keep a better watch she went into her bathroom and slightly opened the porthole. Young islanders in outriggers were still about the yacht. But still she failed to see the one she was looking for. Again a bang from the bush. Was Darrow really hunting doves—or a boy?

He couldn't, she reasoned, be that bold in deliberate murder. And yet . . . . With a sick heart she remembered the prophecy from Ritchie. " 'E'll mike it look like an accident, miss."

Would Darrow shoot the boy down and explain it as an accident? He could claim he'd been aiming at a dove. Unfortunate, he would say to Walts, and then prove his remorse by heaping rich gifts on the islanders.

A dozen times the shotgun banged from the bush. Each time it made Roberta's nerves jangle. Yet how stupid she would seem if she cried out, "Stop him!", and went rushing with Ritchie's weird tale to Walts.

She forced herself to wait.

It was sundown now. Native canoes began withdrawing to the shore. Then Roberta, still at the bathroom porthole,

saw Darrow emerge from the bush and approach his boat. The boat brought him out to the yacht.

Darrow came jauntily on board with a bag of doves.

"Good hunting!" he said cheerily to Walts.

Relief left Roberta limp. There couldn't have been a tragedy in the bush, she thought, or Darrow wouldn't be so blandly at ease.

"Prospect suit you?" inquired Walts.

Darrow nodded. "I had a talk with the high chief, too. He's throwing a *kava* party tonight, for the crew. Give all hands shore leave for the evening, Walts."

"Yes, Mr. Darrow."

"I mean everybody, Walts, including yourself. Might offend the chiefs if all officers and men don't attend. Stake the crew to gifts, too. It's a cheap way to stand in, you know."

Roberta heard a cheer from aft when general shore leave was announced. She closed her porthole and waited. In a little while she heard the crew pulling off for the shore.

CHAPTER X

SHIP FOR A SHIP

SHE looked out next to see darkness and a deserted deck. No sound came from any quarter. Candlenuts flickered from the village ashore. Far up the lagoon a single deck light blinked from the dingy freighter at anchor there.

Singing reached Roberta. It came from the palms ashore, punctuated by clapping and cheers from the crew assembled there. It meant dancing and revelry into the night, Roberta guessed.

It was her own chance to get ashore. She'd hardly be able to find that boy at night, in the jungle of a strange island. But at least she could determine if he lived here. She could show his picture to the first native she met on the beach. The native could tell her whether or not it was a face known to him.

Roberta undressed now and slipped on a one-piece bathing suit of blue. There was a rubber cap to match. She fitted the boy's photograph carefully into her cap, then put it on her head.

She peered out from her door. The deck was still deserted. The landing steps were conveniently down on this side, ready for the return of the crew. Quietly the girl descended them, slipped into the water and began swimming for the beach. . . .

Kava flowed freely at the village guest house. Guitars strummed as each trio of *siva* dancers took turn on the shell floor there. The company from the *Flying Fox* looked on, applauding lustily. Belles of the village courted and received frank admiration. And sailors from the yacht, personable and neatly uniformed, themselves did not fail to make impressions.

These sailor men were much less rowdy, the Niu ladies could see, than the ones who usually came on ships. And much more generous. Such fine gifts had never before been brought to Niu.

But one girl showed no interest. She wandered away down the beach. Vaila wasn't looking for romance with strange white men; her own had been sealed long ago.

But where was he? She hadn't seen Tama since mid-afternoon. Hoping to find him, she left the revelry behind and wandered on down the beach. That was a beautiful ship out there—the tall white one. Yet somehow it made her uneasy. Always when a ship came here, a strange fear began tugging at her heart.

Someone was swimming in the lagoon now. Perhaps it was Tamasami. Tama loved to swim in the moonlight. And who but Tama would be missing the entertainment for white sailors? Tama, she knew, always avoided such parties. She remembered, exultantly, the time he had snatched her away in his arms and had run with her into the bush.

The swimmer came nearer. Vaila, confident that it was Tama, ran to the place of landing. Then she stopped, quite amazed. The swimmer was wading out on the sand now. A girl. A beautiful girl of the cloud-

bursters! She wore a blue swim suit which clung to her with the tightness of flesh.

ROBERTA, at the same minute, saw Vaila. She smiled. Vaila smiled shyly in return. They appraised each other, brown girl and white. Each saw and conceded the charm of another race.

"Hello there," Roberta greeted.

From long association with Tamasami. and from occasional traders here, Vaila knew a few of the more common English words.

"Good howdy, lady," she greeted.

Roberta advanced to within a pace. The funny little rubber cap on her head entranced Vaila. Hats, she had always thought, were only to be worn in the sun.

"I'm looking for someone," Roberta confided. What a break, she was thinking, to run on to this nice intelligent girl. It might have been some half-dumb savage or pompous chief.

"Yes, lady," encouraged Vaila.

"You know everyone here, I suppose?"

"I know all people, lady."

"Good. Then you can help me." Roberta pulled off her cap. The curls of blond bobbed hair now exposed more than ever fascinated Vaila. As she stood staring, Roberta produced from the bathing cap a pictured paper.

"I am looking for this young man. Do you know him?"

Roberta extended the photograph of Tamasami.

Sight of it shocked Vaila. Fear crowded her heart. It was true, then—a premonition which had always haunted her. That some day a ship of his own people would come to take Tama away from her.

Here in the lagoon lay a fine ship. And on it had come this beautiful white girl asking for Tamasami. She should not have him! Resentment flared stubbornly within Vaila.

"I do not know him," she said.

"Are you sure?" Roberta questioned anxiously.

"I am sure, lady. This land does not know him."

A blank look came to Roberta's face. It was a blind alley. She'd been a fool to believe Ritchie!

"It makes you unhappy, lady?" Vaila asked. The white girl was distressed, she could see, and from this Vaila drew natural conclusions.

"It isn't that," Roberta sighed. "But thank you, just the same."

There was nothing she could do but swim back to the yacht. It was humiliating. She must confess to Darrow that she'd stowed away on a wild suspicion, and beg his forgiveness. He'd take her home, of course. And there she must stand shamefully exposed before Celeste.

Roberta restored the photograph to her bathing cap and went wading into the lagoon. Breast deep, she began swimming. The yacht's deck light guided her and in a little while she was there.

She ascended to the deck in despond, not much caring whether she was seen or not. Crossing to her cabin, she entered to change from her bathing suit. Then the glumness of her face in a mirror made her react with a grin. Imagine the look on Darrow's when, returning from the party ashore, he found her waiting for him at the yacht's rail.

She must send a wireless to Celeste, of course. By now the poor dear must be in distraction at her disappearance.

Dressed now in the same sport suit in which she had boarded the yacht in San Francisco, Roberta went out on deck. No sign of life there. She stood with her elbows on the rail, waiting for Darrow.

Clouds obscured the moon and the shore palms loomed only like a dark wall. Lights at the village twinkled from them; Roberta could still hear distant laughter and song. Strange, she thought, that not even a deckwatch had been left here. Perhaps there was. A cook in the galley, possibly, or a sailor drowsing on the bridge deck. It didn't matter. In just a little while she must face Darrow himself.

A dip of paddle came from the lagoon. A boat was approaching from the beach. Roberta stood her ground. She even hoped

Darrow would be on it, to get the ordeal over with quickly as possible.

The boat came nearer and took shape. She saw then that it was an outrigger canoe. A native *paopao*. One figure was in it—a tall young man wearing only a tapa-cloth kilt.

He was standing as the *paopao* came alongside. Catching the ladder with his free hand, he moored the *paopao* to it. Then he stooped to pick up something from the canoe. Roberta, with a shock, saw that it was an axe. He stood in savage stance with his axe, his eyes definitely hostile as he looked up at the yacht.

Then agilely he came up the ladder to the deck. Roberta drew nervously back to the gloom of her own open door. Why should a native come invading here with an axe?

The man took a step aft along the deck. A deck light revealed him more clearly then. She saw his face and her breath stopped—he was the boy of the photograph! That girl ashore had lied to her. He did live on this island. And here he came on some resentful errand to Darrow's yacht.

INSTANTLY Roberta's sympathy suffered a wrench of revulsion. Ritchie, she thought, must have reversed the facts. The barb of murder's arrow pointed the other way now. The axe, this stealthy invasion, could only mean one thing. Darrow was to be a victim of the boy, instead of the boy becoming a victim of Darrow.

Axe in hand, the invader continued aft along the deck. With relief Roberta reflected that Darrow was ashore. The boy wouldn't find him here. She looked out warily, saw him reach the afterdeck and proceed to a hatch there. He was raising the hatch cover. What for?

Roberta followed cautiously to find out. She arrived at the after deck in time to see the intruder, still with his axe, drop out of sight into the open hatch.

He was hiding there, she supposed, waiting for an opportunity to waylay Darrow. She must stop him. She must expose him, warn him that his errand was futile and send him away.

Roberta hurried back to her cabin. She picked up her flashlight, returned with it to the aft deck and peered into the open hatch there. Darkness. She illumined the flash, sending its bull's-eye beam down into the hold.

The boy stood there with his axe raised over shoulder. He was swinging it to crash the blade down when the light hit him.

"Stop!" cried Roberta.

The boy stayed his blow and looked up. Hot resentment still burned in his eyes. He saw a small pale face peering down at him. "What are you doing there?" gasped Roberta.

The figure below only stared at her. It was a stubborn stare. But he seemed less like a murderous skulker now. Something appealing and valiant in his brown eyes held Roberta's.

"What on earth," she insisted, "are you doing with that axe?"

His explanation came with a naïve simplicity which transfixed her in amazement.

"With this axe he has sink my ship," Tamasami said. "So now I sink *his* ship with same axe."

"You mean Darrow?"

He nodded.

"You know him?"

Again Tama nodded. "He has sink my ship with this axe, please."

"So now you want to chop a hole in his!"

"Is it not justice?" Tama countered. He turned from her, and again the axe raised over his shoulder for a blow on the yacht's bottom.

"Stop! Don't be stupid. You can't do that!" Roberta wasn't afraid of him now. He had come not to murder Darrow but merely to sink Darrow's yacht. It was a puerile psychology of revenge, yet direct, and vaguely it pointed to a confirmation of statements made by Ritchie.

Once more Tama stayed his blow. Shouldering the axe, he came and stood directly below her. The bull's-eye beam still illumined his strong, purposeful face.

SHE saw at these close quarters that he was white. Life in the tropic sun had made his flesh brown, but clearly he was of her own race. And linked somehow with a past treachery of Darrow's.

"It is the same axe," he repeated, and held the blade up close to her eyes. She saw the name of a ship etched on the steel of it.

And her mind flashed back to the photograph. The mast of a sunken ship with this boy clinging there. Eloquently it checked. Darrow had sunk the boy's ship, so now came the boy to sink Darrow's.

"But you mustn't," she protested. "There is another way—a just way."

"This is the just way," he insisted.

She must get the facts about Ritchie's story. And quickly, for the crew would be returning to the ship any minute now. "Tell me, did Darrow lead a mutiny and kill people? Did he steal pearls?"

Tama nodded vigorously. Words did not come readily, for this was already more English than he had spoken, at one time, in eleven years.

"He is an evil man, please," Tama said.

"He tried to kill you?"

"I was a small boy, lady. I ran from him and jump into the sea."

"But why haven't you told the police?"

"The police?"

"Men who enforce the law. That is what we must do now. Get out of the hold and we'll go find Captain Walts."

But Tamasami remained stubbornly in the hold. His own way seemed to him best. Why go to all that trouble, when he could even up everything by a few strokes with his axe?

Again the weapon lifted.

Exasperated, Roberta saw that she herself must use arguments no less simple and direct. "What about me?" she protested. "If you sink this ship, I will sink with it. Unless I climb up the mast, like you did, and cling there. And I wouldn't like that a bit."

This impressed Tamasami. His face clouded, then brightened. "But I can take you ashore in *paopao*," he offered.

"I don't want to go ashore," she argued. "And if I did, how would I ever get home to my people?"

"It is a very nice place, Niu," Tama said. "I find much happiness here, and no evil."

She looked at him helplessly. "What is your name?"

"I am Tamasami."

His smile showed strong white teeth and straightforward, laughing eyes.

"Listen, Tamasami. Please be sensible. Darrow has done evils, so he must be punished. It won't hurt him if you sink this yacht. He has many other ships."

Tamasami was astonished. "Fine ships like this one?"

"Much bigger and finer. Come, won't you do as I say, Tamasami?"

Just what she must do was now clear to Roberta. First get Tamasami out of the hold and make him go ashore. Then evade Darrow until she could consult Walts. Walts and his law-abiding crew must be apprised of the criminal issues affecting Darrow. The nearest law enforcement authorities must then be contacted by wireless from this yacht.

Let Darrow face whatever penalty he deserved. A capital penalty, if Ritchie's story was true. It must be true, Roberta decided, because in essential details it was now confirmed by Tamasami.

"I will do as you say," agreed Tama.

He came swinging out of the hold and stood on the deck beside her.

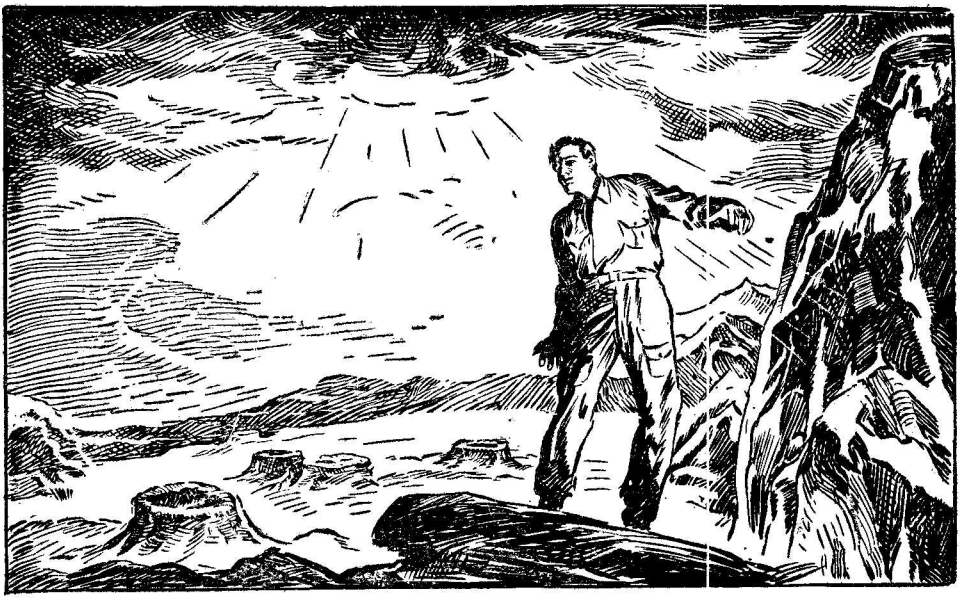
"Go ashore, Tama," she urged, "and do not let Darrow find you. Then I'll—"

"Just what will you do, young lady?"

The question was not Tamasami's. It came derisively from back of them. Roberta whirled to stare at Reed Darrow.

Darrow stood with the pigeon gun held loosely under his arm. His yachting whites loomed in the gloom there. The smile on his tightly compressed lips sent a chill through Roberta.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



He staggered across that terrible land—alone

Nonstop to Mars

By JACK WILLIAMSON

Here is the record of Lucky Leith's incredible flight; how he piloted his ancient ship through the thunder between two worlds—to become the first Robinson Crusoe of space. A complete novelet

I

SOMETHING was queerly wrong—with either the ship or the air. And Carter Leigh knew that it couldn't be the ship. The creaking old *Phoenix* might be obsolescent in a world that the new cathion rockets had conquered, but he knew every bolt and strut of her. Knew her well enough to take her apart and put her up again, in the dark. And loved her, for her loyalty through six years and half a million miles of solo flight.

No, the trouble couldn't be in the *Phoenix*. It had to be the atmosphere.

He couldn't understand it. But the barometric altimeter had kept luring him down, toward frozen peaks that loomed a thousand feet higher than they should have been. The engine labored, and the thrust of it weakened dangerously. And the wind that struck him over the pole was a screaming demon, more freakishly violent than he had ever met before.

It baffled him. Through all the endless, weary night, deaf with the long thunder of the loyal old engine, sitting stiff with cold even in his electrically heated suit, gulping coffee from a vacuum jug, pouring over charts and studying instruments with aching blood-shot eyes—ever since the last strange sunset, he had hopelessly picked at the sinister riddle.

Nonstop flights were nothing new to

Carter Leigh. Men, looking at the long record of his feats, had nicknamed him "Lucky." But he had something more than luck. In his lean body there was the tremendous endurance that it took to fly on, hour after straining hour, when most men would have dropped over the stick.

And this flight—nonstop from Capetown to Honolulu, across the bottom of the world—had promised to be no harder than the rest. Not until he saw that last sunset.

Behind him, beyond the cragged granite fangs of Enderby Land, as he climbed above the ramparts of the polar plateau, the sunset had been frighteningly strange. An incredible wheel of crimson, rolling along the rim of the world, it had been winged and tufted with eldritch green.

The aurora was another disquieting scrap of the puzzle. It burned above him all that night, whenever the sky was clear, until all the white antarctic wilderness seemed on fire with its sinister and shifting brilliance.

The cold was another thing. Leigh had made polar flights before. But never had he met such merciless temperatures. The motor, even with cowl ventilators closed, grew sluggish with it. It crept into the cockpit and probed deep into his body.

Beyond the pole and Marie Byrd Land, over the dark Antarctic again, he met a wall of cloud. He tried to climb over it. Heavy and dull with altitude and fatigue, he opened the oxygen valve. The vital gas revived him a little. But the plane could not scale the summits of vapor. He flew into them—wondering.

SAVAGE winds battled in the cloud, and it was riven with lightning. Rain hammered the ship, and froze on it, until the ice dragged it almost to the surface. Leigh fought the elements, and fought the mounting weariness in him, and came at last unexpectedly into the calm of a strange northward dawn.

The aurora was fading from a sky grown brilliantly clear. Studded with white points of icebergs, the gray South Pacific was sliding back at three hundred and fifty miles an hour—still a good pace, he thought stubbornly, even if the rockets were three times as fast.

Leigh was peeling an orange, beginning to hope that all the terror of the night had been the child of fancy and fatigue, when he saw the thing in the northeast. Against the red and green of a suddenly disturbing dawn, it fell like a silver thread.

A white, spiral vortex—the funnel of a great tornado. He saw a blob of gray mist about the foot of it, marching over the sea. The upper end of it, oddly, was lost above the bright wings of dawn.

Leigh had never seen a storm just like this one. At first he thought there was no danger to him. But the white, writhing snake of it whipped toward him with an appalling quickness.

It seized the *Phoenix* in a sudden blast of wind, sucking the ship toward that racing funnel. Sea and sky spun madly. He was lifted so swiftly that his eardrums ached. Grimly he fought it, with all his calm skill and all the familiar strength of the ship.

He fought—and won. The white pillar left him fluttering in its wake and marched on into the west. Hurried observation of the higher sun told Leigh that he had been flung fifteen hundred miles northward.

But he knew, with a sinking in his heart, that the *Phoenix* was crippled. Her right aileron had been twisted and jammed by the force of that incredible wind. He would have to set her down.

Whistling the tune of *Barbara Allen*, which always seemed to cheer him, Leigh searched the maps. He found a pinprick of land named Manumotu—the only possible haven in a thousand miles—and turned the limping amphibian toward it, flying with rudder and throttle.

One more failure. Two, he reflected bitterly, in a row. For the last flight, two months ago, had failed also, from a cause as strange as that tornado.

A "bipolar" flight, Tick Tinker had called the last one. Tick was the tireless

little publicity man, one-legged and one-eyed, who was Leigh's partner in his singular business of wresting a living from the air. "Bipolar," because the route from Croydon back to Croydon along the prime meridian included both the poles. Leigh had safely rounded the planet, with but three scheduled stops. But the flight had failed just the same, because of the Stellar Shell.

"We're an out-of-doors advertising firm, Lucky," Tick used to say. "You fly for attention value. And I sell it to the makers of oil and piston rings and what-have-you. And it's a legitimate business, so long as you can keep in the headlines."

But all the headlines two months ago had been about the Stellar Shell. Some astronomer named Gayle, the day Leigh took off from Croydon, announced discovery of a mysterious missile plunging out of the depths of space, toward the solar system. The "bipolar" flight had earned no more than a few sticks of space on the inside pages. For the black streamers ran:

STELLAR SHELL SHOT AT PLANETS; WILL OBJECT STRIKE EARTH? ASTRONOMERS BAFFLED

When Leigh came in to Croydon again, the flight completed in three grueling days, there was no crowd to meet him, Staggering away from the dusty, oil-spattered *Phoenix,* he himself paused to buy a paper.

COSMIC BULLET HITS MARS; EARTH SPARED; NATURE OF OBJECT UNKNOWN

There had been no more news of the Stellar Shell, nothing more than the speculations of bewildered scientists. But the flight was already ruined. Tick Tinker had radiographed:

CONGRATS ON BIPOLAR FLIGHT. BUT STELLAR SHELL HOGGED THE HEADLINES. FLIGHT TOTAL LOSS FINANCIALLY. YOUR NAME GETTING RAPIDLY UNKNOWN. TESTIMONIALS BEGGING AT CUT RATES. URGENT RELEASE DETAILS NEW PUBLICITY FLIGHT. SUGGEST SOMETHING NONSTOP POLAR. USE ZEROLUBE BRAND OILS FOR TESTIMONIAL.

And so Tick's message had brought him here, dead with fatigue and heading toward a speck of rock that probably had no inhabitant.

THE motor covered the windshield with a thin spray of oil, and Leigh stopped his whistling briefly to curse all Zerolube products. He plugged in his helmet phones and switched on the little battery transmitter. It was good for just ten minutes of continuous sending—the *Phoenix* had no room for heavier equipment, not even emergency rations.

"SOS!" he called. "Pilot Leigh in airplane *Phoenix* forced down by storm. Will try to land on Manumotu. SOS—"

The instant reply surprised him:

"Manumotu Station, Gayle Foundation, calling airplane *Phoenix.* Dr. E. K. Gayle speaking. Land on north beach. I will stand by to assist you Come in, airplane *Phoenix.*"

"Airplane *Phoenix* calling Manumotu Station," gasped Leigh, relieved. "Thanks, doc. I'll be seeing you, if I can keep out of the water half an hour longer. Signing off."

It took an hour—an hour that seemed endless to Carter Leigh fighting the fatigue in him and nursing the crippled plane. But at last Manumotu came out of the sparkling northward haze. A cragged volcanic summit appeared sheer on three sides, edged on the north with a scrap of coral beach.

