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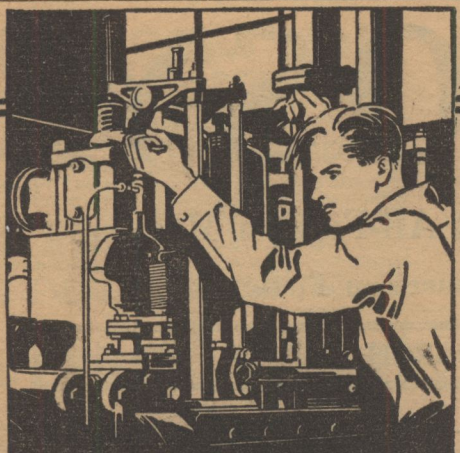

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Illustrating Seven Out of Time

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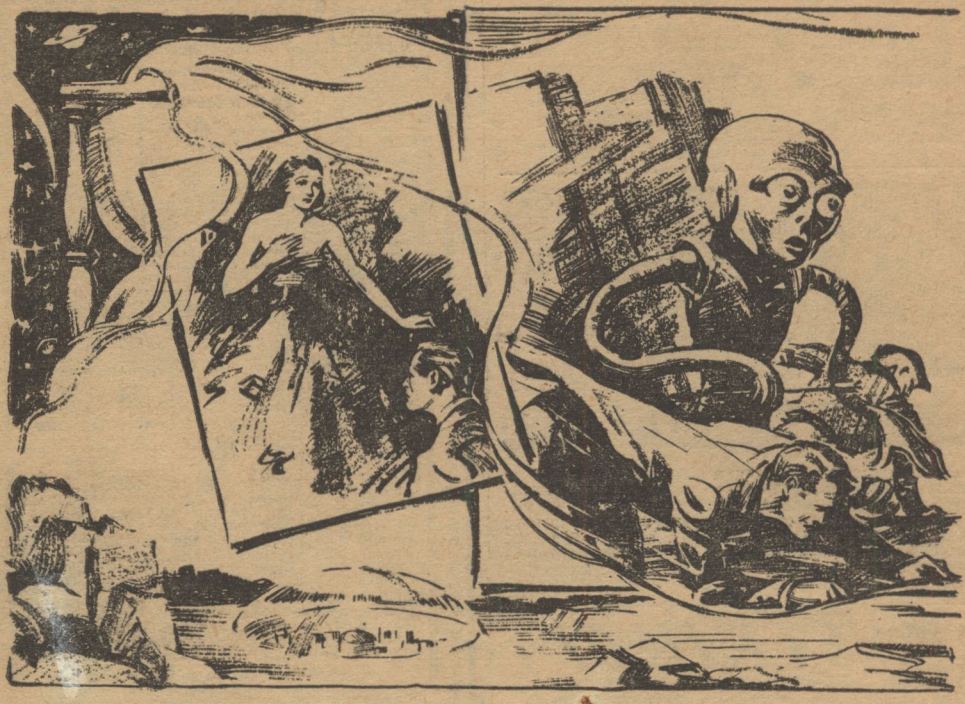


Seven Out of Time

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Here is John March's amazing search for the girl he loved and had never seen; how, summoned by the whisper of a whirl of dust, he stepped beyond the boundaries of time and met the masters of the other world. Beginning a great new fantastic novel by the author of "Drink We Deep"

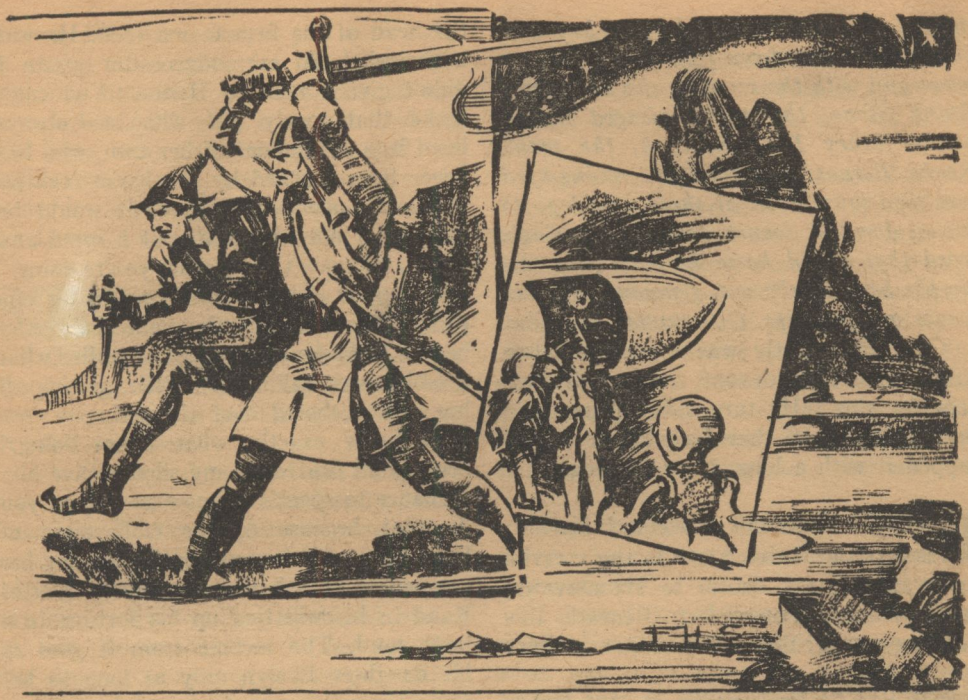
CHAPTER I

THE GRAVEN SNAKE

"YOU have not found Evelyn Rand." Pierpont Alton Sturdevant did not raise his eyes from the papers he had been examining when I entered his office and his voice was dry as the rustle of wind in fallen leaves.

"No sir," I was forced to admit. "I've—" His hand gestured for silence.

The room was enormous, the desk massive, but the head of the law firm of Sturdevant, Hamlin, Hamlin and Sturdevant dominated both. This was not because of any physical quality. P.A. was quite average in stature. His hair, deftly arranged to conceal its sparseness, was gray, but it did not have the patches of white at the temples which fiction writers and movie make-up men like to believe are the invariable mark of position in business or the professions. The skin of his beardless face was netted with fine wrinkles, and tightly drawn over a skull almost femininely delicate.



In contrast to the near baldness of his scalp, shaggy brows shadowed Sturdevant's eyes. His nose was hawklike. About the thin, tight line of his mouth there was a sort of sexless austerity.

Looking at him from the chair to which, with a terse "Good morning," he had motioned me, I had the notion that Sturdevant was very like some Roman emperor on the throne from which he ruled the world. My chief was cloaked in the same consciousness of undisputed power, of patrician aloofness from the common herd.

A very junior attorney in the august firm over which he presided, I might, to continue the fancy, have been some young centurion returned from Ulterior Gaul and hailed before his emperor to report on his mission. I had, in fact, just come back to the city from the remotest reaches of Westchester and what I had to report was —failure.

"If you continue the search, how soon do you think you will be able to locate her?"

"I don't know." I didn't like that *if*. I didn't like it at all. "I haven't been able to unearth a single clue as to what happened to her. The girl just walked out of her Park Avenue apartment house that Sunday morning and vanished. The doorman was the last person to see her. He offered to call a taxi for her and she told him that she would walk to church. He watched her go down the block and around the corner, and that was the last anyone ever saw of her."

"I could not take my eyes off the lass," the grizzled attendant had told me, "though the 'phone buzzer was goin' like mad. She swung along freelike an' springy, as if the ould sod was under her feet an' not this gray concrete that chokes th' good dirt. I was minded o' the way my Kathleen used to walk up Balmorey Lane to meet me after th' work was done, longer ago than I care to think."

By the way he spoke and the look in his eyes, I knew I needed only to tell him what it would mean to Evelyn Rand if word of the fact that she had never returned became known, to keep him silent.

And so it was with the elevator boy who had brought her down from her penthouse home and with the servants she had there: Frank Stone, the granite-visaged butler, buxom Mary Fox the cook, the maid, Renée Bernos, black-haired, roving-eyed and vivacious. Each of these would go to prison for life sooner than say a single word that would harm her, nor was this simply because she was generous with her wages and her tips. One cannot buy love.

"You are exactly where you were two weeks ago," Sturdevant murmured, "except for this." He turned the paper he'd been studying so that I could see it and tapped it with a long, bony forefinger.