He crossed the beach. A broad rocky bench above it was tufted with tropical green. A long shed-like building of white sheet metal stood upon it, a white tent, and a great pile of crates covered with brown tarpaulins. A white flag waved. Then he saw the tiny figure running from the tent toward the beach.

The landing was hazardous. The crippled wing caught the crest of a wave and covered the plane with spray. She staggered, but came up bravely. He taxied in and rolled up on the binding coral sand.

Following the signals of the flag, he brought the *Phoenix* to a safe dry stop where a rocket must have been moored, for there were deep wheel-marks in the

sand, and the hibiscus bushes beyond were scorched black as if from rocket jets.

Heavily, his legs as stiff as if they never had been straightened before, he climbed out of the cockpit. The person with the flag came to meet him. A slim young figure, in boots and breeches, khaki shirt open at the throat, yellow head bare. A crisp voice, brisk, impersonal, greeted him:

"Hello. You are the famous Lucky Leigh?"

"In person" he grinned. "And thanks for showing me the way in, doc—"

His jaw fell. This was a woman—a girl. Her intent oval face was dark with sun. Her keen blue eyes were scanning his heavy, swaying body—not altogether, he thought, with approval.

"Oh!" he said. "I thought you were Dr. Gayle."

"I am," she said gravely. "Dr. Elene Kathrine Gayle."

His red eyes blinked at her.

"You—you aren't the Dr. Gayle who discovered the Stellar Shell?"

She nodded.

"My father was a leader in his field of science. He established the Gayle Foundation. But he has been dead five years. I have been trying to carry on his work." She studied him gravely. "Do you object to my discovery?"

"You ruined my last flight," he told her. "I lived through seventy-six hours of hell; I set a record for gasoline flight over both poles. And what with your Stellar Shell, the world never knew I had been off the ground."

"And, I suspect, was little the worse for the fact." Leigh flushed at the hint of sarcasm in her voice. "However—are you hungry?"

"Famished," he told her.

ON A rough pine table in the white tent, she slapped down two tin plates, split open cans of meat and butter, indicated a big vacuum urn of coffee, a huge jar of marmalade.

"Proceed," she said.

Leigh's dull eyes were watching her.

"You're the whole crew here?"

Her boyish yellow head nodded.

"Emergency," she said. "The Foundation is establishing twenty new meteorological observatories. Manumotu Station was the most important, because it is directly in the track of the phenomena we are investigating. Therefore, I took charge here myself."

"Alone?"

"I had two assistants. But Dr. French took acute appendicitis, and Cragin flew him out in the rocket. Should have been back yesterday. But didn't show up. I'm carrying on. . . . You said you were hungry."

She dumped half a can of corned beef into her tin plate, passed the remainder to Leigh. But he sat, wonderment rising against his mist of sleep, staring at her.

"Emergency?" he questioned.

She nodded.

"Something is happening to the atmosphere."

"I thought conditions were strange," he said, "flying over the pole."

She pushed back her plate to seize a notebook.

"What phenomena did you observe?" she demanded eagerly.

He told her in a tired sleep-fogged voice about the strangely gaudy sunset, the aurora, the phenomenal cold, the unaccountably low barometric pressures, the singular tornado that had crippled the *Phoenix*.

"What does it all mean?" he concluded. "What is happening?"

"I'm here to find out," she told him. "Sunset and aurora probably due to abnormal electronic bombardment of the ionosphere. But the storms and pressure disturbances are still not accounted for. Unless—"

Her yellow head shook.

"The only conceivable answer is too appalling."

She looked quickly at her wrist watch, dumped the debris from her plate into a pail beside the table, wiped plate and spoon clean with a paper napkin. She rose.

"Excuse me. But the duties of both my assistants have fallen upon me. My time is budgeted. I have forty-eight minutes a day for meals. Now I have instruments to read."

"So that's how a lady astronomer lives." Leigh grinned. "If I can help you—"

She shook her head with evident disapproval.

"I doubt it. Our work here doesn't consist of publicity stunts. . . . Eat as much as you like. You'll find a cot behind the partition. I'll radio directions to your rescue party. Please keep in mind, when you leave, that it is the policy of the Gayle Foundation to avoid unnecessary publicity. Especially, we don't want to alarm the world about these current meteorological phenomena, until we have more comprehensive data."

LEIGH was staring at her, a slow anger rising in him. "Look here, you think I'm a pretty bad egg?"

Her keen eyes swept him impersonally.

"Frankly, Mr. Lucky Leigh," her cool voice said, "your existence and your stunts annoy me. I can't see that you serve any creative function. In the precarious early days of gasoline aviation such men as you, testing equipment and exploring routes, may have served a useful end. But now that rockets are as fast and as certain as the sun, you are a mere anachronism."

Leigh opened his mouth to protest. But the girl held up a brown imperative hand.

"I've got no time to listen to you," she said. "Because I have vitally urgent work to do. I am already upsetting my schedule. But I've wanted for a long time to tell you a thing or two."

Her smooth face was flushed a little. He listened to her, grinning.

"Now," she went on swiftly, "if you were trying to fly nonstop to Mars, even if you never got there, that would be a different proposition. Because you would be expanding the horizons of science. You would be doing something different and important.

"But your old gasoline wreck is as far behind the times as you are, Leigh. It is a rocket that will make the first flight to Mars. I know a man who may pilot the first rocket there. He is Laird Cragin—you never heard of him, because he isn't a publicity flyer. But he is test pilot for the experimental space rockets that the Foundation has been working on, in association with some Army engineers. You ought to meet him. Because whether he ever gets to Mars or not, he's trying to do something real."

Carter Leigh gulped.

"Listen, Miss Gayle," he protested. "You've got me all wrong. I used to like the glory, I admit. But now it's just a business. I've come to hate the clamor and the crowds, and I always skip the banquets. Tick Tinker is my contact man; he releases the publicity, does the testimonials, handles all the business end. We're just trying to make a living."

Her brown chin squared. And, through the gray haze of fatigue that filled his mind, Leigh suddenly perceived that a lady astronomer could still be very good to look at.

"It is possible," her cool crisp voice was saying, "to make a living in a way that helps others besides yourself. Here you are hopping about the planet, with about as much aim and intelligence as a beheaded flea, while God-knows-what is happening to the very air we breathe!"

She turned decisively away from him.

"You are as extinct as the dodo, Mr. Nonstop Leigh," she told him. "The only difference is that you don't know it. Sleep on that. I've got a barocyclonometer to read."

II

CARTER LEIGH sat over the rough table, staring out of the tent after her hastening boyish figure. He had seen suddenly, behind her brisk impersonal efficiency, that she was very tired—and somewhat frightened.

His brief anger at her frank criticism

was all turned back upon himself. After all, it was true that such men as Lindbergh and Byrd and Post and Corrigan hadn't left much to be accomplished in the field of nonstop gasoline flight.

No, he deserved her scorn.

But what had frightened her? What *was* happening to the atmosphere? Leigh's mind grappled for a vain moment with the problem, but he could not concentrate now. All he wanted was a chance to sleep.

He stood up, his body stiff and wooden, and reeled to the cot beyond the canvas partition.

"Dammit," he muttered, "what do I care if Lieutenant Laird Cragin flies to Mars on a tissue-paper kite?"

He was asleep before his head touched the pillow. . . .

"Leigh!"

The crisp voice of Elene Gayle awakened him, tense with a suppressed alarm. The tent was dim in the light of an oddly purple dawn. Pausing at the entrance of the tent, her face so gray and tired he knew she had not slept, she called urgently:

"That tornado is coming again. You had better see after your ship."

He tumbled out of the tent and saw her running ahead toward the long metal shed that covered her precious instruments. The dark ocean seemed ominously calm, and the sunrise above it was as splendid as the last.

Against it he saw what the girl, with obvious hesitation, had called a tornado.

It walked out of the flaming east—an endless spiral filament of silver, dropped like some cosmic fishing line from the depthless purple above the fiery sunrise. The foot of it danced across the sea. It moved by incredible bounds. And it was wrapped in a gray wisp of storm.

Leigh caught his breath and started running toward the plane that was standing unmoored on the long white beach where he had climbed out of her on the day before.

But this white funnel of destruction came with the same unthinkable velocity that he had witnessed before. Before he had moved a dozen steps, the white tent sailed over his head. The abrupt, freakish blast of air hurled him flat. His eyes and ears and nostrils were filled with coral sand.

For no more than twenty seconds the tempest shrieked against the black peak above. Abruptly, then, the air was almost still again. There was only a fluttering queerly chill breeze from the east, following in the storm's wake.

Spitting sand and gasping for breath, Leigh staggered to his feet. The funnel of the storm, like the guide-rope, he thought, dangling from some unseen balloon, was bounding away into the gray west. Its sorrowful howling swiftly diminished.

Leigh turned ruefully toward where he had left the *Phoenix*. The battered old crate had been neatly flipped over on her back by the prankish blast of wind. Leigh shook his head and whistled a few bars of *Barbara Allen*.

"Too bad, old girl," he muttered. "But, considering the state of Tick's exchequer and the high cost of salvage, it looks like goodbye for us."

HE TURNED to survey the station. The tent was gone. The supplies, cooking utensile and blankets that it had covered were scattered across the beach to the uneasy sea. The tarpaulins had been ripped off the long stack of crates; tumbled in confusion were red drums of Kappa-concentrate rocket fuel, long cylinders of oxygen, bright tins of gasoline, miscellaneous cases of food and equipment.

But where was the lady astronomer?

A sudden unreasonable alarm tightened Leigh's throat. He was too well seasoned, he kept telling himself, to get unduly excited over any girl—especially a female scientist who didn't like him anyhow. But he was running through the wrecked camp, shouting her name with a quaver in his voice.

"Miss Gayle! Can you hear me? Elene!"

"Dr. Gayle, if you please."

Her crisp voice came from the interior

of the long observatory shed. Half the metal roof had been ripped off. Most of the equipment inside seemed to have been demolished by a huge boulder the wind had hurled from the dark cliffs above. But the slim calm girl, save for the disorder of her short yellow hair and a smudge of grease on her brown cheek, looked untouched. She was ruefully fingering a tangle of twisted levers and crumpled recording drums.

"No more barocyclonometer," she said. "But my visual observations make it imperative that we get in touch with the outside world at once. I believe my worst fears are justified."

"Well, Dr. Gayle," Leigh offered, "if you discover any need of my services, just say so."

"I doubt that you would be very useful." From the preoccupation of her voice, he knew she gave him less than half her mind; her eyes still measured the smashed equipment. "If you can repair your plane, you had better get away from here before tomorrow morning. Manumotu is an unhealthy locality, just now. And I'm afraid you'll find that the world has got more pressing matters to attend to than organizing relief expeditions to rescue stunt fliers."

"Thank you, Doctor." Leigh bowed. "I hope you can stand a shock. I believe the flying days of the old *Phoenix* are over."

"In that case"—her voice was still abstracted—"you had better salvage what you can of the supplies and equipment. After all, if what I fear is true, it won't make any great difference whether you ever leave Manumotu or not."

Leigh spent all morning stacking the tumbled crates and drums so that they made three walls of a tiny low shelter, roofing it with the torn tarpaulins, and collecting there the food and useful articles he found on the beach.

AT NOON, when he carried a plate of food and a steaming tin of fresh coffee to the grl in the observatory building, he found her covered with grime, laboring in tight-lipped silence with the starting-crank of a little motor-generator. She waved him aside.

"I've no time to eat," she told him. "I've data of the utmost importance to send. It's urgent that I get in touch with Washington and our rocket laboratory at Alamogordo. And there's something wrong with this plant."

Leigh glanced at the balky mechanism. He set the plate on an empty packing box beside her and rolled up his sleeves.

"Did it occur to you," he inquired, "that, having made a living out of flying gasoline engines for the past ten years, I might know something about them? I see that your carburetor is smashed. If you'll eat your dinner, I'll make you a new carburetor out of a milk can."

Her face showed a weary relief. "If you can do it," she agreed.

While Leigh found tin snips and an empty can, she sat down on the concrete floor beside the packing box. She gulped the hot coffee, wolfed a sandwich of canned ham, and reached for another. In the middle of it, her yellow head dropped forward on her knees. Leigh heard a long sigh and knew she was asleep.

"Poor kid," he muttered.

Even the staccato *chek-chek-chek* of the little motor ten minutes later did not wake her. Leigh twisted the flap of tin that regulated the mixture, then swiftly checked the hook up of the short-wave transmitter.

He snapped on the receiver. Static snarled at him. An unfamiliar sort of static. The whining ululation of it was oddly like the howling of the storm that had passed. It rose and fell regularly.

Through it, however, he picked up some station—and what he heard stiffened him with fear. For a time he listened, absorbed; then suddenly he hurried to wake the girl.

"It's fixed?" she gasped, starting up. "I didn't mean to sleep—there isn't time."

He caught anxiously at her slim brown arm.

"Elene," he demanded, "what's happening? I was just listening. There's some-

thing frightful going on What is it? Do you know?"

Her blue eyes stared at him. They were dark with sleep—and, he thought, terror. Quick and anxious, her low voice demanded:

"Just what did you get?"

"Storms," he said briefly. "Phenomenal storms. Unseasonable bitter cold. Ice storms even in the tropics. Tidal waves. One against the Atlantic seaboard has probably killed a hundred thousand already. Communications broken everywhere, of course. Panic increasing."

He drew her light body toward him.

"Something has gone wrong with the air, Elene. Do you know what it is? And when it is going to stop?"

Her head nodded slowly.

"I'm afraid I know what it is," she said. "My dispatches can't bring any comfort to the world."

"What is it?"

Her arm twisted free.

"No time to tell you now," she said. "I've got to talk to Washington and New Mexico. And to Laird Cragin—if he's still alive. Our work here has got to be finished tonight. After dawn tomorrow, there may not be any Manumotu."

Leigh gasped. "But—"

Hastening toward the radio, she paused briefly.

"I'll show you tonight," she promised him. "If the seeing is good enough for the telescope, and if we're still alive by then."

She had no more attention for him. He prepared food for himself, ate, and then spent an hour making the tiny little shelter more secure against whatever the girl expected to happen at dawn. And then, heavy with accumulated fatigue, he slept again.

THE air was unwontedly cool on the beach when he woke, and another sunset of uncanny splendor flamed red to the zenith. He kindled a fire of driftwood, set out another meal, and called the girl. Sipping gratefully from a tin of scalding coffee, she gave him a brief smile.

"You have ability, Leigh," she told him. "Ability that has been wasted." Her dark eyes studied him. "Now, I'm afraid, you've very little opportunity left to make use of it."

Sitting silent for a moment in the dancing firelight, she began pouring the cool coral sand through her fingers into little white pyramids.

"If my deductions check out tonight," she said, "I'm afraid the creative functions of our present civilization are just about at an end. The planet will doubtless remain habitable for certain forms of life. Men may even survive in such places as Death Valley. But it will be a little strange if the human race ever recovers its supremacy."

"Tell me—" Leigh began.

She looked at her watch and studied the darkling eastward sky.

"In ten minutes," she said, "I can show you—show you why the earth is no longer a very safe place for nonstop fliers."

Leigh caught his breath.

He looked from the girl into the low, many-colored flames of the driftwood and slowly back again.

"Dr. Elene Gayle," he told her very gravely, "I feel that your frank comments have given me the right to express an equally candid opinion of female astronomers."

She nodded and looked back into the east.

"I haven't been following my profession altogether for fun, although I enjoy it," he told her. "I have been trying to save up two hundred thousand dollars. That would be enough to begin the manufacture of a gadget I have invented for the greater comfort of rocket passengers, and to build a home."

There was weary loneliness in his voice now.

"For hundreds and thousands of hours, cramped in the cockpit of the old *Phoenix*, I have endured fatigue and the need of sleep by dreaming of that home. Sometimes it is on a Floroda key and sometimes it is in a little green valley that I have seen in the Colorado Rockies."

He looked at the girl across the fire.

"But always the most important thing about it was the woman who would live in it with me. I have had one in mind and then another. But none of them, Dr. Gayle, has fitted as well as you do—except, I must hasten to add, in certain regards.

"You must realize that I am telling you this just to make a point—since, what with crackups and your Stellar Shell, Tick Tinker and I have never had more than fifty thousand in a joint account."

A smile touched his lean face in the firelight.

"Physically," he told her, "you would do admirably. And you have intelligence, quickness, and, I believe, a sense of humor. But unfortunately you have other qualities that outweigh all these.

"Try to imagine yourself living a civilized life in a civilized home," he challenged. "You just couldn't do it. You wouldn't fit in—not with a schedule of forty-eight minutes a day for food.

"I hope I've made my point—that female astronomers who completely ignore the fact that they are women are just as out of place in a civilized world as extreme nonstop fliers."

Her first low laugh, and the light of amusement in her eyes, halted his argument. But her laughter grew higher and more breathless until she could not stop. Leigh saw that she was hysterical. He dashed a tin can of cold sea-water into her face. She caught a sobbing breath and mopped at her eyes. With another glance at her watch, she rose abruptly.

"Come," she said in a shaken voice. "And let's see if there'll be any homes in the world ahead."

III

THE squat mass of the twelve-inch reflector looked through a slit in the end of the building that had escaped destruction. Its clockwork, beneath the humming of the little motor-generator, made a muffled ticking.

Visible in the dim light of a shaded bulb, the girl twisted the turret and swiftly set the circles. Before she had done, Leigh knew that her object was the red point of Mars in the east.

For a long time, sitting with her eye to the lens, she was silent. Leigh could see the trembling of her small hand, touching the control wheels again and again. At last she rose and stood staring eastward through the slit, rubbing at her red eyes. Her face was bloodless.

"Well?" said Leigh.

"It's what I thought," she whispered. "Mars!"

Leigh moved into the seat she had left. His eye found the ocular. In its little disk of darkness, a single star burned with changing red and blue. And the disk of Mars, still too near the horizon for good observation, blurred and rippled as if painted on a black flag flying in the wind.

Even for a moment of good seeing, when the image steadied, that mistiness did not clear. But he could distinguish the wide dark equatorial markings—darker, in fact, than he had supposed them—and the white ellipse of the south polar cap.

Two things he saw that puzzled him. Beside the polar cap was a little dark fleck—the darkest marking on the planet—that had an oddly purplish color. And across the yellow-red of the planet, toward it, was drawn a twisting silver thread.

The image blurred and shimmered again, and Leigh rose impatiently from the instrument. A little ache throbbed in his unaccustomed eyes. He turned anxiously to the girl.

"Still I don't understand," he said. "I saw a little purple circle, not far from the polar cap. And a queer white thread twisting into it. But everything looked hazy."

"That's just it," her tired voice told him. "Mars is hazed and dim with atmosphere—atmosphere stolen from the Earth. That silver thread is the other end of the tube of force that we have been calling a tornado—sucking air from the Earth across to Mars!"

It took a moment for the full meaning

to strike him. Then swiftly he felt the shock of it run through his whole body, and he swayed a little, standing there.

"But," he muttered at last, "I thought there were no Martians!"

"It has been pretty well agreed that there are no intelligent inhabitants," she said. "My father gave up the last great attempt to signal Mars ten years ago. But since that time something has happened to Mars."

"What?"

"It just happens," she told him slowly, "that that purple-blue spot, under the other end of the vortex tube, is exactly where the object we called the Stellar Shell struck Mars, two months ago."

He stared at her, in the dim observatory.

"Then—you think—"

"The inference is inevitable. The Stellar Shell was a ship. It brought living beings to Mars, from somewhere. They needed a heavier atmosphere for survival. Across on Earth—now, at opposition, less than fifty million miles away—they saw the atmosphere they required. With the same science that built and navigated the Stellar Shell, they have reached across to take what they require."

Leigh caught his breath.

"Why didn't they land on Earth in the first place?"

"Why should they, if they are able to reach from one world to another to take what they want? Perhaps Mars, with half the Earth's sunlight and a third of its gravity, suited them better in other regards."

Leigh's brain was spinning.

"Stealing the world's air! How possibly can they do that?"

"I saw one clue," the girl told him. "The two satellites are very difficult objects, even with the refinements of this instrument. It was hard to find them. When I did, they were both much too far from the planet. They are plunging out into space, away from their old orbits!"

"And that means—"

"It means that they have been cut off from the gravitational attraction of Mars. I think that is because the gravitational pull of the planet, by a power of science quite beyond our grasp, has been focused into a tube of force that reaches fifty million miles across space to our atmosphere."

"That queer tornado?"

"Exactly." The girl nodded. "Our atmosphere is being drawn up it. It seems to race around the Earth every day, because the Earth is turning under it. The violent air currents it causes, and the very loss of air, generate the storms. The unusual sunsets and auroras are doubtless due to the incidental forces that form and direct the tube."

BESIDE the girl, Leigh peered up through the narrow slit. In the bar of purple sky, Mars was a baleful orange-red point. His staggered mind groped for understanding of its menace.

"What can they be?" he whispered.

The girl's own voice was dry.

"Probably they are interstellar voyagers. They came from the south, quite possibly from one of the nearer stars in Centaurus. Beings capable of such a flight must be as far from our comprehension as we are from that of the ants. And we must be as helpless before them."

"Ants can sting," muttered Leigh. But a breath of night air through the slit seemed strangely cold, and he shuddered again. "When do you suppose they'll stop?"

Elene Gayle's yellow head shook in the dimness, wearily.

"Who knows? We could spare them half our atmosphere, and still survive in the lowlands, though the climate everywhere would be far more severe. Possibly they will be satisfied in time. Possibly the advance of the Earth in its orbit will break their tube of force—until the next opposition, two years away."

"Mars is a smaller planet," Leigh said. "They shouldn't need so much air."

"Because of the lighter gravity," the girl told him, "to get the same pressure and density, they would need more."

"So we are at their mercy? Is there nothing to be done?"

Her face was gray and hopeless.

"People will react in the ways predictable from their known characteristics," she said. "Most of the world's population has already been driven into a helpless panic. The governments that stand will try to mobilize their armies—against an enemy they will never even see before they die. Only a few scientists will try to make a calm analysis of the problem, try to discover what, if anything, can be done. I doubt that anything can be done."

IV

THE rocket arrived before midnight. Elene Gayle had been at the radio all evening, guiding it in with her signals listening to the reports of planet-wide confusion and terror; and trying in vain to get some message through to her Foundation's rocket research laboratory on the New Mexico desert.

When the blue luminescent cathion jets streaked across the stars, Leigh ran with flares to light the beach. It plunged down at an alarming angle, a forward blast checking it in a great cloud of blue flame, and two men tumbled out of it.

The girl came with Leigh to meet them. The thin gray man with a pointed beard was Dr. Laymon Duval, assistant director of the Foundation. And the tall slender black-helmeted pilot, he knew without asking, was Laird Cragin.

Cragin was limping, patched with bandages. The girl nodded to the older man, greeted Cragin with a warm handshake. His handsome face smiled at her.