IT WAS a statement of account, headed: ESTATE OF DARIUS RAND in the MATTER OF EVELYN RAND, debtor to STURDEVANT, HAMLIN AND STURDEVANT. Beneath this heading was written a list of items, thus:

1/30/38	½hr. P.A. Sturdevant Esq.	@ $4.00	$200.00
1/30/38 to 2/12/38	88¼ hrs. Mr. John March	@ 25	2206.25
1/30/38 to 2/12/38	Disbursements and expenses Mr. John March	(acct. attchd.)	64.37
			2470.62
	Total to 2/12/38 inc.		

"Two thousand four hundred seventy dollars and sixty-two cents"—Sturdevant's finger tapped the total—"up to last Saturday, and in addition there is the charge for this quarter hour of my time and yours, plus whatever you have spent over the weekend! Over two and a half thousand dollars, Mr. March," he repeated accusingly, "and no result."

He paused, giving me a chance to make excuses. But I wasn't having any. I bit my lip and waited for what I knew he was going to say next.

He said it. "As trustee of the estate of Darius Rand I cannot approve any further expenditure. You will return to your regular duties and I shall notify the police that Miss Rand has vanished."

That gave me the signal to go ahead. "The hell you say!" I exclaimed. "You can't do that to her! You can't hand over her inheritance to charity." He wasn't the head of the firm to me then. He was a shriveled old curmudgeon for whom I didn't give a hoot in Hades. "You can't make that lovely girl who has always lived in a dreamland of her own, who has never been touched by the harsh realities of life, a penniless pauper. It would be murder, if not of a body, of a mind and a soul. You don't know what you're doing."

I stopped. I was out of breath, for one thing. For another, the calm cold way he was looking at me made me realize what a fool I was making of myself, getting all hot and bothered over the girl.

"I know exactly what I am doing," Sturdevant said when my silence gave him a chance to speak. "I know as well as you do that because of the embarrassment his actress wife caused him by trailing her escapades through the newspapers, Darius Rand in his will tied up his fortune in a trust fund. The income from it goes to his daughter Evelyn only as long as her name never appears, for any reason whatsoever, in the news columns of the public press.

"When she vanished, I determined, as chairman of her committee of guardians, to conceal the situation for a reasonable length of time, hoping that she would turn up or be found. That reasonable time has, in my opinion, expired. I can no longer justify my silence. Therefore, as trustee of—"

"The estate of Darius Rand," I broke in, getting sore again. "You're measuring the happiness of someone against dollars and cents."

The faint shadow that drifted across Sturdevant's face might mean I'd gotten under his skin. But his answer didn't admit it. "No, Mr. March. I am measuring a sentimental attachment to someone over whose welfare I have watched for more than six years against the dictates of duty and conscience."

The old codger's weakening, I encouraged myself. "Aren't there times, sir, when one may forget duty and even conscience? Look here. Give me a week more. Just the week itself. I'll take a leave of

absence. I'll even resign, so you won't have to charge the estate for my time. I'll pay any necessary expenses out of my own pocket. All I want is for you to keep this thing away from the police and the papers for a week, and I'll find Evelyn before it's over. I'm as sure that I'll find her as that I'm standing here."

STURDEVANT'S eyebrows rose slightly. "You seem unduly perturbed over the young lady," he mused, "for one who has never seen her, for one who had never even heard of her fourteen days ago. Or am I mistaken?"

"No. Fourteen days ago I was not aware that such a person as Evelyn Rand existed. But today," I leaned forward, my palms pushing down hard on the desk-top, "I think I know her better than I know my own sister. I know her emotional make-up, how she would react in any conceivable situation. That's what I've been doing ever since I found there were no physical clues to what has become of her. I have literally steeped myself in her personality. I have spent hours in her home, her library, her bedroom. I have talked, on one pretext or another, to everyone who served her, her hairdresser, her dressmaker. I know that her hair is the color of honey and how she wears it. I know that she is fond of light blues and pastel tones of pink and of leaf green. I even know the perfume she has specially compounded for her."

In his little shop on Sixty-third Street, the walrus-mustached old German in the long chemist's smock had looked long at me, perturbation in his china-blue eyes. "Ich weiss nicht," *he muttered. "You say a friend from the* Fräulein *Rand you are and a bottle from her individual perfume you want to buy her for a present.* Aber *I don't know. Ven I say so* schoen ein Maedchen *many lovers must have, she laughs und says she has none. She says ven someone she finds who can say to her so true t'ings about her soul as I say in de perfume I make for her, then she will have found her sweetheart. But such a one she has not yet found."*

"Look," I argued. "Would I know the formula number if she did not tell it to me?"