"Sorry to be late, Gay," he said. "But the freak storm cracked me up in the Marquesas Islands. Had to wait for Dr. Duval, in another fire-boat. But here we are!"

The thin grave voice of the older man cut in, anxiously:

"You are quite certain, Dr. Gayle—certain of the facts in your code message? You really believe that stellar invaders on Mars are robbing the Earth of its air?"

"Duval," the girl asked briskly, "do I make mistakes?"

"Fewer than any man I know," he granted. "What action do you suggest?"

"Return at once," Elene Gayle said instantly. "Get full support from the President and the War Department. Rush our experimental rocket to completion in New Mexico. Arm it. Send it to Mars to stop the loss of atmosphere."

Duval's gray head shook, doubtfully.

"The only thing we can do," he admitted. "But you know I have been in charge at Alamogordo. And I'm reasonably certain that our rocket can't be completed before the air-loss, continuing at the present rate, will force abandonment of the project.

"Even," he added forebodingly, "neglecting the weeks required for the flight—"

"Anyhow," the girl broke in, "we must try. I'll fly back to America with you tonight."

"Tonight?" Carter Leigh echoed her last word. He groped instinctively for the girl's arm.

"I'll go with you, Elene," he said hoarsely. "I'll fly your rocket to Mars."

"Thanks, Leigh." She turned briefly toward him. "But you're not a rocket pilot." She turned back to Cragin. "Load fuel and oxygen. We've no time to spare."

"Hullo." In the smooth voice of Laird Cragin was no very cordial recognition. "So you're Lucky Nonstop Leigh? Well, it looks like you stopped, this time, in a rather unlucky spot. Better watch that storm at dawn. It cuts a swath around the world, every day, through the thirties. Perth and Buenos Aires already gone."

"Back in a moment," the girl said. "I've some notes to get."

Carter Leigh watched her run back into the dark, toward the observatory. Listening silently to Cragin, as he helped lift aboard a drum of the kappa fuel, he tried to hide the despair in him.

"Sorry, old man," Cragin was saying. "But I guess the job will fall to me. I've

been test-hopping the experimental models. If Gay sends her rocket to Mars, I'll go with it."

Leigh caught his breath. Laird Cragin was no doubt a brave and skilful man, even now promising to face certain death for the world's sake. But suddenly Leigh hated him with a blind savage hatred. He trembled, and his fists balled up. Tears swelled in his eyes, until the girl, running back out of the dark with a thick brief case, was only a misty shadow.

"We'd like to give you a lift, old man," Cragin's voice was smoothly regretful. "But this is only a three-place job. And we've no time—"

"Thanks," Leigh managed to say. "But I've got the old *Phoenix*"

Elene Gayle paused to take his hand. Her fingers felt strong and cool.

"Goodbye, Leigh," she said briskly. "Sorry we must leave you. Watch the storm. Make any use you can of our supplies and equipment here. Get north, if you can, out of its track."

Leigh did not answer.

Duval was already in the rocket. Cragin swung the girl in, leapt after her, slid forward the curved transparent hatch. Leigh stood stupidly motionless until the pilot opened it again to shout a warning.

He stumbled back. The blue electronic exhausts bellowed out about him. His skin tingled. Ozone burned his lungs. Blinded, he covered his eyes. When he could see again, the rocket was a dim blue star, dropping and dimming, north-northeast.

CARTER LEIGH stood alone on the beach, softly whistling the melancholy notes of *Barbara Allen.* Alone on Manumotu. It was midnight. Six hours, more or less, until that world-circling funnel should pass again.

Southward, beyond the dark loom of the peak, the strange aurora rose again. Sprays of green and orange crossed the zenith. That eerie light showed him the old Phoenix, lying upside down on the pale white beach. He plodded heavily down toward her.

"Well, old girl," he muttered. "Cracked up or not, it looks like we've got to make one more flight—unless we want to be picked up by that wind between the worlds."

He stopped abruptly on the coral sand. His eyes lifted swiftly from the battered old crate on the beach, up to the red and baleful eye of Mars, now well past the meridian. His mind pictured that silver cord from world to world. And his lips pursed for a soundless whistle.

"Well, why not?"

He stumbled to the old plane. His trembling hand touched the cold metal of her prop. His voice was quick and breathless.

"Why not, old lady?" he muttered again. "There's air all the way. And where there's air, you can fly with gasoline. It's thin and rough, maybe. But we've flown high before, and met our share of bumps."

He walked around the plane, inspected rudder and elevator.

"Quite a wind, I guess. But it will be behind us. And when you've got fifty million miles to make, you need the wind behind you!"

He peered in the darkness at the damaged aileron.

"The percentage may be a billion to one against us. But what's the difference? You're extinct as the dodo, old girl. And I am, too. And we're getting wise to the fact.

"After all, why not? She'll probably be flying to Mars with Cragin, if they get their rocket done. We might as well be there to meet 'em.

"Okay, duchess! Let's get going!"

He knew it wouldn't be easy to get the plane righted and repaired and in the air in the six hours that remained before the wind funnel returned. But he had been in spots almost as tight before. There was the time he came down on the arctic tundra with a broken prop, and whittled out one of his own. . . .

Lucky he had the supplies and equipment at the abandoned station. He walked back for ropes and tackle. In an hour the old ship was on her retractable wheels

again, with no more than incidental injury.

He started the motor, taxied the ship up beside the building where he could have electric light, and went to work on the twisted aileron. When that was crudely mended, he found half a dozen other necessary repairs—and still, for all he knew, there might be some hidden harm that he could not discover till the ship was in the air.

FOUR precious hours gone before the plane was ready to load. Two things he had to have—gasoline and oxygen. The air was already growing thin on Earth, but it would be thinner still in that tube of force.

Tumbling aside the drums of rocket fuel and cases of supplies, he began carrying crated tins of gasoline and pouring them into the empty tanks. Ten gallons at a trip. The empty tanks held three hundred, and he stacked tins behind the cockpit.

The Southern Cross tilted above the peak. Time fled away. He panted. Even in the chill of morning, he was drenched with sweat. Lucky the Foundation had been so generous with fuel for the motor-generator and the stoves. Lower octane rating than quite agreed with the ancient engine. But, if he started on the other, it would do.

The first ominous promise of dawn was in the east, before that task was done. Now the oxygen. He staggered under the weight of the long steel cylinders. Four of them. That was all he dared load.

Red tongues were leaping up in the east now; the vortex would soon be here. And he'd have to be high to meet it—as high as the Phoenix could climb. And even there, in the softer hands of the upper atmosphere, the odds would be overwhelmingly against him.

He made a last dash for an armload of food. He picked up a well-worn book of Keats, the name in it Elene Gayle. Who'd have thought that female astronomers read poetry? He climbed into the cockpit, and jammed his heel against the starter pedal.

While the starter motor wound up, he adjusted his helmet, tested oxygen tubes and reduction valve. He set altimeter and clock, put rudder and elevator trim tabs in neutral. He engaged the clutch, and the ancient motor caught with a roar.

Fine drops of oil on the windshield reminded him that it was in need of an overhaul. If there had been time and tools. . . .

"Crazy," muttered Leigh. "Off to Mars!" Against the roar, he began to whistle *Barbara Allen.*

While the motor warmed, he pushed in the knob that flattened the pitch of the prop, and planned the take-off. The beach was now a ghostly strip of gray beneath that strange sunrise—too short for all the load the *Phoenix* carried.

He taxied to the east end of the beach, turned to face the uneasy west wind, plunged into it with a blast of the gun. The ship was far too heavy. Even with the stick forward all the way, the tail wheel still dragged. And the white spray, flying over black teeth of rock beyond the beach, was rushing at him.

But the tail came off the ground. The wheels tapped the sand, lifted, merely flicked the rocks beyond. Leigh caught a long gasping breath. He pushed the knob that started the wheel-retracting pump. The air-speed needle leapt ahead.

Over the dark unquiet sea north of Manumotu, he wheeled into the east. Moment by moment, the sky was flaming redder. He watched for the thread of silver in it, and trimmed the elevators to hold a steady climb.

He slid the cockpit cover forward. The air about him was suddenly calm. He felt a moment of relaxation before the crisis ahead. His eyes left the banks of instruments for a moment, found the worn little book beside him.

"Sentimental fool," he muttered. "Elene Gayle wouldn't carry dead weight to Mars."

He slid back the cockpit cover, hurled the volume into the shrieking wind. He was immediately sorry he had done so. He scanned the east again. Still no tornado. Would it fail him now?

The *Phoenix* was lifting twelve hundred feet a minute. The cockpit grew cold. He plugged in the heater units in his suit. His ears ached. His lungs began to labor in the thinning air. He adjusted the faceplate of his helmet, twisted the oxygen valve.

Then he saw the funnel. It came toward him like a swinging silver rope Automatically, he banked the ship, flew straight toward it. He saw the dancing tip of it touch Manumotu, nearly six miles beneath. All the green vanished magically from its black cliffs, and a mountain of sea rose over them.

V

THE first blast of wind overtook him so violent that the ship stalled in it. The dead stick was loose in his hands. He shoved it forward, gunned the motor till the ship lived again, pulled it back.

He was trying to climb beside the silver funnel, to edge into it. But the blast of it caught him with a savage and resistless acceleration. The blood was driven out of his head. Darkness pressed down on him. He fought grimly for consciousness and strength to keep the nose of the plane ahead.

For an endless time he was suspended in that battle. His flying of the ship, the swift and delicate reactions that kept it alive and headed up that twisting bore of silver, his skill was more than half conscious. And he had no awareness of anything but life.

That killing pressure slackened at last, however. His strained heart beat more easily. He was aware of the plane again, creaking, twisted, battered—but still miraculously intact.

He turned up the oxygen, adjusted the prop to increase its pitch to the utmost opened the auxiliary supercharger. The cold gas filled his lungs again, and he found awareness for things outside the plane.

It was the strangest moment Leigh had known. The curve of the silver tube seemed quite close, on every side. He knew that the air in it, and the plane, now had a velocity quite beyond conception. Yet it seemed that an odd calm surrounded him, and he held the plane, the motor at half-throttle, at its center without difficulty.

Though he knew the tube could be nothing material, nothing more than a vortex of etheric force, the walls of it looked curiously real. Almost glass-like.

Whatever they were, he soon knew that he had better not touch them. For a whirling stick in the air ahead had grown into a great black log—the stripped trunk of some mighty tree, snatched, he supposed, from Manumotu. He saw it spin into that glassy wall. Saw it instantly rebound in a thin dissolving puff of dust and splinters.

He twisted in the cockpit and saw the Earth behind him. Beyond the shimmering walls of the tube it was a mighty hemisphere, suspended in darkness. Gray and misty, patched with great circular areas of white cloud. The Americas were crowding near the rim of it—vast stretches white with unseasonable snow. Asia was invisible in darkness.

Perceptibly, the Earth diminished. It was odd, Leigh thought, that it looked smaller and nearer all the time, not more distant. The two Americas thinned and crept very gradually beyond the lighted curve of the world. The blur of Australia came slowly out of the night; the now invisible foot of the tube, he knew, sweeping destructively across it.

A steady pressure held him back against the seat. At first he had hardly noticed it. But it required effort, he realized, to thrust out his arms against it. The muscles of his neck were already aching.

It was that acceleration. Swiftly, ever more swiftly, that resistless suction was drawing him across toward Mars. So far, so good. He guided the plane around a good-sized granite boulder, drawn with him up the funnel.

The thing was incredible. Flying to Mars in the *Phoenix*—a secondhand crate that Tick Tinker had somehow wangled out of the city fathers of Phoenix, Arizona, six years ago. And the Gayle Foundation,

with all its millions, had failed to fly its rockets even to the Moon.

But, incredible or not, it was happening.

AFTER the tension and excitement of the last few hours, Leigh felt the pressure of a maddening monotony. He was already weary from loading the plane. And he found this flight the most exhausting he had made.

The air was too thin—so thin the motor coughed and stuttered, even under both superchargers. Even with the oxygen hissing steadily, he felt faint and oppressed. And the cold was a savage thing. Even the heated suit failed to protect him.

Nothing changed. There was the ship and the silver tube. The Earth was soon a dimming point behind, beside the dimmer Moon, and Mars remained only a reddish point ahead. He ate a little, when the clock told him, from his scanty supplies.

Through the tube's pale walls space looked very dark. The stars were more brilliant, more colorful, than he had ever imagined them. But in their myriads he found it almost impossible to discover any familiar constellation. He felt lost amid their alien splendor.

He watched the clock. Its hands crept with deadly slowness. One day at last was gone. Another began. His body prickled painfully and then went numb with cold and fatigue. Sleep dragged at his brain.

But the shattering of the log had told him what would happen if his attention wavered.

"If nonstop fliers are extinct," he muttered once, "it's a good thing for them."

In his first wild resolve and in all the hazards he had met, he had not thought of what might happen next. But now, in this endless monotony, he had ample time to ponder the question: What will I do when I get to Mars?

He had a .45 autoloading pistol and half a dozen extra clips of ammunition with him in the cockpit—a relic as ancient as the *Phoenix*. How, with such a weapon, was he to cope with the science that had made this interplanetary tube?

Presently his fatigue-drugged mind recoiled from the problem, baffled.

Every dragging revolution of the minute hand seemed an eternity. But Mars at last began to grow beside the endless argent coils of the tube. It became a swelling hypnotic eye.

He shook himself in the grasp of monotony and sleep. But Mars stared at him. It was the ocher-red eye of that sinister intelligence that was stripping the Earth of air. He tried not to look at it. For its red gaze was deadly.

He woke with a start. The old *Phoenix* creaked and shuddered. The right wingtip had touched the silver wall, and it was shattered. Twisted metal caught the air, dragged. He set the rudder to compensate.

But the tube had begun to widen. The current of air was slowing. A resistless force pushed him forward in the cockpit. Wind screamed about the *Phoenix*. She was plunging down toward Mars.

He cut the throttle, pulled the old plane back into a spiral. Savage eddies hammered her. She groaned and strained. Bits of metal whipped away from the damaged wing. More and more, it dragged and fell.

But Mars was swiftly growing.

HE STUDIED the clock. Just fifty hours since he climbed off Manumotu beach. He must have come fifty million miles. A million miles an hour—let Laird Cragin beat that in a rocket!

The face of Mars grew broad beneath him. The orange-red of it was white-patched, more and more, with the stolen clouds of Earth. But he found the white ellipse of the shrinking polar cap the growing purple circle, above its retreating rim, where the Stellar Shell had landed.

Plunging down through widening funnel that cushioned the air-jet from the Earth, he held the steep spiral of the *Phoenix* toward that purple circle. He would land in the middle of it, he resolved. And try to deal at once, as best he could with

exhausted body and inadequate equipment, with the mysterious science of its creators.

A reckless determination rose in him. A wild elation filled him—the first man to cross space. He was the representative of all mankind, and he felt the strength of all men in him. He was invincible. If he must, he thought, he would make a bullet of the *Phoenix* and dive into whatever seemed the heart of the enemy's strength.

In his feverish excitement he wanted to push back the cockpit cover and yell. His lungs were burning. Then a glance at the barometic altimeter showed that it was registering. Air pressure was mounting again. He was suffering from oxygen intoxication. He partially closed the valve.

For a time a passing cloud hid the purple spot. With battered binoculars, he studied the surface of the planet beyond it. New lakes upon the reddish desert were black or mirror-like The olive-green bands around them must be vegetation.

The cloud moved on, and he could see the purple spot again, perhaps only twenty miles below. A patch of dense purple jungle, the binoculars revealed it, far ranker than the olive-green beyond. Had the invaders brought alien seed to Mars?

A green line cut the purple wilderness, opposite the polar crown. And, in the center of the jungle, he saw curious glints and sparklings of green. The glasses picked out machines there. A colossal latticed tube thrust upward.

That mighty metal finger pointed toward the silver funnel, toward the far-off Earth. It was the finger of doom. It, Leigh knew, was the thing he must destroy. He tipped the shuddering old *Phoenix* into a steeper dive.

A long, long flight, his dulled brain thought, just to bring a man to suicide. But for all mankind, for Elene Gayle and her science, even Laird Cragin and his rockets, it was the thing he had to do.

Or so he had resolved. But the gesture was denied him.

That long green finger moved abruptly in the purple jungle. It swung down from the Earth, to point at the diving plane. The *Phoenix* was struck a staggering blow. If the power of that needle was the focused gravity of Mars, then a good deal of it, reversed, reacted on the ship. The impact battered Leigh into oblivion.

VI

WHEN Carter Leigh came back to consciousness, the plane was spinning down in a power dive. Her ancient frame quivered; scraps of metal were vanishing from her injured wing. The damaged aileron was jammed again.

He yanked at the stick, fought to bring her out of the dive. He stopped her spinning, and her nose came slowly up. Then he looked below for a landing place. Shallow lakes of yellow rain water patched the red desert. He found a level ridge that looked firm and dry enough, extended the landing gear.

But the air even here at the surface was still very thin. Lesser gravity made a partial compensation, but the landing speed must still be dangerously high. Still he came down.

The red ridge flashed up at him, and he tried to level off. For all his efforts, the dragging right wheel touched first, too hard. The plane bounced, veered dangerously. The bounce carried him abnormally high. He had time to get the plane half straight again. Another bounce, to which the whole plane shook and groaned. Next time, in spite of him, the injured wing grazed and crumpled. He fought to right the ship; but the good wing dipped, plowed into red mud, and was shattered to kindling. The fuselage rebounded; skimmed along on its side for a hundred yards in a spray of crimson mud; at last was still.

Leigh clambered painfully out of the wreckage. He felt his bruised limbs. Despite the stunning finality of the crackup, he found no bones broken. His helmet had been knocked off. His lungs had to labor, but they found oxygen enough.

Pale yellow-green shoots, pulpy and fragile, were pushing up through the wet red soil at his feet. He had come to rest at the margin of a wide shallow lake, that mirrored the drizzling sky. Far beyond, above the gentle red hills patched with fresh olive-green, he could see a long low line of purple darkness. And his ears, after they had become accustomed to the silence, heard a continual distant roaring in the sky.

That roar was the wind of stolen air from Earth. That line was the purple jungle. Beyond it was the great machine of the stellar invaders, that had to be destroyed. Leigh, as wearily confident as if nothing were now impossible, set about that distant project.

He snapped the action of the old automatic, slipped it in his pocket. Two five-gallon tins of gasoline and the remaining cylinders of oxygen he made into a bale, padded with his thick flying suit.

On Earth, he could not have moved them. Even here, their weight was eighty pounds, and his own sixty more. The burden simplified the matter of walking. But the effort of breathing taxed his lungs.

The horizon was closer than it looked. He dwelt upon that fact for encouragement, and walked toward the barrier of the unknown jungle. The roaring grew louder in the sky. He reeled with fatigue. The slow drizzle of stolen moisture continued, interrupted with flurries of sleet. Cold sank into his bones.

He came at last to the jungle and supercactus. Jagged purple spines grew with a visible motion; they stabbed into the red mud, sprouted, lifted new barbed lances. It was a barrier too thick and dense to hope to cross.

Utterly disheartened, he flung down his burden. Mechanically, he ate a can of beans he had slipped into the pack. Then quite suddenly he slipped into sleep.

THE slow thrust of a living bayonet wakened him, drenched and stiff with cold. His chest felt congested and breathing took a painful effort. He picked up his burden and slogged off westward through the red mud, skirting the advancing jungle.

It was in that direction that he thought he had seen the green slash. An exhausting hour brought him to it—a broad level pavement of some glistening, bright-green stuff. The surface was perfect, but the bank beneath it had a surprising look of antiquity.

This road came straight out of the north. It cut into the jungle, the walls of purple thorns arching over it. After brief hesitation—lest he meet its masters unawares—Leigh trudged in upon it.

The purple shadow of the jungle fell upon him. The roaring continued in the sky; cold rain and sleet fell endlessly. Leigh plodded endlessly on, ignoring fatigue and cold and hunger. Once he stopped to drink from a puddle on the road. A lancing pain stabbed through his chest.

A humming clatter startled him. He stepped off the road, thrust himself into the purple spines. A huge three-wheeled conveyance came swiftly along the pavement. The bed of it was piled with something pale-green and crystalline—something mined, perhaps, in the equatorial regions.

Straining his eyes in the purple dusk to see the driver Leigh glimpsed only a gelatinous arm. That arm and a yellow eye and another translucent waving limb were all he ever saw of the actual invaders. Their nature, the motives and the course of their flight, the mysteries of their science, the extent of their designs upon the solar system—all these remain defined only by conjecture and dread. The invaders remain but a dark-limned shadow of the unknown.

The brief polar night was already falling when the truck passed. It was bitterly cold. The rain turned again to driving pellets of sleet, and heavy frost crackled over the roadway and the jungle spines.

The roaring overhead was louder now. A greenish glow filtered down the tunnel of the road. And at last, dead with fatigue,

Leigh dragged himself to the edge of the central clearing in the jungle.

He perceived no source of light. But the surrounding wall of thorns and the fantastic structures before him were visible in a dull green radiance. He saw what must have been the remains of the Stellar Shell—a huge projectile, whose nose had plowed deep into the planet. Half its upper parts had been cut away; it must have served as a mine of the green metal.

Beyond it, swung between three massive piers, was the latticed tube, now horizontal, pointing across the pole toward the unseen Earth. Leigh caught his breath. Nerved with a last spurt of unsuspected strength, he staggered forward in the green shadow of the Stellar Shell.

Nothing stopped him. He swayed across a little open space beyond, dropped with his burden in the darkness between the three piers. His hands began shaping a basin in the half-frozen mud.

A hoarse coughing hoot from some half-seen structure beyond, spurred him to desperate haste. He ripped open his bale, began pouring his ten gallons of gasoline into the basin. An unaccountable rasping rattle lifted the hair at the back of his neck. He heard a metal clatter, nearer.

Fumbling desperately, he opened the cocks of the oxygen cylinders. The compressed stuff came out with a hissing roar, half liquid, half gas. It evaporated and enveloped him in a cloud of frost.

He turned the blue jets into the gasoline. Ticklish work. Before the invention of the cathion blast, gasoline and oxygen had been the favorite fuel of rocket experimenters. An efficient mixture of them, as makers of aerial bombs had sometimes demonstrated, had five times the explosive energy of nitroglycerine.

This wouldn't be a very efficient mixture. The gasoline froze into brittle blue chunks, and the oxygen was swiftly boiling away. The results were unpredictable.

Above the dying hiss of the jets, Leigh heard that rattle and the rasping hoot, very close to him now. He straightened in the thick white fog, and saw the yellow eye. A huge luminescent yellow pupil, fringed with a ragged membrane.