I had got it from Renée Bernos, but the German was convinced. When I opened the little bottle that had cost me enough to have fed a slum family a month, my dreary hotel room was filled with the redolence of spring; of arbutus and crocuses and hyacinths and the evasive scent of leaf-buds, and with another fainter redolence I could not name but that seemed the very essence of dreams. For a moment it seemed almost as if Evelyn Rand were there with me. . . .

"Ah," Sturdevant breathed. "And what did you hope to accomplish by so strange a procedure?"

"I figured that if I could get inside her mind," I replied, "I should perhaps know what was in it when she walked down Park Avenue to Seventy-third Street, and turned the corner and never reached the church which she had set out for."

The arching of Sturdevant's shaggy brows was more pronounced this time. He was laughing at me, damn him, and he had every reason to.

"Yes?" he murmured. "Is that all you have done in two weeks?"

"This weekend I went out to Evelyn's country home, the house where she was born and where she spent her childhood. It was closed, of course, but I had obtained the keys from Miss Carter, your secretary. I spent most of Saturday in that house, and all of yesterday.'"

The other rooms had told me nothing about Evelyn Rand. They were the commonplace living quarters of a wealthy family, and that was all. But one dim and dusty chamber still held the personality of the child Evelyn Rand. That was the nursery.

I pulled out a bureau drawer too far, so that it fell to the floor and split, and that was how I found the thing. Only Evelyn Rand could know, if she were still

alive and remembered, how long ago it had slipped between the side of that drawer and the edge of its warped bottom. At least fourteen years ago, because, as I already had learned, when the girl was six and starting school the door of this room had been locked and never opened again.

As my fingers closed on the bit of carved stone that lay in a clutter of dolls' clothes, grimy picture books, battered blocks and mummified insects, something seemed to flow from it and into my blood. I was aware of a vague excitement and fear.

It was slightly smaller than a dime, approximately an eighth of an inch thick and roughly circular in outline, and there was, oddly enough, no dust upon it. It was black, a peculiar, glowing black that appeared to shimmer with a colorless iridescence. Almost it seemed as though I held in my palm a bit of black light strangely become solid. Too, it was incongruously heavy for its size, and when on impulse I tested it, I found it hard enough to stratch glass.

The latter circumstance made more remarkable the accomplishment of the artist who had fashioned the gem. For it was not a solid mass with a design etched seal-like upon it, but a filigree of ebony coils that rose to its surface and descended within its small compass and writhed again into view till the eye grew weary of following the windings.

On the window-sill to which I had taken the gem lay a magnifying glass. I wiped away the thick layer of dust that covered the lens and looked through it at the stone.

Now, sitting in the office with Sturdevant, I remembered clearly the amazement I had felt when I studied that stone under the glass.

CLOSE-PACKED and intricate as were the thread-thin loops, they formed a single continuous line. True, two or three of the coils were interrupted at one point in the periphery by a wedge-shaped gap about an eighth of an inch deep, but the rough edges of the break made it obvious that this was the result of some later accident and not a part of the original intent.

Then I made another surprising discovery: the coils were not smoothly polished as they appeared to the naked eye, but had traced upon them a myriad of microscopic scales, each perfect in outline and detail.

I could not bring myself to believe that any human could have had the skill and the infinite patience to have carved this out of a single piece of whatever the stone was. It must have been made in parts and cemented together. I bent closer, to see if I could find some seam, some evidence of jointure.

I saw none. But I saw the snake's head.

Tiny yet exquisitely fashioned, it lay midway between the gem's slightly convex surfaces, and at the hub of its perimeter. I could make out the lidless eyes, the nostrils, the muscles at the corners of the jaws, straining muscles because those jaws were widely distended.

To avoid any interruption of the design, the reptile had been graven as swallowing its own tail.

A strange toy for a little girl to have, I thought, and put it away in my vest pocket, meaning later to fathom out what it could tell me about Evelyn Rand.