A pointed metal rod, glowing with strange green, appeared beneath the eye. It thrust toward him through the fog. Leigh stumbled backward; his numbed fingers found the automatic, fired into the yellow eye. It blinked and vanished, and the rod clattered in the fog.

Leigh staggered back to the end of the Stellar Shell and began shooting into his mud basin between the three great piers. At his third shot, the world turned to blue flame, and went out utterly.

THE massive green wall of the cosmic projectile shielded him from the blast. And it sheltered him somewhat from the tempest that followed.

He came to, lying in the freezing mud, nostrils bleeding, head ringing. Dragging himself up behind the shielding barrier, he saw that all the great structures of the invaders had been leveled. The green glow had gone from them.

He started at some motion in the gray twilight; it was a gelatinous arm, waving slowly above a pool of mud. He emptied the automatic at it—and it sank.

Then the wind came. The interplanetary air-jet, now that the cushioning forces by which the invaders had sheltered themselves had been removed, came down in a shrieking blast. The mighty walls of the Stellar Shell were all that stood before it.

For half an hour, battered and half suffocated, Leigh clung to a metal bar in its shelter. The wind blew itself out abruptly, the last of the ravished air. The small sun rose warmingly in a sky suddenly serene, and Leigh slept half the day in its heat.

In the afternoon, still aching with weariness, he found the roadway again, and plodded back through the flattened jungle toward the wreck of the *Phoenix*. Hungry, bitter with loneliness, he began to regret that he had survived.

Some swift decay had attacked the fallen purple thorns, but the native life of Mars was thriving exceedingly. In the changing

landscape, it was difficult to find the plane. When at last he reached it, he ate the solitary can of corned beef that remained of his supplies and then rigged up a directional antenna for the transmitter.

For several reasons, this last hopeless message was important. He wanted to end the fears of the Earth; wanted to help Tick Tinker; and he wanted Dr. Elene Kathrine Gayle to know that he had flown nonstop to Mars, usefully, with gasoline.

"Mars, calling Earth," he repeated. "Carter Leigh, on Mars, calling C Q, Earth. Landed here yesterday. Destroyed invaders last night with gasoline bomb. Anticipate no danger further loss of air. Inform Tick Tinker, New York, nonstop flight to Mars made with Zerolube oil. Now marooned on Mars. Goodbye, Earth."

He repeated that message, between intervals of sleep, until the little battery was exhausted. Then he set himself, wearily and without hope, to begin the life of the first Robinson Crusoe of space.

In a pot cut from the end of a gasoline tank, he made stews, queer-flavored but edible, from the fruits and seed of some of the native plants. Hoping to reach a less severe climate in the equatorial regions and driven by a desire to learn more of whatever lost people had built the road, he stowed all the useful articles he could salvage upon a sledge made from the elevator of the *Phoenix*, and set off northward along the straight green pave.

The Earth, now drawing away from Mars, was a splendid golden morning star. Sight of it, in the frosty dawns when he could not keep warm enough to sleep, filled him with tragic loneliness.

One day he threw away the gun, to end his desire to use it on himself. The next he turned back along the road, and spent all the day to find it and clean it again. But when it was ready he put it on the sledge and plodded on down the glassy pavement.

He had counted thirty Martian days. With the slow advance of spring, and his weary progress northward, the climate had become a little more endurable. He was cheered sometimes by the sight of young, familiar-looking shoots—grown from seed borne upon that interplanetary wind.

But his body was gaunt with privation. He had a recurrent painful cough. Sometimes his meals from the Martian plants brought violent indigestion. The end, he clearly saw, would be the same, whether he used the gun or not.

Then the night, the incredible night, when he woke in his chill bed beside a smouldering fire to hear the familiar rhythmic drum of cathion rockets. He saw a blue star following down the roadway from the south. Breathless and quivering, he sprang up to feed his fire.

MANTLED in the blue flame of its forward jets, the rocket came down upon the road. His firelight showed the legend on its side: *Gayle Foundation.* It would be Laird Cragin, he supposed, another exile—

But the bare grimy yellow head that appeared, when its thick door swung open, was the head of Elene Gayle.

"Greetings, Mr. Lucky Leigh," her brisk voice said. "And congratulations on the aptness of your nickname. . . . You are all right?"

"Right as rain," he croaked hoarsely. "Only—surprised!"

"We finished the rocket." She was oddly breathless. "When the guns and explosives were no longer necessary, we loaded it with return fuel and supplies for a few weeks of exploration."

"Cragin?" demanded Leigh.

"There were two places," said the girl. "After we took off, I made him drop back by parachute." Her voice was suddenly very crisp. "I have the honor to bring you, Leigh, in token of the gratitude of Earth for your recent remarkable nonstop flight, the medals and awards—"

Her voice broke abruptly. She stumbled out of the rocket, and came running across the strange pavement to meet him. In his arms, trembling, she clung to him.

The tug gave a sickening lurch . . . a hand reached out and grabbed her arm

The River Run

By NARD JONES

Author of "Lost Horizon," "Detour," etc.

The last rapids was the tough one to beat—even to a veteran river man who knew the river like the palm of his hand, there came a day when he thought he wouldn't make it

THE shortcut to the Hebberd place and a scattering of bleak neighboring farms was called the River Road. It had been the main road, but was isolated now from the wider and straighter asphalt highway back from the river. There were spots between the ruts where Anne Hebberd's car pressed down the rye grass as a thresher mows down wheat. But Anne knew how to handle the treacherous combination of the River Road and the Hebberd car.

At least five mornings a week she drove down the Columbia as far as Umatilla to teach the sixth grade, returning in the evening at a more leisurely rate, watching the rapids and the swirls.

The white-tipped Umatilla was the climax, the one to which Joel Hebberd referred as "the last rapid." He meant that it was the final rapid for his *Outlaw* when she had ranged from Deschutes to Fort Walla Walla and back again.

Above the Umatilla were still the Juniper and the Wallula, but these swirls never really tested a pilot's skill. And then there was "The Riffle." There are thousands of riffles in the Columbia, but to Joel Hebberd this one had always meant the end of the eastbound trip.

His cottage was set back a little from the riverbank. Not so close as to brave the high water, yet near enough so that Judge Hebberd could hear "The Riffle." To Anne, the place had always been home, but she knew her father and mother had lived in The Dalles when it was a steamboat town. Those were the days when Joel Hebberd was a purser on the *Daisy Ainesworth*. Later he'd been a master, and there was nothing finer in that country, then, than a steamboat captain.

Judge Hebberd had been born a little too late, for the railroads had forced him off the river and into the mustiness of law. Yet he'd buckled down, become a good lawyer and finally a respected judge. This didn't mean that his heart wasn't with the river or that he'd quite forgiven the railroads for sending the river steamers to the boneyard.

He had watched the river for years since retiring from the bench—watched it flowing silently and morosely, bereft of surface life. And when the army engineers began to swarm along its banks to build dams, when their dredges began to poke at it, Judge Hebberd scoffed.

Engineers might disturb it a little with their great structures at Coulee and Bonneville, but that didn't meant it was tamed. It would always press down from where it bent sharply south, taking strength as it came, taking it from the Snake and the Clark Fork and the Kootenai, swallowing up the Okanogan to become one of the great rivers of the world. It would always have that deceptive change of pace—miles of it sluggish as the Mississippi, then stretches where it would boil treacherous and defiant.

Anne piloted the little coupé around a bend and faced the lights of the cottage, far up the road. They were blazing from every window, upstairs and down, and it was hardly more than dusk. But that was Joel Hebberd.

He said that people driving along the river bank liked to see the lights as they came through the deep cut and onto the flat land where the cottage stood.

And had it not been for those lights, Anne might easily have run down the man she saw standing flat-footed in the middle of the road. The coupé's head-lamps were none too efficient, but she saw the slender figure against the lights of the cottage. Involuntarily she brought the car to a chattering stop and found herself too angry to be frightened.

THE man walked around the car and looked in, his face dimly illuminated by the instrument panel. He wore no hat. His hair was dark and stubborn, and his gaze was pleasant. Nevertheless Anne kept the engine running and the gear lever engaged.

"Sorry to have been standing in the middle of the road that way," he began.

"You might have been sorrier. I almost didn't see you."

He grinned. "You needn't be frightened. That is, if you *are* frightened."

"I'm not," Anne said. "What do you want?"

"You see, none of the few cars I've seen showed any inclination to stop, so I thought I'd try just standing there. I'm very much lost. Can you tell me where Judge Hebbert lives?" When he saw Anne's hesitation he added, "It's quite important."

"It isn't far. I'm his daughter and I'll take you there."

"Fine!" The door opened instantly, and he sank with a sigh against the cushions. The knees of his whipcord breeches jutted rather high. He held his head forward a little as though afraid he'd bump it against the top. "My name's Jerry Calkins," he said. "Do you mind a pipe?"

Anne said that she did not, and let out the clutch.

"They tell me your dad is the best pilot on the upper river," said Mr. Calkins.

"He was—when they had pilots on the upper river. You can see the lights of our place ahead there. Dad used to take the *Outlaw* up to just about where the cottage is. The passengers transferred there to the narrow-gauge, if they were

oing to Walla Walla, or get aboard another stern-wheeler bound up for Lewiston nd the mining camps."

The young man nodded. "That's the ind of a feller I want."

His assurance nettled Anne. She stole nother look at him, at the soiled whipord breeches, the blue flannel shirt open t the throat. "May I enquire why you'd vant a fellow like that?"

"I've got a new tug, and an oil barge. f I can get her up the Columbia as far s Wallula with a hundred thousand galons of oil I've cinched a five-year conract with Amalgamated Oil."

"Sounds like a wonderful idea," said Anne indulgently.

"It is. The ship lock at Bonneville, and he Diesel engine have fixed it so you an make a million on this river. And I'm head of everybody else."

"Except for financing, I surmise. I think ought to tell you, Mr. Calkins, that udges in this county do not retire rich. And I'm just a schoolteacher. I'm afraid ou've had a long hike for nothing."

"I don't want any backing. I want your lad to bring the tug and barge up."

Anne stirred behind the wheel. "It's our idea. Why don't you do it? Why would a man build a tug and barge if he couldn't bring them up the river?"

He tapped his pipe unfeelingly on the outside of the coupé door. "I'm not a river man. I can take a tugboat anywhere from Astoria to the Bering Sea—but that doesn't mean I know what this river's all about. I had a man who got her as far as Blalock Island. But we had a bad time at Squally Hook and he's jumped. Didn't want to take the responsibility."

They were nearing the cottage, and Anne slowed the coupé almost to a stop. "Listen, Mr. Calkins—Dad is seventy-something. He won't admit to me seventy-what. He's not bringing any tug and a hundred thousand gallons of oil up the river from Blalock Island."

"Why not? They said back at Umatilla that he'd be tickled to death to do it."

Anne nodded silently. "I'm afraid you're quite literal, Mr. Calkins. Doctor Nevitt's told me that Dad hasn't got the kind of a heart now that will stand much."

"But there'd be no excitement to it for a man who knows the river like he does. It's just—"

He stopped. They had rolled into the yard of the Hebberd cottage, and a tall old man was walking toward the car. "Hello, Annie—who's with you?"

Anne stepped down. "This is Mr. Calkins, Dad. I found him on the road, looking for our place." She shot Jerry Calkins a final glance that seemed to combine warning with hostility. But her voice was guileless. "Of course you must stay for dinner, Mr. Calkins. You can pick up a ride into town at seven-thirty with Sid Barnes. He's the mail carrier and he'll be on his way back about then."

"Thank you. I'd like to stay if you're sure it won't be a bother."

"Bother?" Judge Hebberd exclaimed. "Annie likes to cook."

THE dinner, Jerry Calkins found, made that fact obvious. But Joel, fired with the idea of the tug and barge, hardly gave him a chance to eat. He peppered questions thick and fast.

"You'll build tanks at Wallula, Mr. Calkins?"

"Yes. Then the oil will be transferred to motor trucks that will take it all through the Inland Empire."

The old man chuckled. The vision of a vessel, even a tug with a barge, bringing cargo to the arch enemies of the railroads, pleased him. He looked at Jerry admiringly. "What kind of an outfit you got, exactly?"

"A sixty-footer. She draws about three and a half feet."

"Any beam to speak of?"

"Seventeen."

"Goin' to use these new Diesel engines?"

"You bet. Eight cylinder jobs. Two hundred horses in each of them, with reduction gears to get some real push with that shallow draft. She's about like any Puget Sound tug on deck, except there's lots of

deck all around the house amidships."

Joel wrinkled his forehead. "Y'know, if that house is 'midships she wants to be plenty high. You'll run into trouble if she's not. You got to see down past the nose on this man's river."

"There'll probably be changes in her after the first trip. More power would have been safer, but I couldn't raise the money at this stage. And I had to rush. There's a barge-type freighter being built at Portland and if I smash up, then the business will be wide open for her. But we got to Arlington all right. There were a couple of tight squeezes, but we made it. I suppose the worst is yet to come. That's what they all say, anyhow."

"You've done all right, so far. But don't let anybody tell you the Columbia is a sissy piece of water."

"We made it in seventeen hours from Portland to the Bonneville lock. That's better than seven miles an hour, and the engines were turning up eleven hundred. They'll go to fourteen without straining."

"And you bent a wheel at Squally Hook?"

Calkins nodded. "I've got a new wheel and a spare coming up from Portland."

The Judge was looking across the table, out of the window—at the river. "I don't know . . . maybe you got the right idea. But I wish you could've seen the *Harvest Queen. There* was a boat for this man's river. Two hundred feet fitted out as slick as any Mississippi steamer you ever heard of. Ainsworth and Cap' Troup built her to bring wheat down river, and carry cargo and passengers up."

Anne interrupted sweetly. "I don't want to hurry you, Mr. Calkins—but it's seven-fifteen. Mr. Barnes will be coming along soon. I wish we could ask you to stay all night. But the cottage just isn't quite big enough for a spare room."

"That's quite all right. You've been more than kind."

The Judge stood up. "You take your time with that blackberry pie, Mr. Calkins. I'll go out on the porch and hail Barnes when he comes by."

Calkins watched the tall, straight figure out of the dining room. Then he turned to Anne. "He's a grand guy, and you ought to let him do it."

"Do what?"

"Bring the tug up the river. He'd love it."

Anne smiled. "I'm afraid your solicitous attitude isn't entirely unselfish, Mr. Calkins."

"You don't like me, do you?"

"I really hadn't formed an opinion one way or the other. But, if you want me to be frank, you strike me as something of an opportunist. You're stuck with your outfit at Arlington. You believe Dad can get it up for you. That's all he is to you. The river doesn't mean to you what it means to him—and you needn't pretend to me that it does."

Joel Hebberd stuck his head into the dining room. "Barnes is coming down the road, Mr. Calkins." At the door he said, "Maybe I'll get to Arlington tomorrow and see the outfit." He grinned at his daughter. "That is, if I can sneak away from Anne. She's kind of scared I'll get back on the river, I think."

He went down the path to chat with Sid Barnes, and Jerry turned to Anne. "Thanks for the lift—and the swell dinner."

"You're very welcome, Mr. Calkins." Her eyes were without compromise, and she added: "If you encourage Dad to bring up your outfit you'll be doing a cowardly thing."

His face reddened. "Suppose he decides to do it—of his own free will? Shall I pretend he's a child and send him home?"

"Perhaps I'd better be there when you start."

He stood looking down at her, his eyes narrowing a little. "If you show up aboard that tug you'll get tossed into the Columbia." He started down the path, then turned. "The trouble with you," he said, "you're the only daughter of a widower. You've been running a man since you could blow your own nose. It might interest you to know that men run their own

affairs, as a rule—and they usually run their women, too."

Anne's mouth opened then closed helplessly. Her small fists clenched at her sides. But there was only Jerry Calkins' broad back, going down toward where her father stood talking to Sid Barnes.

BACK inside the house, Joel heard Anne rattling the dishes in the kitchen. It was an angry sound and he approached the door warily. He had always been a little afraid of Anne, even when she was small. He stood there by the door, waiting, until he could catch the degree of fire in her eyes. Then he said, "I wonder if that darned young fool will try to bring that boat up alone?"

"I'm sure I'm not worrying," Anne said, dousing the coffee pot without mercy. "He had a nerve, to come here and ask you."

"Well, now, he didn't exactly *ask* me," protested Joel. "I think maybe he might have, if you hadn't appeared so set against it. He just barely suggested it." The Judge paused a moment, tamping down his pipe. "I'd hate to see him try it. Got a new, expensive outfit—and his heart set on getting that oil hauling contract. He'll put that new propeller on tomorrow and he might not be ready to go until late in the afternoon. Suppose he was fool enough to start out then?"

"Suppose he was," Anne said, "what of it?"

"The Columbia isn't any stream to try to navigate in darkness. We never used to do it unless there was some emergency or other. Why, that was how Martin Speller lost the *Daisy,* trying to get two hundred head of cattle away by dawn. The watchman in charge of the wharfboat had taken his lantern down and walked up the portage road with it to see a lady friend." The Judge chuckled indulgently. "It'd been better if he hadn't set the lantern down on his lady friend's front stoop —because Martin Speller saw it. He lined up the *Daisy's* nose with it and smashed full against that rocky ledge at the head of the upper Cascades."

THE Judge stood at the corner of the highway junction outside of Umatilla and hitched a ride along the river. He felt like a schoolboy playing hooky, for in reaching this spot he had made a wide detour around the schoolhouse lest Anne glimpse him from a window. That morning Anne had said, "You're not going to go down and look at Mr. Calkins' boat, are you?" and he had replied, "I don't think I will, Annie. I don't feel quite up to it today."

The tug and barge he encountered under way alongside of Blalock Island. "I'll get out here," he told his benefactor.

At first he could not believe his eyes. Jerry Calkins had told him what the outfit looked like—yet in his mind's eye the Judge had persisted in seeing a vessel like the *Outlaw* with perhaps a wood bateau nudged ahead. But this vessel, though bright and new, seemed squat and ugly. Its turreted barge was like nothing the Judge had ever expected to see on the grand Columbia. She was broad as could be, the Judge told himself, but there was a great crest of foam at her stem. The more Joel watched her against the current the better he liked her.

He followed her along the highway clear to Paterson's Landing, and he needed no more than a hiking stride for the tug was breasting a tough current. Calkins saw him on the landing, and the tug and barge began to swing in, slowly and gingerly, the guy wires taut with the strain.

When the barge was within four feet of the landing pier, the Judge leaped, went sprawling, and was up in an instant to motion for Jerry to keep her away. Then he scrambled around the barge's filling turrets and climbed up over the bow of the tug.

As his feet hit the solid deck, something happened to Joel. He seemed to grow straighter. His gait was different from his shore walk. He was a younger man, and in the doorway of the pilot house his voice was vibrant, "You're not going to try to get beyond Umatilla tonight, are you, Calkins?"

Jerry nodded, his eyes on the stream. "It took us longer to fix the wheel than I figured—and my option with Amalgamated is up two days from now. Suppose I had another delay, and they finish that barge-type freighter down at Portland?"

"It's suicide to go up here after dark. Know that?"

"Then why'd you come aboard?"

Joel didn't answer. He reached for the wheel. "Let me see how she handles, will you, son?"

Calkins stepped aside, watching the old mans' face. It was beautiful to see as Joel took the wheel and looked out ahead onto the river. The Judge turned. "She seems to handle all right. But I wish that barge wasn't there."

"The hookup makes her handle like a single vessel, though, doesn't it?"

"Well . . ." There was a cautious silence. "I like to look down over the nose of a boat."

"Want me to take her now?"

The Judge shook his head. "No. I want to know her pretty well before we hit the Umatilla Rapids . . ."

THEY hit them thirty minutes after dark, hit them when things were as black as the heart of the devil. Joel had been doing fine. Calkins hadn't realized, until he saw the deftness of the old man, what river piloting meant.

The current was swifter now. Jerry could feel its rush increasing beneath the deck. He reached out to the controls, set up the revolutions of both the port and starboard Diesels.

"You handle the gadgets," the Judge said. "I don't know what makes this tub go—but I know the river and what a rudder's for."

It had worked out well so far, in the quiet stretches from Paterson's Landing. Gradually Joel had become used to the idea that Calkins could help handle the tug by speeding up one or the other of the engines.

"Fourteen to sixteen miles an hour," Joel Hebbert said. "That's what she runs in the Umatilla now. Think you can handle that?"

Calkins peered at the illuminated dials. "They're turning around twelve-fifty and we're doing all right."

"Don't let that fool you. Twenty or thirty feet from the end of those rapids she raises hell. All of a sudden. Those twenty or thirty feet are enough. It's good solid water against you."

"We've got fourteen hundred revs if we need 'em."

Joel was leaning over the wheel, peering intently into the pitch black. "We'll need them. And I wish you'd bring your man out of the engineroom. He's a luxury down there. I want him down there on the barge—with a flashlight to signal us. I think we can miss the rocks, but maybe my memory isn't as good as it was. Or maybe the rocks have changed around."

"Chris!" Jerry yelled below, and brought out a stolid squarehead glad to be up where he could at least see what was to destroy him. Fresh from Puget Sound, he'd weathered storms from Cape Flattery to the Bering Sea. But the strangeness of the Columbia he did not like.

Chris believed devoutly that only fools sought shoal water deliberately. And even through his stolidity there pierced the feeling that this squat tug and this ugly barge of steel were anachronisms on the eerie, ancient stream. Eagerly he grabbed the flashlight from Jerry's hands and clambered onto the barge for lookout duty.

Calkins himself could see nothing beyond the bow. The after end of the barge was simply a misty sheet, and Chris had disappeared beyond that. He wondered whether Joel Hebbert could see any more, or whether, as he'd intimated, he was steering from sheer memory. The channel grew tortuous, creating cross currents which jarred the barge and swung it until the guy wires sang.

Suddenly Jerry Calkins straightened. He had thought it dark—but now the blackness deepened. "We're coming into the cut," Joel said, as if explaining the new

blackness. "It's really better. You can spot the white swirls now."

They were shoulder to shoulder, straining their eyes ahead. Not once had Chris's light shown. Jerry began to wonder if the engineer was still out there. Then the thought was swept from his mind. They were slowing down!

"A little more," Joel said instantly. "Easy . . . just enough to hold her nose into it." Then the old man swore.

"What's wrong?"

"There's no damned light. I can't hit the channel up there without a light."

The statement startled Jerry Calkins. "The engineer's chart doesn't show a light."

"There used to be one there," Joel said. "Before the engineers. A wharfboat with a light. I've lined up with it hundreds of times on winter runs when I was late with the *Outlaw*."

Jerry peered at the old man anxiously. Maybe this was too much for Joel Hebberd—going back like this, straining to remember.

"Boost her a little more," Joel said. "I'm going to make a try."

Calkins hesitated only a second. Then his hands tightened on the dual controls. The tug crept forward a little.