"You seem to be making a good thing out of your assignment," Pierpont Alton Sturdevant remarked. "Using it to obtain a week-end in the country at the estate's expense."

I got pretty hot under the collar at that. It took an effort to remember that if I said what I wanted to, what faint chance there was of persuading him to permit me to continue investigating Evelyn's disappearance would be gone. At that, my voice had dropped a couple of notes in pitch when I went on.

"I also talked to the woman who was Evelyn Rand's nurse and her foster-mother after old Darius divorced his wife, the girl's constant companion till your committee sent her away to college."

"And what did you learn from Faith Corbett?" For the first time a faint hint of interest crept into Sturdevant's tone, though his face remained expressionless.

I hesitated. Could he possibly understand if I answered that question with complete honesty?

CHAPTER II

WHISPERING WHIRL OF DUST

THERE was no sound in the office of Pierpont Alton Sturdevant except the almost inaudible burr of the electric clock on his desk. The long second hand of that clock could have swept hardly halfway around the dial before I made my decision.

"Nothing," I answered. "I learned nothing from her that I can put into words."

I had stopped at the door of the cottage and asked for a drink of water. Faith Corbett, shrunken and fragile as a withered leaf, had asked me in. Very willingly I accepted her invitation to have tea with her; and soon the little old lady was talking about Evelyn Rand.

"She was a dear child," the faded, tenuous voice mused as the scrubbed kitchen grew misty with winter's early dusk, "but sometimes she scared me. I would hear her prattling in the nursery and when I opened the door she would be quite alone, and no sign that anyone had been there. When I asked her who she'd been talking to she would look up at me with those great gray eyes of hers and gravely say a name, and it would be no name that I had ever heard.

"But it was something that happened the day before they took her away from me that upset me most of all," Faith Corbett said. "I didn't understand it and I will never forget it."

She took a nibble of her toast and a sip of her tea, but though I waited silently for her to go on, she did not. Her thoughts had wandered from what she had been saying, as old people's thoughts have a way of doing.

"What was it," I asked after awhile, "that happened the day before Evelyn went away to college?"

"I was packing her trunk," the old lady recommenced as if she had not paused at all. "I could not find her tennis shoes so I went downstairs to ask her what she had done with them. Evelyn was not in the house, but when I went out to the porch I saw her on the garden path. She was going toward the gate through the twilight, and there was an eagerness in the way she moved that was new to her. She walked as if she were going to meet a lover.

"I stood and watched, my heart fluttering in my breast for I knew there was no youngster about who had ever got so much as a second glance from my girl. She came to the gate and stopped there, taking hold of the pickets with her hands. Like a still white flame she was as she looked down the road.

"They had not put the macadam on it yet and the dust lay glimmering in the dimness. All of a sudden Evelyn got stiff-like and I looked to see who was coming."

The memory of that afternoon was still so vivid in my mind that I could hear again the little gasp the old lady made as she paused for an instant.

"The road was as empty and still as it had been before," she told me slowly.

"The air was smoky, kind of, the way it gets in the fall and there wasn't a leaf stirring. But there must have been a breath of wind on the road because I saw a little whirl of dust come drifting along it. When it came to the gate where Evelyn stood it almost stopped. But it whispered away and all at once it was gone.

"All the eagerness seemed to go out of Evelyn. I heard her sob and I ran down the path calling her name. She turned. There were tears on her cheeks. 'Not yet,' she sobbed. 'Oh, Faith! It isn't time yet.'

"'It isn't time for what?' I asked her, but she would say nothing more and I knew it was no use to ask again. . . ."

Faith Corbett's voice went on and on,

telling me that she had rented this cottage with the pension the estate granted her and that it was hard to live alone. But I heard her with only half an ear. I was thinking of how in that smoky fall twilight long ago it had seemed to Faith Corbett that Evelyn Rand must be going through the garden to meet her lover. I was recalling how the grizzled old doorman had said, 'I was minded o' the way my Kathleen used to walk up Balmorey Lane to meet me'; and large in my mind was the oddly frightening thought that perhaps when Evelyn Rand had turned the corner into Seventy-third Street a whirl of dust might have come whispering across the asphalt. . . .

"YOU learned nothing at all from Evelyn's old nurse?" Pierpont Sturdevant demanded. "I cannot believe that."