"I think we're close now, son. Stand by to give her all you've got."

JERRY stood rigid, waiting. His arms were trembling, as though they had been supporting weights. The Judge seemed hardly to be moving the wheel. His eyes were straight ahead, but Jerry knew now that they might as well have been closed. Joel Hebberd was recalling something out of the past, remembering as a blind man remembers. He was feeling the river. Feeling it through the tug's keel and ribs and rudders.

Then ahead Chris's flashlight blurred wildly in an arc on the starboard side. Instinctively Jerry cut down the starboard engine and shoved the port controls ahead. Joel was muttering under his breath.

"Both ahead, Jerry. *No-ow!*"

With the flats of his hands Jerry shunted the controls forward. Below him the Diesels mumbled louder. Then suddenly his whole body chilled. There was a shattering, scraping sound that shivered up into the soles of his shoes.

It must have telegraphed clear to Chris, for Jerry saw the flashlight bobbing along the barge, then past the wheelhouse like a streaking comet. There it stopped suddenly, went out, and clattered to the deck to the accompaniment of a grunt from Chris. An unmistakably feminine voice said, "Why don't you look where you're going?"

It was Jerry's arm which reached out and brought the owner of the voice into the wheelhouse. Old man Hebberd stared. "Annie! Annie, what are you—" He stopped, returning his attention quickly to the river.

"You're throwing gravel fifty feet out behind," Anne said.

In the faint light the girl's face was very pale, and her words came slowly, with the effort to keep her voice steady.

Jerry nodded grimly. "We know it—and what the devil are you doing here anyhow?"

"I got aboard at Blalocks, while you were fixing the wheel. I—I hid to see if Dad would show up, and then you started before I could get off."

Jerry let go of her shoulder, contemptuously. He went to the side of Joel Hebberd. Sweat was streaming down from the old man's hair despite the wind that veered in through the open windows of the pilot house. "Cut her down easy, son. Without that light—it's hard to figure."

Jerry felt his legs sagging. They weren't going to make it. They couldn't stand still in that river. There'd be the moment when the strain on the barge was too great, when the guy-lines would snap like string and the barge jackknife against the tug.

He stood there beside the old pilot, held motionless by his overwhelming sense of impotence. He could do nothing.

He knew now what Joel had meant when he said you couldn't fool with the upper river. It had looked so easy, so innocent, with the shoreline always in sight. Those rapids astern of him had been adventures. They had meant nothing because he had got through them. But now this one had him. It and the night together had snatched up his fragile outfit and his fragile dream—"

"Dad!" Anne's voice struck out through the darkness, and Jerry Calkins whirled viciously.

"Shut up, you little fool! You've no business here. You—"

"Dad . . ." Her voice cut clearly through Jerry's own. "If you can make it a little way farther—I had Mrs. Lacey turn all the lights in the cottage on."

Jerry saw the old man's shoulders straighten. "Give her a little more, son." Jerry stepped to the controls, pushed them ahead equally. But it seemed to him that the dark outlines of the hills would never move.

"There, by God!"

At sound of the old man's choked exclamation, Jerry tore his eyes away from the lowering shore and looked ahead. There were lights!—the lights of the cottage.

"THOSE lights," Joel said brokenly. "They—they line up with the channel that brought us through in the old days." His voice became vibrant and young again. "Annie—Annie remembered. Give her all you've got, son."

"Thirteen hundred it is, sir," Jerry almost shouted it.

The tug and the barge began forging upstream. "Thirteen fifty," Jerry said. "We ought to have fifty more down there in the engines."

"Give them to me, son."

The needles crept up, jarred, crept up again. "Thirteen ninety-five on the starboard engine. Fourteen hundred on the port."

"Watch her now," old Joel cried. "We're steamboating, son . . ." The tug sprang literally, throwing Jerry and Anne back against the pilothouse wall together. "She's done," Joel said. "We're heading for 'The Riffle' now."

His voice had suddenly grown strong and sure again; but after he had spoken, he let out a long, sighing breath. In the cabin's silence it seemed a shout of relief.

Jerry and Anne stood there in the darkness, clutching each other. "I'm sorry," Jerry said. "I didn't know you wanted to help. I—"

"I didn't want to help. I—I just thought it might be a good idea to telephone Mrs. Lacey to put the lights on in case Dad . . ."

Her voice drifted into silence. They watched the shoreline loom closer, seeing the reflection of the cottage lights on this comparatively quiet stretch. Chris stood on the nose of the barge, line in hand, ready to leap ashore. Those three in the pilot house, he told himself, were crazy. Running a tug and barge on wet rocks! Navigating by the lights of a house! He spat overside and wished he were on Puget Sound.

But the three in the pilot house were smiling happily. They were standing shoulder to shoulder—Jerry Calkins at the engine controls, old Joel Hebberd at the wheel, and Anne close on the other side.

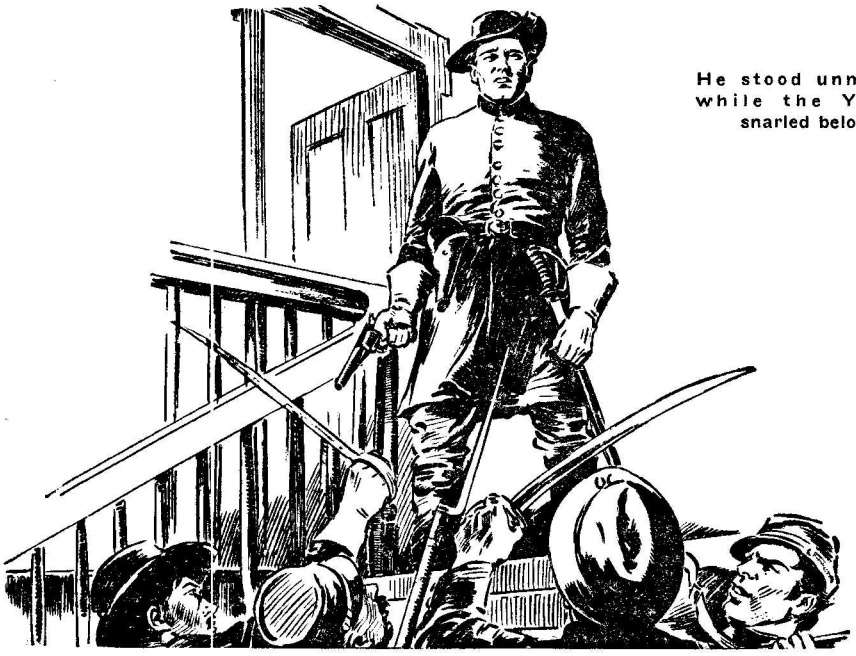
"We're coming in," Joel said, contentedly. "There's no beating a river man, Annie."

She did not answer him then, but her hand reached out and squeezed his arm for an instant.

Jerry cut the engines. The tug drifted easily into shore and he saw Chris take off the line. Quietly he stepped close to Anne Hebberd.

"I'm thinking there's no beating a river woman, either," he said.

She turned her face to his in the half-light. All the hostility was gone, and her eyes were the soft eyes of a woman willing to concede that it is better, after all, for men to run things in their own way.



He stood unmoved while the Yanks snarled below

None but the Brave

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Him and General Lee," "A Letter to Mr. Lincoln," etc.

A moment in the war between the states when a blind man saw with perfect clarity the long road that a hero must walk

TO THE north, there was cannon. You could hear that even if you could not see the flashes. Deep in your ears, there would be concussion and then, seconds later, the dull roll of thunder which was a shade too sharp and intense to be real thunder. The house they sat in would tremble, and the pictures on the walls would shake with a faint buzz of vibration. To Wilkes Hunter, sitting there in the Hunter home, it was all the more acute, because he had accustomed himself to living by sound and touch, not sight, and he could almost feel the caissons moving closer.

It was hard for Wilkes Hunter to listen to Meg read the letter to him. It was hard because he knew the Yankees were coming, rolling closer to Jonesboro all the time, on their drive south toward Harper's Way, where the Army of Virginia under General Lee had stored a great supply of ammunition. It made Wilkes Hunter's soul turn to wormwood inside of him to sit there, blind and helpless, unable to raise a hand against the marauders, unable to defend his home.

"It's an old letter," Maragaret said. "Why, Wilkes, it's more than two months old! And it just arrived, Mr. Temmiken just brought it a few moments ago. You heard him at the door?"

Wilkes nodded somberly. "I heard him—barely—above the cannon. Is it from Barton then?"

"Yes."

"War upsets mail schedules," said Wilkes politely. "It's a wonder we received it at all, Meg. Go ahead."

Maragaret Hunter settled herself in the chair opposite him and primly opened the letter from Wilkes Hunter's brother, Barton. War and tragedy had not marred Margaret's beauty. It was striking, a warm and chiseled face with kind eyes and a full sad mouth. Wilkes always imagined her as she sat next to him and read the mail. His eyes could not see her, but in the mirror of his mind, she was there, completely, her raven black hair with the steel-blue tint across the top where the light struck it in passing; her blue eyes, the outrageously long black lashes, the soft delicate white hands.

Sometimes Wilkes would grip the arms of his chair until his knuckles turned white. The thought of her, of him, of their marriage—it was almost too much.

"It was written from Fredericksburg," Meg said. She read quickly and silently for a moment. "He is well, thank God! Not even wounded!"

"Read it, read it!"

". . . none but the brave survives now. For even if a coward comes through battle unscathed, his spirit is a dreadful thing, a fetid corpse which rots within him and soon enough destroys him. Yes, dear Meg and Wilkes, the price of war is perfection. The physical condition of soldiers must be flawless for the strain of war is flawless in itself. Gettysburg was a horror, and why I am alive today, I do not know. I can only be grateful that Wilkes was not here, for it is certain both of us would not have been spared—"

"For what?" Wilkes Hunter cried suddenly. "Spared for what, Meg? What would Almighty God in all his splendor have spared me for? To sit in a house with a wife who has to do everything for him, to see for him every hour of the day! Almost to think for him! And all the time pitying him! Pitying his blindness!"

"Wilkes," said Margaret softly, with mild reproach in her voice.

"Oh, Meg," he groaned, burying his face in his hands. "It's no good. It's no good at all. We weren't meant for this. You were as much in love with Barton as you were with me. Why do you tie yourself to a blind man? It's only pity, and I don't want pity. I pity myself enough!"

"Wilkes, dear, you must not say such things."

"Meg, my darling, they're true. I think them all the time, so why not say them? Why not have them out? Meg, you married me when I wasn't blind. You've been trapped by me, trapped, I say. Three days married and then that explosion! It isn't fair to you, you didn't ask for it! And as for me—it's as though our marriage has never been consummated. There is no spiritual consummation here, Meg; it's never been the same between you and me since I lost my sight. You know it."

"I only know," she replied tenderly, "that you are a foolish man, Wilkes. I loved you when I married you, and I still love you. The fact that you are blind has nothing to do with it."

"That's mere gallantry," he snapped. "I abhor gallantry from you! I married a lovely girl and I made a watchdog out of her, I put a collar around her pretty neck and tagged it. I chained her to my chair, I taught her to obey every command . . ." His voice dropped. "And she did as I said because she pitied me. Love and pity. They're close enough. I don't think you yourself can tell the difference right now. It's a pity. Love had its quarrels. Pity endures quarrels. Love is petty. Pity is all-giving. And you give me pity, Meg, in your voice, in everything you do. I *feel* it. I can't see, I must feel my way, and I feel pity from you."

"Poor Wilkes," she murmured. "Is it so dreadful, being blind? You can't shake me off. I may be a watchdog, but dogs are faithful beasts. Nothing you can say will change that."

Wilkes Hunter sighed and relaxed. No use. Too much thoroughbred in the girl.

"Shall I go on with the letters?" she asked.

"No, no. I want to talk to you, Meg. I want to tell you some things."

"Yes?"

HE STARED at her, his sightless eyes on her, his face quite passive and lean. "Did you ever realize how much Barton and I look alike?"

"You might be twins," Meg said. "Most folk who didn't know you two boys often thought you were twins."

"Two peas in a pod," he said. "But Barton was older. All my life I've looked up to Barton. I wasn't jealous of him, but I envied him. He was always the better, always first. I used to try so hard to be like him. We were very close, Meg, and the first time I ever won a game, was when I won you."

"Darling, what are you getting at?"

"Nothing at all, really." He gripped the arm of the chair as the cannon roar in the north came closer. When the sound had passed he relaxed again. "Barton was so damned brave when we were youngsters. When we climbed down into the caves, he always led the way, and I was always frightened. How I wanted to be brave like Barton was brave! Meg, I—when the war came, I was really happy about it! Barton had always looked upon me as a kid brother. I never had the chance to show him I had courage."

"He knew you had courage, dear. Only those who are afraid and go through fear have real courage."

"We were both captains in the Army of Virginia. Captains. I thought, here is the chance, we'll march off to war together, and Barton will know how brave his little brother can be. Yes, I was his little brother, still, even if we matched shoulders. I was going to show him, to live up to his own example. And what happened?"

"Please," she said, "please don't think of it again, Wilkes."

"The farewell parade . . . all of us marching down Main Street . . . I can see you still, Meg, waving goodbye to me from the courthouse steps. I was leaving my bride of three days, my young and beautiful bride whom I loved so much. I was riding there with on my horse beside Barton—the two of us—how damned dashing we must have looked! We certainly felt as much generals as General Jackson and General Lee.

"All the flags, the girls saying goodbye, the veterans of New Orleans standing by so proudly, and then that fusillade, when we officers fired our guns into the air . . ." He paused, his mouth quivering. "Why, Meg? Why should my gun have exploded in my face and blasted the sight out of my head! Why should I have had that gun? I had so much to live and die for!"

"You have me now, Wilkes," Margaret said laying her hand on his wrist.

He patted it tenderly and said, less bitterly, "Yes, I have you, Meg. And I cannot even protect you. The Yankees are coming in from the north, they'll be here this morning some time, no doubt of it. And I must throw myself upon their mercies, beg them not to harm you, beg them not to raze this house, be civil and courteous to them when—if I could see—I'd show them the point of Virginia's sword!"

Wilkes shook his head. "It is a terrible thing to be blind when you have seen the beauty of the earth, Meg."

Margaret kissed his cheek. "I think I understand, dear," she said. "All your life you've been a little brother. All your life, Barton did things for you, protected you, and you never had the chance to do the same. And that's what you have wanted to do for so long—show Barton that you're not his little brother any more."

"Why, Meg," Wilkes said slowly, "I've often thought he dropped from courting you because I loved you. I used to think he did not want to hurt me by winning you, and so he stepped out of the picture. He could have won you if he wished. You know that."

"What difference does it all make?" Margaret replied. "We have each other now. And though you may be blind, my darling, at least you're safe, no harm can come to you—"

THE door opened. Wilkes heard it first, heard the latch turn. He snapped, "There is someone at the door, Meg." He felt Margaret turn and look, and he heard her gasp. She did not say anything.

Wilkes paled. Down Main Street, he could hear a roar, the shouts and cries of men, the crackling of sudden rifles, and the cannon pounding away with furor which now rattled the vases on their stands and caused one picture to drop to the floor with a crash.

"Meg," Wilkes said in a terrible voice, "who is it?"

"Hello, Wilkes," said a heavy voice.

"Barton!" Wilkes cried, leaping to his feet. "Where are you?"

Barton Hunter stumbled across the room to his brother and they embraced. Meg closed the door and joined them. "You're wounded, Bart!" she cried. "Oh, Wilkes, his arm is shot! Take him upstairs and make him lie down while I get some hot water—

"Bart!" Wilkes said sharply. "What are you doing in Jonesboro? Are you hurt badly?"

"Take it easy, Wilkie," Barton Hunter said. "Don't get yourself excited about me. Just sit there where you were and I'll be all right."

"For heaven's sake, don't baby me now!" Wilkes snapped. "I may be blind but I'm not hurt. Are you all right?"

Barton Hunter nodded, then realized that his brother could not see the nod, and said, "I'm all right, youngster. I caught a ball through the left arm on the way here. No sense getting excited, and don't bother with water, Meg, I can't stay. We're retreating to Harper's Way to destroy the ammunition dumps there!"

"How did you get shot, Bart?"

"A couple of damyanks captured me," he said. "I was at Wolf's Ridge this morning when my company made a stand. I was unhurt then, but they wanted information about Harper's Way and I wouldn't give it. I finally got away, and shot a major in the bargain. They came after me. I'm afraid they were anxious to see me dead. I've got to go now. They saw me riding this way, they'll trail me here. My horse, I, all known. I—" he sighed once and suddenly collapsed. Wilkes heard the thud and guessed what had happened.

"Never mind him a moment, Meg. Go to the window and look toward town. What do you see?"

"Yankees," Meg cried. "The whole town is overrun with Yankees!"

"Any coming this way?"

"Three men on horses," said Meg. "They look as though they're going to—they're turning off Jivers Lane, Wilkes! That means they're coming this way!"

"All right," Wilkes said quietly. "Give me a hand with Barton and carry him up to the attic. Then bring a cot up there, and we'll fix him up. Hurry, Meg. If those officers ride in here, tell Jonah to stall them until you're ready to come down. Is there a blood trail on the doorstep?"

"No," Meg said tremulously. "The blood soaked into his clothes. There's no trail."

They labored with Barton Hunter and carried him up the stairs all the way to the attic. Meg did not have to go for a cot. One was already stored in the dark attic. They unfolded it and stretched Barton out on it. Wilkes felt his brother's cold face. "Has he changed, Meg, do we still look alike?"

"Even more so," she said breathlessly. "It's uncanny. Barton's face was always plumper than yours, but it's got lean from war. Lean and gaunt the way your own is naturally. And it's very sad, like your own. Wilkes, it's so strange, it's as though you were lying there and watching yourself at the same time."

"Is his face dirty?" Wilkes said quietly.

"A little dirty." She understood then that he wanted her to see Barton Hunter for him. "He is in Confederate Gray, his uniform, a captain, a sword by his side, his revolver in its holster. His uniform is wrinkled but quite clean except for the bloody arm. His boots are muddy. He is clean shaven freshly."

"Go for water, Meg. Quick, for water. Bring a bandage and help him."

MEG left them and climbed downstairs again. Wilkes went to the attic half-moon window and leaning out, he heard the three Union officers galloping up toward the house with drawn guns. One shouted something, and Wilkes' heart sank. It was his brother's white horse, he knew. They had the horse.

He listened to one of them shout, "There's the horse, Colonel Morgan! I told you, sir, he turned off for this house! He's inside!"

Barton Hunter stirred at the sound of the shouting and opened his eyes. He was instantly awake. "What happened?" he said. "I fainted. Now, that was a silly thing for a grown man to do. Did you bring me up here, Wilkie?"

"You lost a lot of blood," Wilkes said. "Don't be an ass, Bart. Lie still."

"Can't," Barton Hunter said. "Can't stay, Wilkie. I'd like to, but I've got to reach Harper's Way. I've got to contact the commanding officer there before the Yanks reach the town. The Army is going to retreat to the south to try and draw the Yanks after them, but if that doesn't work, the Yanks will strike west and reach Harper's Way ahead of us. I'm to go and warn Major LeBree to fire the ammunition dumps if the Yanks appear."

"Quiet," Wilkes said. "There are Union officers downstairs now."

Barton Hunter paled "I'm done! Here already? They'll shoot me on the spot. Because of that major I killed. They'll waste no time. Look here, Wilkes, let me surrender myself! They'll raze the house if you try to shield me!"

"Quiet," Wilkes said. "Meg is going to stall them. You'll get to Harper's Way yet, Barton, but you won't do it without me."

"Without you? What can you do, Wilkes? Don't be foolish, I tell you, let me give myself up before they—"

"No, Bart. This time you're in my hands. . . . Tell me one thing: if anything should happen, you'll look out for Meg?"

"Of course." Barton Hunter looked at his brother sharply. "What do you intend to do?"

"Just give me your boots," said Wilkes, "and I promise you that you will reach Harper's Way tonight."

"You'll do nothing foolish?"

"I will do the only thing," Wilkes said quietly. "Meg loves you, Bart. I may not have a chance to tell you it again. She would die before she'd say so, but she loves you. And you love her. I know that. You stepped aside in the beginning to favor your little brother, didn't you? All your life, you've done things for your little brother. But your little brother is a giant today, Bart. God bless you, and be good to Meg."

"Wilkie—"

Wilkes took the boots and left the attic. He felt his way down the stairs. He paused a moment then and went back. "Bart," he called, "did they know you were wounded?"

"No," Barton Hunter said weakly. "They didn't. Wilkie, don't do anything foolish. Better to give me up. You're a blind man, you can't dress like me and lead them a chase through the woods. Is that what you plan to do? You'll never do it. You can't see, you don't know the way, they'll kill you!"

"They'll not kill me," Wilkie said. "Be quiet, Bart. They're at the front door. I can hear Jonah arguing. . . . Goodbye, Bart."

THIS time he went down to his own room and entered it and shut the door securely. He locked the door as an afterthought in case they should come up before he was ready. Hurriedly he stripped the clothes from himself and stuffed them into the closet. Then, feeling around in there, he found his uniform. His fingers caressed the Gray, ran across the buttons, fondled the grip of the sword, touched the grim stock of a revolver. It sent a shiver through him. Even a blind man could be a soldier now.

He slipped into the trousers, thinking quickly all the time. The prime thing was

identity: Would the Yankees recognize him, would they know he was not Barton Hunter? He thought not. Even Meg had said that war had made Bart look more like Wilkie than he had when Fort Sumter was won. Yes, Wilkie felt, they could be fooled. Just a glance, and nothing more and by the time they got closer, it would be too late for them.

But Meg—Meg would know the difference instantly and she might cry out, so the thing had to be done with a dispatch or not done at all. Once done, he knew he could depend on Meg. She was a loyal Virginian, and she would know Bart was safe in the attic, and she would act her part perfectly.

He stood up and saw in his mind how he looked. His uniform was wrinkled, his hat dusty from the closet, his sword clanked noisily. He pulled on Bart's muddy boots and stood erect. A soldier of Lee, he thought. He took the pistol from his holster and broke it. His fingers felt the chamber. Fully loaded, every chamber. He snapped it back into place, then unlocked the door and went into the hall, pulling his hat down over his face.

At the top of the stairs, he waited, listening. The raucous, harsh voice of the Union commanding officer in the hall came up to him.

"Madam, we will endure no nonsense! The man is here, we found his horse outside! I warn you, lead us to him, give him up, or this place will be burned to the ground and every living soul will burn with it or be shot for harboring a Confederate murderer! It's no idle threat, madam, and you've only this instant to make up your mind!"

"But I tell you, gentlemen," Margaret cried, "he is not here. The horse belongs to my husband—"

"Madam, my last warning!" snapped the commanding officer. "This is a personal matter with me. Major Lewis was my closest friend and this rebel scoundrel murdered him in cold blood to effect an escape. I'll have his head no matter how many heads I'm compelled to take in the bargain. There are soldiers on the march. One word, and they destroy your home, destroy even you! Will you deliver the man into my hands?"

"But, Captain—"

The Union officer growled exasperation and pushed her roughly aside. "Lieutenant McCrail. You will divert B Company into this estate with instructions to loot and burn the structure to the ground. Everyone on the estate to be placed under arrest. Lieuenant Galliday, arrest this woman. We'll smoke out Captain Barton Hunter if I have to burn every stick and stone in this ratho e. Even though he was in uniform when seized, I'm convinced that he is a spy—and that he deserves a spy's penalty. We'll smoke him out the way you smoke out a weasel—"

"That won't be necessary," said Wilkes Hunter.

HE stepped into view at the head of the stairs. In that moment, Meg thought he looked magnificent, the lone Gray among such hostile Blue, his hat at a rakish angle (he could not see when he put it on), his sword at his side, his pistol in his hand. You would never have known he was blind, for he looked straight down at them all, a faint smile upon his thin mouth.

"Is a Hunter worth so much, Captain? Is a mere Confederate captain worth such moral degradation as you were about to show—the arrest of an innocent woman, the burning of a home? Surely not!" And he laughed in derision.

"It's he!" the Union commander said. "Take him!"

"No violence," said Wilkes calmly. "I am your prisoner."

"No, no—" Meg cried, aware suddenly of the game.

"Meg, don't speak, don't say a word. This is the right thing, Meg, believe me, it's right! I love you. Be happy with him, be honest with yourself. This is the true way, for Virginia and the girl I love! Goodbye, dear!"

"Wilkes!" she screamed.

"If you gentlemen wish to return me to the Yankee encampment," Wilkes said with sarcasm, "I am afraid I will be some trouble. You will have to carry me and I weigh a good deal!"

"Hunter!" the Union captain bawled. "Don't—"

Wilkes was still smiling when he lifted his trembling hand and placed the muzzle of the revolver inside his mouth. His finger quickly tightened on the trigger and there was a sharp, frozen report which seemed to hang forever in the air. The gun fell from his nerveless hand and clattered to the floor. Next instant, he pitched forward and fell down the stairs. He seemed to take a long time, and the thuds were horrible. He finally reached the bottom and rolled to the very feet of the Union soldiers.

Meg stood against the wall, rigid with horror, one hand to her mouth, quick uncontrolled tears in her eyes, her other hand clutching her breast. The soldiers stayed frozen for moments too, stunned by the casual swiftness of the event.

"Galliday!" gasped the Union captain.

The man called Lieutenant Galliday stepped forward, reluctantly, and stooped down. "Quite dead, sir."

"He—he looks different," said the captain. "You're sure—"

"It's the bullet," the lieutenant said. "Messed his face. Soft-nosed bullet. Yes, sir, it's he. It's Captain Barton Hunter without a doubt. I detailed him this morning in camp and I know."

The captain sighed. "That's that, then." He seemed to wilt. He turned to Meg who was turning white and slowly coming to life again, the tears cutting shiny paths across her cheeks.

"Madam, my sympathies. Believe me, my sympathies."

"He was afraid," she whispered. "He was always afraid . . ."

"None but the brave is ever afraid," said the captain. "Your husband was a brave and clever man. Too clever for the army's good. I deeply regret it had to end this way, but such is war. We will leave the body in your care. Good day, m'am." A click of heels and they were all gone.

Meg stared, white as a sheet. "But only a minute ago—he was there, on the stairs—alive. Poor darling, he was so afraid—"

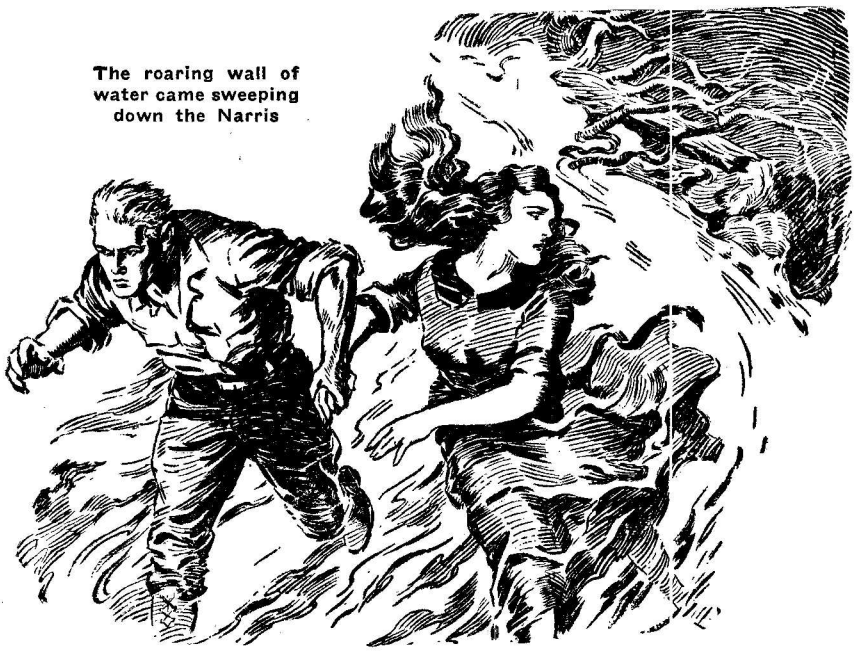
From the head of the stairs, Captain Barton Hunter spoke. The words were from his letter, and as she heard them she did not turn her head, for they came to her ears, as though she were reading the letter again:

"None but the brave deserves to die, my dear. Let cowards live haunted by their puny souls. But if a man must die, let him die for what he believes is good, is right, is sacred: the love of a woman, the love of a country, the love of justice . . ."

He took Meg gently in his arms and kissed her. "Meg, I'll be back for you. I promised him that. Be patient . . ."

"Yes," she said, her voice taut. "Yes, Barton." She trembled. "His face, his poor face. . ."

But she could have spared her tears. Wilkes Hunter had counted mightily upon that bullet, and what it had done to his face exceeded even his desperate expectations, for which he would have been glad if he could have known.



The roaring wall of water came sweeping down the Narris

Steamboat Gold

By GEORGE W. OGDEN

WHEN Jonathan Randolph came to New Bend to search for the gold that lay buried beneath Missouri silt in the hulk of the old river steamer *Morning Star,* he could not have imagined the stir he was to cause in the small, ghost-ridden community. Jonathan had to struggle to win the assistance of Moss Gregg, his father's old pilot on the *Star;* and it was only with the help of Juliet Moore that he could get her grandfather, Caleb Moore's consent to dig for the *Star's* skeleton. And this consent was necessary because, since the night of the wreck of the *Star,* the Missouri had changed her course; Moore's cornfields now grow where once the waters ran.

Randolph finds the New Bend folk a queer lot. There are Mystery and Arkansas Gregg, Moss' daughter and son, both of whom try to warn Jonathan away from his project; there is Hugh Atchison, the erratic schoolmaster, jealous of Mystery's affection for Joel Langworthy; there is Joel himself, ambitious, credited by the natives with supernatural powers, half his face reduced to unspeakable ugliness by a repellent deformity; there is, finally, old Caleb Moore given to dreaming of the river's return to its old channel, and haunted by the phantoms of his own ancient mind.

The work begins at last. Then one night, Jonathan is attacked by something that seems half-monster. Confronted by the light of Jonathan's torch, the creature runs away.

The next morning New Bend has two topics of conversation—the river is in unseasonable flood, threatening even to return to its old course in the Narris; and Jonathan Randolph has disappeared.

When after two days of fruitless search Juliet Moore insists to Atchison that she has heard Jonathan's voice calling to her, he believes her as mad as her grandfather. Then later, Atchison hears Randolph, too . . .

CHAPTER XXII

THE CAVE OF NIGHT

HUGH stood sweating, his length of pump-casing in his hand. His legs trembled, his tendons strained to fly, but he gathered reason

This story began in the Argosy for January 28

enough out of the tumult to hold himself there. If he should retreat one step, he knew, his fear would multiply and grow shameless; he would streak the night like a meteor.

The one thought that grew big above the confusion was that the dead are voiceless. If Randolph was under the earth there, he must be living and, if living, able to answer to his name.

He fitted his length of pipe into the hold and put his mouth to it, Randolph's name shaping on his tongue. It was a foolish thing to do, he said, philosophy back in its seat in all severity, but nobody ever could charge it up to him.

"Randolph—John!" he spoke softly into the pipe, like a telephone. "John, are you down there?"

He laid his ear to the pipe, like a telephone. "John, are you down there?"

He laid his ear to the pipe and listened. The result was no less disconcerting than the first cause of his panic. Randolph's voice answered him, a little thick and weak, but plain enough to be identified.

The schoolmaster's doubt and fright disappeared immediately. He was as steady as a rock, even a little resentful that Randolph should set him puzzling over his apparent defiance of all physical laws.

"How did you do it? How in the name of sanity did you do it?" he demanded.

"Get me water—I'm dying for water!"

"What are you in—have you got air?" the schoolmaster inquired, the wonder greater on him than the sense of Randolph's need.

"I must have water—water, or I'm a dead man!"

There was something so solemnly imperative in Randolph's thick voice that Hugh woke suddenly to the gravity of his necessity. How Randolph had forced himself down a two-inch hole, and how he had accommodated himself at the bottom of it for more than two days; why he had not come out the same way that he had gone in—these were questions which would wait for adjustment between them. Just now Randolph was perishing for want of water; his voice was thick from thirst.

"Have you got your hat?" Hugh shouted down the hole. Randolph replied that he had it. "Hold up a few minutes longer then, I'll get water to you."

Hugh hung his own hat on the pipe to help him find it quickly again, and within five minutes he was back with lantern, bucket of water and cup. He directed Randolph to hold his hat under the hole, and began pouring.

"Go easy on it, the dirt will make you sick," Hugh cautioned.

Randolph begged for more, which Hugh denied him. He bent over the tube and urged Randolph to tell him how he came to be buried under forty feet or more of earth, and how to proceed to get him out.

"Langworthy's mine. I found an iron door in the old drift and broke it open. When I tried to leave it was fastened on the outside."

"You mean the mine's a blind? You mean it's a tunnel to the wreck?"

"Give me more water—a little more, please, Hugh."

"Go on to that door and pound on it so I can find it and let you out."

"The drift comes out under a big elm with grapevines on it. Is it morning?"

"Almost morning, John."

"If you'll just pass me down another drop of water, Hugh—"

"Go to the door—I'll be there ahead of you."

HUGH hurried to the tent for an ax and crowbar. Armed with them he soon was groping among the trees on the bank of Skillet Lake, looking for the mouth of Langworthy's mine. It was a tangle of brush and vines there, with matted weeds encumbering the feet. More than one elm had grapevines on it, and it was all strange territory to the schoolmaster, who never had visited that spot before.

He plunged frantically through the tangle, shouting Randolph's name, full of

fear that he might not be able to find him in time to bring him from his tomb alive. It was Randolph's faint pounding on the hidden door that guided him to it at last, the sound coming dim and smothered, like the ticking of a death-watch behind a wainscot.

Even with that to direct him, Hugh had a bewildered time to locate the door. It was far back from the mouth of the old tunnel, around a sharp angle, a heavy log propped against it. It was made of riveted boiler-iron, and had been locked at top, bottom, and center with padlocks which Randolph had broken off to enter.

Randolph staggered out of it, his face as white as milk, and dropped to his knees beside the water-pail that Hugh had carried with him in his struggle through the thickets. The cup clicked against his teeth as he drank, the schoolmaster supporting him with tender hand.

"That will be enough for now," Hugh cautioned, taking the cup away, upsetting the pail with his foot.

Randolph was steadier now, and came to his feet with little help. He put out his hand behind him with a fearful gesture toward the door, leaning away from it as if to flee from horrors which he had so miraculously escaped.

"Shut it up, Hugh, for God's sake! It's full of dead men!"

The schoolmaster closed the door quickly, and set the log against it as it was before.

"Come on, let's get out of this—you must have something to eat," he said.

He hung the lantern on his arm with the word and started to pick Randolph up and bear him off in his arms. The secret of Langworthy's mine was second in his consideration; that could wait.

"I can walk all right, Hugh," Randolph protested; "I'm not so far along as that. I've had plenty of rest, such as it was." He shuddered as he stood with drooping head, his shoulder against the tunnel-wall. "They're all in there, Hugh—the whole story's there!"

He stretched his hand in that movement of staying some terrible thing crowding after him, and staggered on away from the door, the schoolmaster steadying him, for his legs were weak as clay.

"When you get something to eat—you can tell me then, John."

There was a cold, creeping feeling at the schoolmaster's back as he hurried Randolph along to the tunnel's mouth. When they reached it, and the rescued man saw the stars bright over him, he freed himself from the schoolmaster's restraining hand, threw his head back and breathed, long and deep, as if he drank from the fountainhead of life.

"Now, I'm a man again!" he said.

"You must be hungry, John," suggested Hugh, with mild wonder.

Randolph stood as if he did not hear. He had faced back, and was looking at the black hole in the bank.

"They're in there—those missing men!"

"Come on away from here, you can tell me later," the schoolmaster urged.

WITHIN fifteen minutes Randolph was breaking his long fast on bacon and softboiled eggs. The schoolmaster was of the opinion that six were enough to start on; Randolph being equally firm in his contention for eight. But Hugh carried the basket off and hid it in the corn, and had his way.

Sober and harsh as Randolph's face had been before, the ashes of his experience lay upon it now like a shadow, making it older than the age of years. It was a thing that would not wear away. Jonathan Randolph was marked as one who had suffered in the tomb and come forth again, its terrors cold upon his soul, to walk the world of men.

There was a distant candle paleness in the east when Randolph finished his meal, which had been broken only by an immaterial word here and there, for Hugh would have none of the story until the fast was broken. Hugh put out the lantern now, and Randolph stretched himself with a sigh.

"I'm twice a man now, old fellow,"

said he, reaching over and clasping the schoolteacher's hand.

"So that was the secret of old Sam Langworthy's dreaming and mining all the time," said Hugh. "The shrewd old devil never was crazy at all!"

"Far from crazy at the beginning, but if he isn't crazy now he ought to be, and his precious, mp-faced son as well. I doubt the sanity of many men who can carry out such a diabolical, systematic plan of wholesale murder as they've put through down there."

"It was that old man's plan to tap the wreck when he came here—I can see through it now as plain as glass, John. He knew about that wreck—before he ever settled across there from Moore he knew it. Do you think they've—"

"No, they've never found the wreck, close as they came to it. It's been a groping in the dark; but they came mighty close, mighty close!"

"That accounts for Joel's interest in the progress of our work. He feared we'd discover his mole-hole under here, and the secret he's been hiding in it."

"The bones of the poor devils who came here ahead of me on this unlucky hunt. They're down there, Hugh; the three of them unaccounted for—they're down there sitting in a row."

"It's like him," said the schoolmaster grimly. "But they may not be the bones of those men; they may be victims of the wreck."

"No; these men never were buried; they were shut in there till they shriveled up and died. Their hair and their shrunken skin is still there on their poor pathetic skulls."

"It must be the missing three. He lured them in there; he murdered them."

"Like he intended to get rid of me. They're sitting there with their backs against the wall, like men asleep."

"The fiend out of hell!"

"Too hideous for even hell, I think. One of them has been crudely articulated, bound together with baling wire."

Randolph was standing, gaunt of face, pale, his eyes hungrily on the east, where the morning glow was spreading. A miracle was being heralded there which he never had hoped to behold again. The schoolmaster stood near, the light of the growing day strong on his face.

"There isn't a mark on their bodies to tell how they died," Randolph said. They were shut in that cave until their tongues swelled and choked them, like dry rags crammed down their throats!"

HE REACHED to the collar of his flannel shirt, already loose about his neck, and opened it; dipped a cup of water and drank thirstily. The schoolmaster touched his arm.

"How did you stumble onto that door, John?"

"I'll go back to the start of it—I'll tell you."

They sat down again. Randolph told of the attack of the biting savage, and at the hearing of it the schoolmaster nodded slowly many times, as if some suspicion in his own mind had been confirmed.

"Next morning," Randolph said, "I found tracks leading off toward the lake. The rain had distorted them and nearly blotted them out—all I could make of them was that they had been made by bare feet when the ground was soft. I felt pretty sure that creature had gone that way, but you people came before I could follow them up. I didn't want it spread around that Arkansaw's snapping ghost had been after me, so I kept still about it that day. But you noticed I had my wrist tied up."

"It's known now; Arkansaw found the cloth."

"It's too bad. I'd rather—but no matter. After supper that evening, quite a while before sundown, I took up that trail again. It led me to the woods on the lakeshore, and I found it there. I'd given it up, and was looking around in the brush for some ripe pawpaws when I stumbled onto that tunnel. I remembered Langworthy's goldmine, and I also thought that it would be

a natural lair for the Narris vampire."

"A logical conclusion; a very logical conclusion," said the schoolmaster, again nodding slowly.

"No; there was nothing to it. I got a club and went in as far as the door. I was so amazed when I ran up against that boiler-iron door that I stood there and burned all the matches I had, kind of hot under the collar and a little panicky, like a man feels, you know, when he begins to sense it that he's been tricked."

"I understand your sensation—I have gone through it myself."

"From the general plan of the thing, I knew then that the tunnel ran under Moore's land. So I came back and got my flashlight and gun, and that little carpenter's bar of Gregg's—I guess you've missed it?"

"No."

"I believe that door is over Moore's line, and I didn't question my rights as lessee to investigate what was back of it. I pried off the three locks you saw the hasps of and went in.

"The tunnel's narrow all the way, as you saw it there in front, but deep enough for a man to walk upright. All propped up like a coal-mine, and walled solidly with logs a hundred feet or more from the door—back to the point where the exploration drifts were run out right and left during the years that old Langworthy was groping around and sounding for the wreck. It's even floored with split logs in front, as if it was designed to keep anybody from digging either in or out. There hasn't been any work done in there for a good while—several years, I think.

"I went on back along the lead, somewhat stunned by what I'd found. They've made a chamber at the inner end, where soundings have been made for the whisky barrels—they've got a pump in there already. But they didn't hit them; they weren't far enough in. When I saw all that I started back, red-hot and fighting mad, to tell Moore about it. The door was shut; I couldn't budge it."

"You might have shouted your head off, too, and nobody would have heard you unless he was right there, listening."

"Yes, I thought of that, Hugh; but it didn't keep me from setting up considerable noise, I guess. I'd left the bar outside; I had nothing but my bare hands to tackle those timbers with, and I knew I couldn't get out. I tore around there like a wildcat for a while, until I began to get thirsty and came to my senses.

"Then I figured it out that if I'd keep still, go back to the skeletons, and wait, somebody was bound to come in there after a while to see what he'd caught. I hunted around for a seep where I might collect some water, but there wasn't a trickle. It's a horrible hole!"

Randolph was so shaken by the recollection of his tortures that he seemed unable to carry his story to its close. He stood, drawing his breath deeply as if to make sure of his freedom.

"Tell me the rest," said Hugh, touching his arm, an eagerness on him that made his hand shake. "Nobody came; you didn't see—"

"No, he didn't come."

Randolph sat again, his chest heaving, his hands clenched as if for battle.

"I walked a beat from chamber to door, Hugh, and watched daylight come and go around the chinks of it. This place where that poor crazy vampire bit me throbbed like it was infected, but it got easy after a while, and I slept. That was the second night.

"I wanted to keep alive long enough to meet the man that would come to sit me out against the wall with the other three. The thought of water was the hardest thing next day; it was harder every hour. But I watched daylight go again through the little cracks around the door, and I hammered on it with my gun until my arms gave out."

"I was right here, John, but I might as well have been five miles away. Not a sound as big as the tick of a watch ever reached me."

"I know that, old man—you'd have

been down there like a hornet. But I was asleep when you began to drop those pieces of weed down that hole. I didn't know the hole was there, but I was under it, and the little, broken bits of weed fell in my face.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SPECTER OF THE NARRIS

RANDOLPH reached for the water again and drank. He caressed it in his mouth like a gourmet rinsing a precious wine to give his tongue a prolongation of a seldom-met delight; he drew his breath long when he had drained the cup, and sat with his hands clenched hard.

"I stood on a keg and felt the timbered roof over inch by inch, for my battery was dry. I had no more light. I found the hole; then I called you."

"How did you know it was I?"

"I knew there wouldn't be anybody else with courage enough to come here, much less to stay."

"You're wrong there!" said the schoolmaster triumphantly. "You are altogether wrong."

Randolph's face lighted with a flush; a softness as of tears came into his eyes. He looked steadily at his friend a moment, then rose as if lifted by the wings of joy.

"Did she—come down here, Hugh?"

"More than once. I'd bet all I've got that she hasn't closed her eyes this night."

"God bless her!" said Randolph, his voice soft and low.

"And keep her," the schoolmaster added. "She is as noble as she is true and brave. Well, the rope that will hang Joel Langworthy is woven at last."

"It's doubtful, Hugh. A man that can hide a secret like that for twenty years is going to prove a mighty hard customer to corner."

"How do you suppose the crafty devils lured those men into their trap, and what was their motive for doing it, John?"

"I think Joel was lone-handed in that part of it, Hugh. You know he had the old man declared incompetent about that time and himself appointed guardian over him. But that may have been a blind—all a part of the scheme. One way or the other, it don't cut much figure now; but my theory is that old Langworthy began tunneling to tap the whisky. Joel may not have been very keen on the work at first, but when those men began to come here and nose around, he believed there was something more than whisky that they were after, and he set his crafty mind to work to get it out of them. There are a hundred pretenses that would induce a man to walk into that hole."

"That would be the smallest part of it."

"Maybe he got their secret out of one of them, first or last; or maybe the tale of the treasure is only a golden lure to lead men to their graves. Old man Moore told me it was; he said no man's hand ever would lift it from the place where the Missouri had buried it."

Hugh stood a little space in front of the treasure-hunter, his face set strong against the light of the east, his chin up, reaching forward a little in the poise of his body, as if the last hurdle was just ahead and he was sure of the leap.

"Or else those men were suspicious of Langworthy's activities down there, and their suspicions led to the discovery that Joel and his still-mouthed, black-hearted old father were probing for the wreck," Randolph said. "They would have murdered to keep the fact of their tunneling from Moore."

"They would have done that, and more," Hugh agreed.

"But the last man—it's harder to account for him. He seems to have been an innocent victim who escaped the tortures of death in that hole to fall in even a more terrible way. He doesn't fit into the theories which disposed of the others, Hugh, for they're only theories, of course, and must wait their justification until the final day of reckoning with Joel Langworthy, the specter of the Narris."

"It was the same hand all the way through," the schoolmaster said. "The last man was escaping with the secret of the tunnel; he was going toward Moore's house when he was killed."

RANDOLPH lifted his bandaged arm and looked at it, a shadow of distress and fear darkening over his face, like a man who hears himself pronounced mortally stricken without a warning symptom.

"You mean—you mean— Oh, that's impossible, Hugh! He's a murderer—he's a cowardly, treacherous murderer; but not—not that!"

"He's the whelp of a wolf!" the schoolmaster said.

Randolph was shocked, incredulous, dazed at the monstrous charge.

"It's impossible—it can't be—Joel! Even the devil in his face doesn't foreshadow a trait as base as that."

"It's Joe," the schoolmaster insisted. "The curse of blood-thirst is on him! I've known it a long time, but I lacked proof that would give me ground to whisper it to even you. Jonathan Randolph, I tell you that man's breast is the house of a demon."

"I can believe that; but I can't charge him up with this night-roaming, this blood-thirst of a beast. It's the work of a crazy man, Hugh; and Langworthy is anything but that."

The schoolmaster stretched out his hand toward the woods, his face as grim as judgment.

"I've walked that road at night in the hope that he'd spring out on me as he has on others—many and many a night I've waited for him. I've seen him; I've pursued him; but he's as swift of foot as a deer. If he'd tried to set his hell-forged teeth in my flesh I'd have put my seal on him. I'd have marked him to the bone!"

Randolph sat down on his cot, his wounded wrist clasped in his hand as if it had sprung a hemmorrhage at the mention of Joel Langworthy's name. Sweat stood on his forehead; his hand trembled.

"I thought it was the work of a madman—I charged it to another!" he groaned.

"Another?" The schoolmaster looked at him strangely. "Who else is there outside of hell to charge with a crime like that?"

"I thought it was some half-witted person known to Moore—some poor creature who suffered these wild relapses—somebody that he was responsible for in some way. I thought that—I even thought at times that it was Moore himself! God pardon me for the unspeakable wrong I have done him!"

"Moore!" said the schoolmaster in horrified astonishment, looking at his friend in more of censure than sympathy for the grueling of conscience that he was suffering that moment. And again, his face white, his eyes staring: "Moore!"

"Oh, I've had a thousand wild conjectures around him and his lonely old house," said Randolph, grinding his face into his hands like a groveling penitent; "but I never suspected Langworthy. I thought Moore might have somebody, even a crazy son, locked up in some room of that old house—he gave me such mysterious hints; he had such spasms of what seemed to me nothing but colic of the conscience."

The schoolmaster was silent, pondering it from this view of a stranger.

"He warned me against something"—Randolph looked up defiantly—"in a vague, incoherent way the very night this"—lifting his arm—"happened to me. He was shaken to the foundation. I thought he was carrying some secret—and I believed Juliet partly knew—that he was afraid would come out on him, and add to his shame and sorrow in the end."

"It was not an unreasonable conclusion, all considered, John."

"Poor old soul! I'm sorry I wronged him by a suspicion so hideous. God knows what it was that he fancied he saw at the window that night—he threw his glass at it—his jaw was set like a dead man's. A man would have to look beyond the

things of this world, Hugh, to freeze the blood in him that way."

"The day of specters in the Narris is nearly past, thank God!" said the schoolmaster fervently; "the holy water that will disperse the demons is distilled."

"Do you think Moore knows it, then? Do you believe it was Joel he warned me against?"

"If he knew it he'd shoot him down like a wolf! I don't know what it was he warned you against—he spoke about it to me, too, in a rambling, insane way, only yesterday. The old man's mind is going, John."

"Maybe if we could get him away from here, and these gloomy associations, he could be cured. It's a place of doubt, dread and insane horrors! I feel it in my own blood, Hugh—I'm sick, sick of it to the bone—I could almost wish I'd never come!"

He seemed sick, in truth, the reaction of his long strain upon him. He bent forward, his face hidden in his hands, shivering as if the day was coming in cold instead of red with the fire that the sun was bringing, still hidden in its brazier below the horizon.

"You're not through yet, John," the schoolmaster said. His voice was gentle, but there was a spur in it that was almost a taunt. Randolph shook himself, got to his feet with something of his natural force and sprightliness, and looked round him at the green summer world.

"No, of course not—I haven't much more than begun!" he said. He put out his hand in apology and appeal. "Don't get it that I'm a coward from that break I made a minute ago, old fellow—it was only a passing chill."

"I couldn't think of you as that," the schoolmaster said in simple sincerity.

"Even if I never discover what I came to hunt, Hugh, I'll not go away from here any poorer. And I don't believe it's there, the thought that it isn't haunted me like a delirium while I was down there. Oh, let it go to hell!"

The schoolmaster turned to him from his mental hurdle-leaping, a smile in his solemn eyes.

"It's there, John," said he calmly.

"How do you know that, Hugh?"

"Because we were within a foot of the old safe when we quit work the last day.

"That mush of quicksand has settled around the sides of the pit where we'd dug deeper to let the casing down—you can see the corner of the safe sticking out."

Randolph was not excited over the news. He did not leap, shout, fling his hat nor laugh. All he did was color a little in his lean cheeks—leaner for his days of privation in Langworthy's trap—and look at the schoolmaster with something near to comic incredulity in the puzzled alertness of his eyes.

"Well, that's funny!" he said.

CHAPTER XXIV

HALF WOLF

WITH the windlass over the mouth, it was still dark in the shaft as Randolph and the schoolmaster climbed down the ladder nailed to the casing side.

Hugh was first down, with the lantern. Randolph followed eagerly, the chill of discouragement gone out of his blood, which was bounding in his veins again with all the romantic fire of his dreams.

"I thought it might be a piece of the machinery," Randolph said, on his knees beside it, scraping away the wet sand, "but there's no mistaking it, it's got the shape of a safe."

Within an hour they had laid the face of the safe bare. The schoolmaster sent down sledge and bar, and followed to spring the rusty hinges.

Time had not weakened the safe that hid the treasure, however, great or small, of the *Morning Star*. Rather, it had cemented the seams of its door with rust, and set it in its place so firmly that all the schoolmaster's strength was spent on it in vain.

Randolph took his turn at the sledge. The steel of the old safe mocked them,

throwing back the hammer with no more effect on the metal than if they had pelted it with a pill.

"It'll take a charge of dynamite to do it, Hugh, and we haven't any."

"I'll go up to Richfield and get some—I can be back by noon."

Randolph stood looking at the brown iron of the safe, scaly with the rust of its buried years. The sun was white on the windlass above, the strong light of the day struck down to the bottom of the shaft. It whitened like a nimbus on the treasure-hunter's tumbled, sunburned hair, and shadowed in the hollows of his gaunt face. He stood pensively silent thus a while, then turned to the schoolmaster.

"I wonder if there's anything in it, Hugh?"

"Can you doubt it now, after coming to it through so much faith?"

Randolph looked at the safe again, bent to it, ran his fingers along the rust-bound seams of the door.

"But I haven't come to it in the way I had it all imagined, Hugh, the way I've already discovered it a thousand times. I don't feel the thrill of it like I should to make it seem true to me."

"The gloom of that hell's pit is on you—you must get up out of here into the sun."

"I guess you're right, old philosopher."

"Half a stick of dynamite will crack that rust and tear the door loose," said Hugh. "Come on, let's get out of here. It can't get away now."

"I don't seem to be able to believe it's there," Randolph told him laughing a little at his own want of conviction in the face of the material fact. "I'll go on up and look at it from a distance again."

The sun was up the height of tall corn, its arrows coming hot from the forge.

"They'll be stirring by now," Randolph said, looking toward the house on the hillside. "I'd almost forgotten that my first duty is to relieve the anxiety of my friends."

"How much should they know—all of it?"

"I've been considering that, Hugh. It's got to be explained, but I think it would be wiser for me to stay under cover a little longer and let that scoundrel go on thinking he's got me shut in his trap and out of the way. As soon as we blow the safe and see what's in it, I think we'd better have the sheriff and coroner over here to investigate that tunnel."

"I was thinking the same. If Joel knows you've got out, he'll more than likely leave the country."

"Then I'll lie low, Hugh, till we can get the county officers down here. I'll be back to nobody but Juliet and the old man. Langworthy will hardly be going to look in on me today—it's too soon, he'd expect me to be alive, with a fight left in me yet."

"It's the best plan. I can stop in as I pass and tell Juliet, unless you'd rather risk being seen to go up yourself?"

"I'll wait till evening; I'm in no presentable shape anyway, with all this mud and whiskers and stuff. Hugh, does she know about the safe?"

"I left that for you to tell her, John."

"But you didn't know I'd ever come back. If I hadn't—what then?"

"Nobody ever would have known it then but myself. I'd have blown the pit up, as Moore suggested, and buried it again for good."

"What a case you are, what a genuine old character!"

RANDOLPH slapped him heartily on the shoulder as the schoolmaster turned to go on his double errand. There was a mistiness in his eyes as he watched the master away up the corn-bordered road, and a softness in his heart for the treasure that he had found in that place, even though the safe of the *Morning Star* should prove empty at the last.

The treasure of a good man's friendship and a good woman's esteem—or kind interest and good wishes, at least. A thing more tender, lying close to his heart like a new-unfolded leaf, he could not so boldly claim.

He felt weak and trembling, shaken in the legs as if the sap had been drawn out of them, after his vain exertions to open the safe. He seemed to have entered a cold shadow, which deepened as the schoolmaster passed out of sight.

The hardship of his imprisonment must have dried the courage out of him, he charged, as he hung his mirror on the tent-pole to shave, and felt his lean jaw, and passed his finger-ends over the deepened hollows of his cheeks.

And yet there might be reason in his low spark of enthusiasm over the discovery of the safe. Perhaps that indefinable coldness of dread was intuitive; maybe it was guilty treasure, a thing carrying its curse with it, as Moore had said. No matter, said he, in a burst of defiance. He had yet to hear of anybody's curse or clinging misfortune impairing the purchasing power of the dollar.

He was bending over the basin washing off the lather when he first saw Joel Langworthy. The front lap of the tent was down to shut out the sun.

Joel doubtless had taken it, from the appearance of things, that the camp was deserted. He stood between excavation and tent, looking about him with animal alertness and suspicion. Randolph stepped back out of sight, watching him through one of the numerous holes in the canvas.

Now the fresh earth on the dump drew Joel's attention. He took a long, leaping stride, leonine in its grace and swiftness, stopped, head thrown back. He seemed to be sniffing the wind for a scent of human presence which neither his eyes nor his ears could tell him of. Now he went on again toward the shaft, cautiously, half-crouching, and stopped at the mouth, leaning over to peer down.

Randolph reached for his revolver in its wear-polished holster, went out and stood in the sun at the tent-side, his arms folded, in the severity of one who waits to pass judgment and enforce its decree. His battered and soiled campaign hat was pulled down to his eyes, the shadow of it making his serious face almost grim; his feet were firm beneath him now; the weakness had gone out of his limbs.

Langworthy was at the ladder, hand on the scantlings of it which extended above the casing. A moment after Randolph's appearance he bent there, gazing down into the excavation, one foot far back from it, hand extended, as if balanced to spring away at sight of anybody below. Then the wind, or some sharper sense than ordinary man has to stand guard for him seemed to tell him that he was not alone.

Joel straightened from his stealthy investigation, turned, saw Randolph, waved his hand in greeting and came forward. Randolph remained as he had drawn himself up beside the tent, giving no heed to Joel's salutation, his bearing stern and unfriendly, watching every movement that Joel made as he came up the bank in long strides as if the eagerness of joy at a friend's return hastened him on.

"Back again!" said Joel, sprightly and confident as always, the good side of his face presenting a smile making it more winning, his small, even teeth sparkling between his lips.

"Against the expectations of everybody and the hopes of some," Randolph replied.

HE LOOKED darkly at Joel, ignoring his offered hand. A shade of perplexity; astonishment, humiliation, clouded Joel's fair features at this apparent affront; he stood back a little, his despised hand sinking slowly to his side.

"Expectations and hopes?" said Joel, recovering himself in a breath. "Why, schoolteacher and I knew very well you'd be back in good time, and no mystery in the case at all. Gregg was for raising a terrible row over it, and bringing the sheriff in to hunt you."

Joel laughed over it, quite himself again. It was difficult to identify this confident, free-mannered man with the stealthy creature who had stood sniffing the wind like a hound only a few minutes before.

"The schoolmaster's faith is the finest

thing that ever came into this hell-hole of the Narris! But you didn't expect to see me on top of ground any more, Langworthy, for all of your confidence in my ability to come back."

"I didn't expect?" Joel searched him from head to foot with slow, amazed look. "Why, sir, you—you confound me, you stun me!"

"Langworthy, there isn't any need beating around the stump—your graveyard didn't hold me. It's kept its secrets a long time; you've got an interesting collection down there."

Joel surveyed him again, slowly, with injured surprise.

"Mr. Randolph, you seem to have a strange capriciousness to joke this morning, sir," he said, "but the subject of your pleasantry is very obscure. Maybe when I'm in a brighter mood I'll be able to appreciate it, but right now I think I'll trot along."

Joel set his foot forward on the intention. Randolph stepped in front of him, holding up a commanding hand.

"You'll stay right here, you'll not leave my sight till you go with the sheriff."

Joel fell back, his face white. "Your conduct is felonious, sir! I'm not armed—"

"I am," Randolph said, lifting his blunt-nosed revolver from the holster, pushing it back again when Joel had seen it.

"You forget that I'm an attorney, Randolph, that I know my rights!"

"Heaven knows I wouldn't take any of them away from you, Langworthy, such as they may be! You'll need them all, and more, to get you out of the pit you've been digging these twenty years. The county authorities will be here before night to investigate the mysteries of the catacomb you've been building under Moore's farm."

Joel flashed a quick look of intelligence. "Oh, you've found it at last, have you?"

"At last," Randolph nodded solemnly. "And you thought you'd fixed it so I'd keep the secret, like the others down there have kept it."

Langworthy laughed, with apparent sincerity in his mirth. "I understand your absence now. You were shut in, was that it?"

"The joke seems to have turned," said Randolph dryly, "but the humor of it passes over my head. I was shut in, as you shut the other three in to die of thirst and starvation."

"My advice to you would be to withhold your judgment on that, Randolph, and not go around making any rash charges."

"Judgment! If I gave you the judgment that's your due I'd shoot you in your tracks like a wolf."

"Randolph—" Joel raised his hand as if to soothe and pacify, his voice low and gentle, his gaze frank and steady—"I don't blame you for your feeling in this matter. A man who has suffered what you must have gone through down there is in no condition to render judgment, or even to see the truth in the evidence before his eyes. I didn't have any hand in shutting you in; I never turned a key on any man that ever went in there and failed to come out."

"I'm not trying you here, Langworthy; that will come in its place."

"You're mistaken on that—it will never come!" Joel spoke with heat; face reddened, he bent his slender brows in a frown. "You think right now you're going to hand me over to the sheriff, but you're not. You'll not hand me over to anybody, you'll keep that gun in your pocket, and you'll set up and eat my dough-cake out of my hand, that's what you'll do!"

"There's no use blustering and bluffing, it won't get you anywhere, Langworthy."

RANDOLPH was careful to stand clear of him, leaving space enough between them to give him time to sling his gun if Langworthy should attempt a sudden assault. He regarded his prisoner with a feeling of loathing, of untinctured hate. Truly the humor was on him to treat the man like a wolf and send him out of the world with a bullet without waste of another word.

"I'm not bluffing, Randolph. There are people here in the Narris that I could bring to their knees inside of fifteen minutes, and I expect I could have you hunkerin' down with them, beggin' me to keep my mouth shut. Well, I don't know whether I'm going to keep my mouth shut much longer or not!"

"I suppose people commonly go down on their knees to you, Langworthy," Randolph said contemptuously.

"No," Joel returned, seriously, "I've never put the screws to them yet. But I can do it, and I will do it. I'm tired of totin' other men's burdens around, by Heaven!"

"You're going to tell me you didn't dig that tunnel, and didn't shut those poor devils up in it to choke on their swollen tongues. No, you didn't do it, you poor damned innocent!"

"Yes, I had a right smart to do with the tunnel from first to last. But I didn't go it on a lone hand, I didn't trap those men—there's not a speck on my conscience nor a smirch on my soul on their account."

"You didn't?" Randolph seemed to have forgotten that Joel was not on trial.

"If you want to know who did that—" Joel caught his words up there as if he had reconsidered it and would not tell.

"Well?"

Joel wheeled back again, anger in his face.

"If you want to know, go and ask old man Moore! But keep your gun in your hand when you do it."

"Oh!" Randolph dismissed the indictment against Moore in that sneered word. "You couldn't make a case stick against that old man if you had twenty years more of free-handed villainy ahead of you. You've spun the rope that will hang you, Langworthy, as the schoolmaster said not an hour ago."

"It'll quicker hang him—or you," said Joel earnestly. "I can't make a case? Well, I tell you, Randolph, I'm nothing but a country lawyer, and maybe not overly sharp, but when I play with fire I keep a bucket of water handy, and when I work with a madman I lay a club up where I can reach it any minute of the day. I've been storin' up evidence against Caleb Moore since the first man went into that place down there, lured in to starve him into giving up what he was supposed to know."

"You may have your evidence, but you'd never be able to convince anybody with it. Moore knows no more about those bones down there than I did three days ago."

"All right, I'll not try to convince you. It's entirely immaterial to me what you believe, Mr. Randolph. But men like you don't make up the juries in this county, nor in any one around here that he could take his case to on change of venue. The evidence'd hang him, whether you believe it or not. That's plenty for me."

"You'll tell it that Moore had you and your family dig the tunnel to try to find the wreck. Is that your game?"

"Moore inspired the tunnel, he engineered it, from the first shoveful that was thrown," Joel declared, vehement in protesting this thin and foolish charge.

"Very likely tale, good business for a man as shrewd as Moore to go tunneling for five or six years to find something that he knew where to put his hand on all along. That's another thing you'd never make stick."

"He never knew where the wreck was—he believed it lay over there on the shore of the lake. Don't doubt I'll make it stick, when the time comes."

"You're a precious example of—oh, well, it doesn't matter. Better sit down over here in the shade, Langworthy; it'll be some little time before Hugh Atchison comes back from Richfield. When he comes, we'll consider disposing of you till the sheriff can get here."

JOEL ignored the invitation. He stood straight as the cornstalks in the field around him, looking at his captor with frowning brow.

"Moore took me up as a boy," he said, "and shaped me to his hand. He helped

me, he did a lot for me, in his way. Gratitude made me loyal, and kept me loyal many a year, but I tell you, Randolph, it will not keep me loyal to the hazard of my good name and my neck. You can hand me over to the sheriff—I'll save you the trouble of guarding me till he comes. I'll furnish the horses and we'll ride over to the county seat this morning."

"I prefer to wait."

"But I prefer to go now, and have it over with. Then you can talk, Randolph; you can talk as loud as you please, and show off what there is to be seen, but the more you say and the more you show the tighter you'll knot the rope around the old man's neck. I'll not hide his secrets any longer, damn my soul if I will!"

Randolph was turning the probability of the outcome of Joel's presentation of what he termed his evidence against Moore. He was considering the prejudice that had grown and thrived against the old man in that place for half a century, and the grim notoriety that had gone abroad.

Langworthy would have little trouble in convincing the public that Moore had been the inspiring force behind the tunnel. He could cover the improbability of such a tale under the old man's well-known stubbornness and dislike of publicity. To the people of the Narris, and that county outside of it, it would be only natural that Moore should avoid an open exploration for the wreck after he had talked so bitterly and openly against the cargo that it carried.

A jury would find against Moore on Joel Langworthy's word alone. He could convince them with a word that Moore had imprisoned those adventurers who had come seeking the wreck. He looked at Langworthy. Joel had worked up considerable heat. He was sweating, his face was inflamed. Now he raised his fist and hammered with it into his palm.

"Look here, Randolph! I had my own father declared incompetent by a court so I could have authority over him and keep him out of that hole after Moore began to shut men up in it and try to starve their supposed secret out of them. I've kept him out of there, he's never set eyes on the rack of bones that crazy old murderer keeps piled down there. You know they're there, and I know it. No other living man but Moore does know. Set your tongue clappin' and by God! I'll have you up as a witness to help hang him!"

"If this tale of yours is true, Langworthy, assuming for argument that it is true, why did Moore give me permission to explore the wreck, when he knew that I might uncover his secret while I hunted for the other? Why didn't he lure me into the tunnel, and try to starve it out of me?"

"Because the plan failed on the others. He was wise when he was older; he let you uncover your secret first."

"Then he locked me up?"

"I didn't see him lock you up," Joel returned, with a small lawyer's caution.

"But you knew where to look for me, all along, didn't you?"

"Of my own personal knowledge, I did not."

There was no use trying to tie an eel. Joel was confident, he was cool again, he was serene.

"I don't know that a case could be made against you, candidly, Langworthy," Randolph confessed.

"It does your legal mind credit, Randolph."

"I'm not yielding a point on my belief in your absolute and damnable guilt, only I'm inclined to take my hand off to spare that old man the added trouble that your prosecution would bring him."

"His own prosecution you should have said. The grand jury would never return an indictment against me."

"Probably not, considering the—considering everything in this place. I'll tell you what I'll do, Langworthy; if you'll leave the country between this and sundown and not come back as long as Moore is alive, I'll agree to drop it."

"I'll accept no conditions," returned Joel

loftily. "You started out to hand me over to the sheriff; go ahead."

Joel was defiant, triumphant. Randolph felt that he had made a grand bluster and come to a bluffer's end, although his intentions at the beginning had been serious.

"Langworthy, you win," Randolph said at length. "I know that ruin and desolation would result from opening the case against you. The murderer of four defenseless men—"

"If you'll say that before witnesses I'll make you prove it!" Joel flashed.

"Wouldn't stop at the indirect murder of one doubly defenseless in his age," Randolph finished, unmoved by Joel's outburst. "But there's one thing standing between you and me that calls for no court to adjudicate. You must stop forcing your attentions upon a young lady who shall be nameless in this controversy."

"I don't take 'must' from any man!"

"You'll take it from me!"

"I've taken more from you already than I ever took from any man, you upstart adventurer!"

"That will be enough." Randolph gave it to him as counsel calmly. "Your attentions are distressing to her; keep away."

Langworthy turned to him with a quick little start, but stood silent a moment as if fighting to restrain his hot words. Then he said very quietly: "I am going to marry her. Do you suppose I've kept silence twenty years for no reward? It's arranged. I'm going to marry her."

"You lie, you scoundrel!"

"You'll settle with me on one of these days for all this when we meet on equal terms," said Joel as a man speaking of a debt for which he held surety. "Juliet—"

"Don't speak her name! It's profaned in your mouth—there's blood on your lips, you whelp of hell!"

LANGWORTHY sprang back at the charge—a swift change coming over his face. The darkness of the withered portion seemed to spread in it, drawing it, distorting it in horrible grimace out of all resemblance to its cast of a moment before. The man crouched like a creature gathering itself to spring; his limbs trembled; his eyes glowed green in bestial rage. His face, wrinkled like a snarling cat's, was blackly red with gorged blood; his thin red tongue-tip ran like a flame from side to side of his parted lips.

He was a creature possessed by a destructive passion—his human soul submerged in the wild raging of a beast. He began to creep forward, low-bent, his arms reaching out with stealthy uplifting, his mad eyes gleaming.

Randolph fell back a step or two, his revolver drawn. Amazement had displaced his first cold horror of the transformation. Langworthy's hair stood like the bristles of a wolf—like a wolf scenting hot blood, he whined.

A few seconds, Randolph was saying to himself, in a leaping lightning stab of thoughts; "When he comes that far I'll shoot!" But before he came to Randolph's imaginary deadline, Langworthy shook himself and stood erect again. His fearful hair sank down; the blackness cleared out of the fair half of his face. He stood panting, his thin, delicate nostrils flaring.

"Randolph," he said, his voice deep in his throat, thick with falling rage, "there'll be a settlement between you and me before long, and when it comes—when it comes!"

CHAPTER XXV

FLOOD STAGE

JOEL had made his case, it seemed, and had no more to say. He was gone through the corn before Randolph had recovered from the shock of the man's amazing transformation.

Randolph stood, considering all that had been revealed to him in the experience of those past few days. How much of it must be revealed to, how much kept hidden from, for his own welfare and peace, that old man in the weathered gray mansion on the hillside yonder? He turned to face that way with the thought.

Juliet Moore was hastening down the dust-white road.

If he had followed his heart he would have leaped to meet her like an eagle winging from his rock. She came like incense into that place to purge away the foul shadows which lingered after Joel Langworthy. Randolph went forward with a hushed sense of holiness over him, as one who approaches a shrine.

She saw the story of his suffering in his hollow face. A little way from him she stopped, her cheeks paling, fear settling in her eyes. She lifted her hands with a tender illustration of sympathy; he heard her moan in such deep sorrow as only comes from the sacred places of the heart.

He hurried to her to relieve her sympathetic suffering, holding out his hand.

"I'm sorry that I caused you so much trouble and anxiety, Miss Moore," he said.

"Are you—are you—safe?" she asked, looking up with that in her eyes which would have paid him for even a greater peril.

He took both of her hands, with no doubt any more, and no question of his right, and folded them to his breast with a convulsion in his throat as if he swallowed tears.

"I was as the dead, but you have brought me life," he said.

"I didn't wait a minute—I came as soon as Mr. Atchison told me—I ran."

"He didn't tell you where I've been?"

"Only that you had come back. But I saw in his eyes that something terrible had happened to you—he couldn't hide it, and he hurried away."

"Sit here," he said, bringing campstools into the shade of the tent, "and I'll tell you, Juliet."

To assure her that he had come living out of the mystery that had swallowed other men, perhaps, he held her hand as he told her the adventure of the tunnel and his rescue from it that dawn.

When he came to that her face was hidden on his shoulder, her hands clinging to his as if she feared the mysterious hostility of that place would drive him again from her side. He pressed his gaunt cheek against her hair and felt her sobs of pity for his past pain wrench her.

He spoke to her endearingly; he quieted her grief and soothed her fears.

"Does your grandfather know that I—that I'm—here again?"

Juliet shook back her hair in her pretty way of girlishness. "He doesn't know; he was away at dawn to see the river and hasn't come back."

"Hugh and I concluded that it would be best for nobody to know it but you and your grandfather, for we believed that Langworthy would run away if he learned I'd escaped his trap."

"The wretched scoundrel!"

"But there's no need in concealing it now, Langworthy knows; he was here just a few minutes before you came."

"Here—you saw him? What excuse—what defense—"

HE TOLD her, without reservation, of Langworthy's accusations against Moore. She agreed at once that it would be best for her grandfather to have it concealed, not alone because of the trouble and danger that an attempt to prosecute Joel would throw the old man in, but of graver consideration the certainty that Moore would take the law into his own hands.

"He'd hunt him down and shoot him—he'd never give him time to bring his horrible, wicked accusations!" she said.

"I believe he'd do it," Randolph agreed.

"We'll have to leave it to time and his own devices to tangle him," he said.

"*Grandpère* has not been the same since they built the levee—he has brooded so and become so silent and grim."

"The levee? What levee, Juliet? Why?

"I forgot, it was after you—after that. The river was threatening to bring *grandpère's* old prophecy true—they were afraid it would come back to him."

"Joel did it," he nodded; "there would be nobody else."

"He directed it, but, of course, nobody could rightly blame him for that."

Randolph sat turning the news in his mind as if it had stunned him. He looked up the old track of the river to the Narris head, where the strong wall of treetops stood green and secure.

"So it was threatening to come back to him?" he said speculatively, as one speaking in the shadow of a graver thought.

"They say the danger is past, the crest of the flood is here, the weather bureau reports. But, oh"—whispering, clinging to him fearfully—"what if it had broken in while you—while you—while you—were down there!"

"I was thinking of that a minute ago," he said. "Well, I'm not down there—I'm up here in the sun—in the sun!" He repeated it slowly, looking into her eyes.

"I was almost sorry, for poor old *grand-père's* sake, when I heard that there was no danger of it coming back. But, of course, I didn't know you were in that place then."

"Of course you didn't. Well, there are a good many people living along the Narris who would have to scramble pretty lively for their necks if it ever broke that levee."

Below them, on past the old store and wharf, a dwelling could be seen here and there, submerged to the eaves in corn; the brown of a haystack, the soft yellow of stubble fields. Cattle grazed in the half wild brushwood meadows.

"It is such an innocent scene to cover the cause of so long a sorrow!" she said.

"Perhaps it is like me—keeping the best till the last, Juliet."

She turned to him quickly, his secret half-guessed, as betrayed by her lively eyes. "The best till the last, Jonathan?"

"I hope it will prove the best, Juliet. We have found the safe!"

"Oh, the safe—the treasure!"

"It revealed itself rather while I was—down below. The sand settled around it and left a corner bare—Hugh saw it first."

"Did you—Was it—" she whispered, rising to tiptoe, her hands on his shoulders. Her face had grown white, and the greatness of anxiety was in her eyes.

"No, we couldn't open it, Juliet. Hugh's gone to Richfield for dynamite. But I don't care—I don't care one little old sigh—whether there's a cent in it or not—not now!"

"But I care whether the treasure's there, Jonathan—for your sake, I care."

RANDOLPH was sincere in what he had said. Just at that moment the safe down deep among the rotting ribs of the *Morning Star* was of second importance, for all the long lure that it had been in his life. Life was fuller for the past peril of death; the golden key of the world was in their hands as they stood there smiling in the shadow of the corn that fair, still summer day.

So Juliet must see the safe, leaning with hand on the windlass, whispering as she looked down, as if afraid that a loud word would break the enchantment and dissolve the long-sought treasure before her eyes. A soberness had settled on her; there was a paleness in her cheek as she lifted her head from peering down at the safe, plainly seen now at the bottom of the pit, for the sun was feeling down into it like the sly, still hand of a thief.

"I wish Mr. Atchison would hurry!" she said.

"He'll be back before noon, and when he comes we'll make a regular ceremony of opening the safe."

"You feel it, too—you feel it!" she said. "*Grandpère* said no man ever would raise the treasure out of the wreck—he told you that. He repeated it to Mr. Atchison only yesterday!"

"We're all full of fancies down here in the Narris," he said, trying to smile, making a poor flicker of it, like a light struck in a wind. "There may not be anything in it, Juliet; I haven't set my hopes very high."

"I wouldn't leave it—I wouldn't leave it a minute!" she said. "That—that man—

that demon with the hideous treasure of dead man's bones—would be so jealous of your discovery if he knew!"

"He knows; he was here looking at the safe when he saw me."

"Then he'd blow it up, or do something to keep you from having it, if you turned your back a minute. Watch it; don't take any chances, Jonathan. Oh, you must not lose it now, after all you've gone through to find it!"

"I'll not take any chances with him," he said. "I'll stick right here till Hugh comes back. When he passes, come down with him, and bring your grandfather, if he's home by then. We're going to get into that safe this morning."

Randolph felt himself as hungry, when Juliet had left him, as if he had taken no nourishment since his rescue. He prepared himself a meal, and rose from it with new courage.

The treasure was there; his long dream was coming to a happy end.

Past eleven. Hugh might come the next minute, and it might be an hour. He would have time to go down and take another look at the safe and feed his imagination at the old fire.

His legs trembled on the ladder in his eagerness to reach it. It was as if he had not found it before, as if the labor of the morning had only been the entangled striving in a dream.

So it was there, the far-leading treasure, at last—to be brought up presently and spread glittering in the sun. Cold under his hand was the proof; the sands had kept it secure.

THE sound of a foot scraping on the boards around the hoist made him leap and turn. The dead battering against the casing of his excavation could not have given him a sharper wrench of sudden alarm. The fright passed out of him electrically. Hugh had come, of course.

"Is that you, Hugh?" he shouted.

No answer. The sound of lumber being disturbed came down to him, and again he called Hugh's name. Nobody answered. He clambered out of the little beveling hole at the bottom of the shaft and started to mount the ladder.

This was a pieced and crude contrivance which had been extended from time to time as the pit grew deeper. He looked up as he climbed, a sense of danger so heavy over him that it seemed a clogging weight. Bits of earth were falling, loosed by the unseen feet at the top, and now a heavy blow on the protruding timbers of the ladder started the upper section from the wall.

"Get away from there; leave that ladder alone!" he shouted, mounting fast.

There was but one thought of who was trying to imprison him in that pit of his own making—Joel Langworthy, skulking out of the corn with some new diabolism in his shrunken soul! Remembering that he carried his revolver, he leaned back arm's length from the ladder and fired, although he could not see anything but the heavy plank that was being used to spring the timbers.

Something came over the edge of the pit, clattering down the ladder as it fell. He flattened himself against the timbers; a heavy piece of scantling struck his arm.

For a moment he clung uncertainly, his arm numb from the blow. Then up again, as fast as rage could drive him. His hands were on the section between him and the top when the unseen person, having freed it from the timbers to which it was but loosely nailed, laid hold of it, wrenched it free at the bottom, and drew it out of the shaft.

Randolph stood with hands on the top rung of the broken ladder, yelling commands and threats. Nobody answered him, even with a taunt. The windlass spanned the shaft twelve feet above him, its rope far out of his reach. The planing of the cofferdam was closely joined to keep out seepage; there was not a crevice in it that would give him a finger hold.

The only possible way of getting out before Hugh came and hoisted him from that humiliating situation would be to climb one of the six-by-eight perpedicular

timbers of the casing. As these presented but three sides, and no knee-room against the boards, he knew that such a feat was impossible without claws.

What Langworthy could hope to gain by making a prisoner of him in this way was not plain. At the best he could keep him there no longer than Hugh came—or Juliet. It seemed a vindictive little trick—a last bit of detriment which Joel, seeing it possible to interpose, could not resist. He had drawn up the ladder and run off like a cowardly boy.

He clung there between bottom and top considering his ridiculous situation.

HE LOOKED up, his tongue suddenly dry in his mouth. A little cascade of water had broken over the top of the cofferdam. It was falling with a musical sharp splash on the wet earth below.

For a little while the sight held him in voiceless surprise. Then he shouted, shouted till his throat ached, and tore at the timber of the cofferdam until his fingers bled.

Out of his reach stood the windlass, the sun white on it, the strong rope wound short; higher the blue sky, calm and pure. There was no storm blowing; no deluge from the heavens had loosed that stream. He knew that the river had broken the levee at the head of the Narris and was sweeping back to claim its own.

From three sides of the pit the cascades of brown water came tumbling in with growing volume. The noise of it had swelled in those few seconds from the pleasant tinkle of a musician tuning his instrument into a full orchestral roar.

There had been little possibility of climbing the timbers of the cofferdam to the first cross-brace at the beginning, less now that they were wet and behind a curtain of water. But he made a desperate effort to do it, and groped back to the ladder almost drowned.

He shouted for help, conscious of his voice along through the physical effort of producing it, leaning out the length of his arms to keep his head clear of the descending flood. It was a hopeless cry—terrible with the visions of that cruel end!

The water was not far below his feet—spray of its breaking stifled and blinded him. Death was pressing close—the gloom of it was thick in that roaring pot. Randolph struggled and lifted his face to look again on that last hope—the little gleam of glad blue sky, like a man giving farewell out of his grave!

Something was dangling there, swinging, snatched now by the eager waters now within reach of his clutching hand. The hook of the bucket—the rope of the hoist.

He held it in both hands and swung clear of the ladder—life flooding back to him like a surge of fire. There was a fight to be made now; again he was a man. He could not see the windlass, or who was there, for the water was pouring over him, but he felt the upward jerk of the rope that told him he was being drawn out through the inrushing stream.

Juliet, her wild hair flying, her feet braced against the sucking current which struck her halfway to her knees. He knew that it was Juliet before his head cleared the curb, and he saw her straining at the windlass to drag him up to life.

It was a struggle to get out of the down-dragging water that had almost filled the pit, and swirled in it, and pulled at his limbs to tear him away from her hands. How he accomplished it Randolph could not have told. There were two pictures only of that crowded moment remaining to him afterward.

One that of the dangling hook, dim before his eyes in the mists of the cataract; the other of Juliet as she turned with outstretched arm, her wet clothing pressed against her body like the garments of some heroic bronze pointing up the river.

THE river was sweeping down the Narris—a wall of water thirty feet high, whirling uprooted trees like straws under a winnowing rake. The gigantic wave stood above them like a muddy horizon, the roar of a tornado in its coming, an awful

thing, sublime in its wild terror and all-obliterating might.

That charging wave seemed not more than a thousand feet away—fully a fifth that distance separated them from the highlying shore where the tent stood almost taunting in its untroubled security, white in the sun. Randolph caught her hand and shouted to her to run. Together they went splashing through the lake that had formed in the sunken ground.

The river was to be satisfied that day with taking from him the treasure of the *Morning Star.* Its running shore-wave caught them as they staggered to high ground, flung them down and trampled them, he holding her in his arms and fighting it in a struggle so fierce that it seemed his breast must burst. His mettle tried so, the river released him, and he drew her upon the shore among the marshaled ranks of corn.

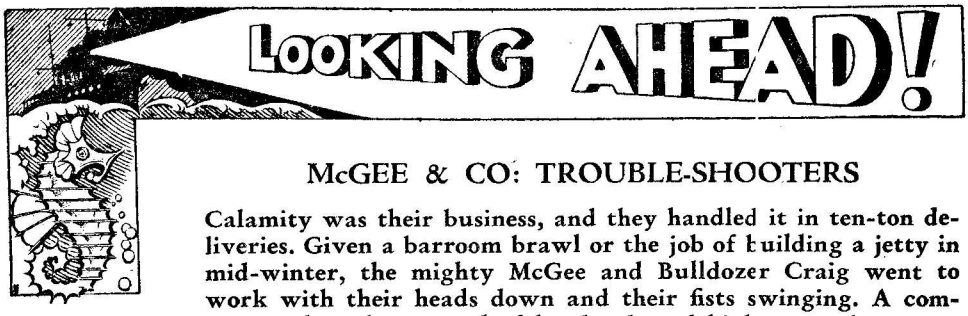
They stood there on that old-new shore still dumb with terror of the thing that they had defeated.

In full head the river was driving through the Narris, high above the old shore marks, for the years had filled its bed, and this sudden flood could not be contained within its former bounds.

The roar of its advance wave was dimming; soon it would plunge out of the green gate through which Caleb Moore had watched the boats from his high veranda and join the old river, its work of reclamation done. The corn fields which had grown in the reclaimed river bed were hidden; roofs of houses and barns which had stood in fancied security an hour ago came sweeping by, as if the Missouri was hastening to remove these usurpers from its old domain. Tumbling great trees went lashing past, roots seen this moment, their draggled, muddy branches the next, their strength humiliated, their majesty despised, by the mighty river which bent to no force but the rocky rampart of the hills.

The Missouri was digging its way through the Narris, a great, marauding, savage, cruel river; swirling a deep whirlpool over the shaft reaching down to the lost treasure of the *Morning Star.*

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



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THE MAN NEXT DOOR

None knew whence he came, nor why . . . and he looked too nondescript for anyone to care. Yet the touch of strangeness was upon him, and flaming death was trapped in his eyes. A distinctive short novelet by

PAUL ERNST

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—MARCH 4

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ACCUSTOMED as we are to being shunted around by the exigencies of space, omnivorous printers, and similar crises, we hasten to move over without further ado for the lengthy letter of a regular contributor to these columns.

THEODORE MAHAFFEY

In Argonotes for August 13th I wrote, "Max Brand was a fool to ever give his name to such tripe as *Señor Coyote*. Or does this serve as an indication of an end to the stories that once provided American fiction readers with some of the best produced in our country?" I wrote in this vein because I believed that Brand actually was through; I thought that he had come to the end that so many good artists sometimes manage to crawl into.

I might best illustrate what I mean by taking the Chaplin case. When Charlie Chaplin was so poor that he bought one fifty-cent shirt each week and discarded it rather than have it laundered he applied his ability to such extent that he became our greatest mimic.

Today Charlie Chaplin is said to be rated at $12,500,000 but neither he nor his rating have caused even a snicker for years. He is an example of an artist who when stuffed like a game bird becomes so lazy that he ceases to be even an ornament. It was with the Chaplin case as a criterion that I hastily judged Max Brand several months ago. But do not think that I judged him solely for the performance that he turned in on the above mentioned story. Some of the factors that caused me to arrive at such a conclusion are reports that he can turn out a three-part serial in one morning's sitting, that he gets around $100,000 per year for his output and finally the writing for such moronic publications as *Liberty* and *Collier's*.

Now, please, convey my sincere apology to Max Brand because I have just finished reading the concluding installment of his *Young Doctor Kildare*. Mr. Brand again has both feet on earth and has turned out an interesting and informative story that has what some call "human interest." He has not used this lucid style of his for the purpose of crusading but even here he has shown some of the shortcomings of a group that deserves and will shortly get a thorough diagnosis. The medical group, like big business, the motion picture industry and other entrenched groups has acted for years as if they have no responsibilities to us (the government); and through the flagrant violation of laws and internal strife they are coming in for their share of investigation and ultimate regulation. The author did not purpose to take issue with the medical group here but simply used them as part of the stage setting but in doing this he has shown them up some.

Before I started reading the story I saw the motion picture which starred Lew Ayres and Lionel Barrymore as young Kildare and Gillespie, respectively. This is the first motion picture that I remember seeing that has complied so strictly to the story, even to dialogue in some noteworthy instances.

Now, after this apology, which is unusual for me, I think I will attempt to soar into some of my usual criticism. Norman Siringer might be a good diagnostician but I cannot agree with much that he has written in his "ratings." Personally, I think that it is a case of "another man's poison." . . . But don't let me try to deter him from making these ratings because that is every man's right not a privilege; as Thomas Jefferson said in his second inaugural address, "Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." In this day of censorship of the press, both voluntary and otherwise, it would be well that every man remember the words of the sage of Monticello.

As I walked down the street with this week's copy of ARGOSY I made sure that no one would see that cover by folding the magazine. It seems shameful that such a practice is necessary especially when it is a publication whose contents are not in keeping with the cover. If the present staff of cover artists cannot turn out jobs that are harmonious with the contents I would suggest that we adopt a cover something like the old Munsey's . . . one that serves also as a table of contents. This is a custom that is used by many publications.

As America's oldest all-fiction magazine goes into it's fifty-sixth year, I hope that anything that I have said here will make it have many more.

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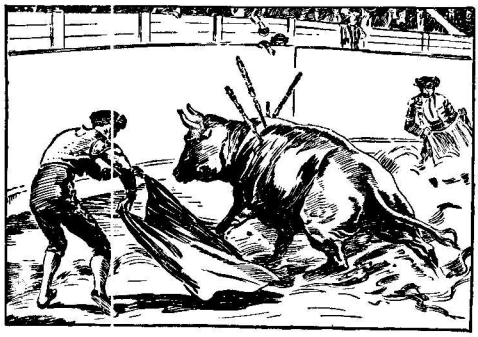

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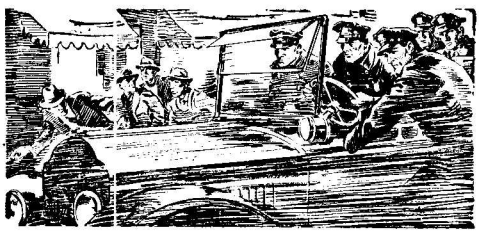

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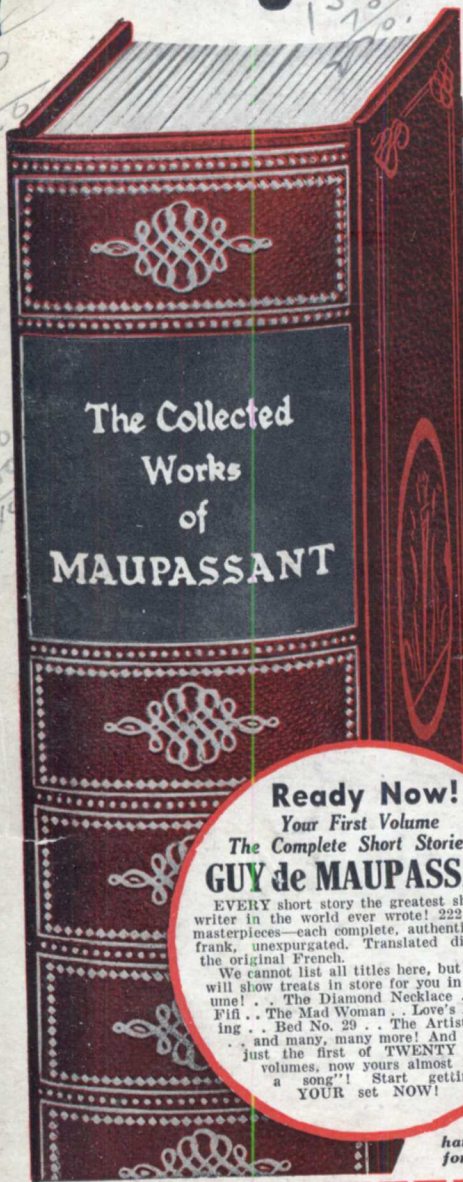

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