"Well," I conceded, "she did make me certain that the girl was unhappy and lonely in that motherless home of hers. But, as an imaginative child will, she found ways of consoling herself."

"Such as?"

"Such as writing verse." I indicated the yellowed papers I had laid on Sturdevant's desk when I came in.

The only light left in the cottage kitchen had been the wavering radiance of the coal fire in the range. So much talking had tired Faith Corbett and she nodded in her chair, all but asleep.

"Thank you for the tea," I said rising. "I'll be going along now."

The old woman came awake with a start. "Wait," she exclaimed. "Wait! I have something to give you. Something nobody but me has ever seen before." She rose too and went out of the room, the sound of her feet on the clean boards like the patter of a child's feet except that it was slower. I stood waiting and wondering, and in a little while she was back with a number of yellowed papers in her hand, pencilled writing pale and smudged upon them.

"Here," she said, giving them to me. "Maybe these will help you find her."

The papers rustled in my hand. I had been very careful to conceal from Faith Corbett the object of my visit, and I wondered how she could possibly know Evelyn Rand had vanished.

"Verse?" Sturdevant peered at the sheets dubiously.

Eager as I was to pierce the dry husk of rectitude that he wore, I had sense enough to retreat from my intention of reading to him, in that great room with its drape-smothered windows and its walls lined by drab lawbooks, the lines a child once penned in a sun-bright garden. He would hear the limping rhythm and the faulty rhymes, but he never would understand the wistful imagery of the words, the nostalgia for some vaguely apprehended Otherland where all was different, and being different must be happier.

"Poems," I assented. "They have told me more than anything else exactly what Evelyn Rand is like."

"And so it has cost the estate two and a half thousand dollars to find out that Evelyn Rand once wrote poems. You haven't even located a photograph of her, so that I can give the authorities more to go by than a bare description."

As far as anyone knew Evelyn never had been photographed. "I've done better than that," I said triumphantly. "I've found out that a portrait of her is in existence, painted by—" I named a very famous artist. For reasons that will shortly appear I shall omit that name from this account.

"Indeed." Sturdevant's brows lifted. "Why did you not bring that here instead of this trash?" He flicked a contemptuous finger at the sheaf of old papers.

"Because it is in a gallery on Madison Avenue. I intend to go there as soon as you finish with me, and—"

His look checked me. "You seem to forget, Mr. March, that I have canceled your assignment to this matter."

There it was! I hadn't changed his decision in the least. "You—!"

I didn't get any further than that because the annunciator on his desk interrupted me with its metallic distortion of human speech. "Nine-thirty, Mr. Sturdevant," it said. "Mr. Holland of United States Steel is here for his appointment."

Sturdevant clicked up the switch key that transformed the device from a receiver to a transmitter. "Send him in, Miss Carter. And make a note of this, please. John March has been granted a leave of absence, without pay, for one week from date. This office will do nothing in the matter of Evelyn Rand until Monday the twenty-first."

He turned to me and I swear there was a twinkle in his eyes. "Remember," he said. "Time is of the essence of the contract."

I was to recall that warning, but in a sense far different than he intended.

CHAPTER III

THE PORTRAIT AND THE GUIDE

ART lovers are not as a rule early risers, and so after I had purchased a catalogue from the drowsy attendant in the foyer and passed through the red-plush portieres before which he sat, I had the high-ceiled exhibition room to myself.

Shaded, tubular lights washing the surfaces of the paintings on the walls accentuated the dimness that filled the reaches of the gallery. A decorous hush brooded there, the thick, soft carpeting muffling the sound of my feet, close-drawn window drapes smothering traffic noise from without. The atmosphere was thick and oppressive.

I passed a circular seat in the center of the floor and saw Evelyn Rand looking at me from the further wall.

I knew her at once, although I had never seen her pictured anywhere. So sure was I that this was the portrait I had come to seek that I did not look at the gray pamphlet I held but went right to it.

I was conscious only of her face at first, ethereal and somehow luminous against the dark amorphous background of the painting. It seemed to me that there was a message for me in the gray, frank eyes that met mine, a message somewhere beneath their surface. It seemed to me that the satin-soft red lips were on the point of speaking.

Those lips were touched with a wistful smile, and there was something sad about them. Somehow the painter had contrived to make very real the glow of youth in the cheeks and in the honeyed texture of the hair; but there was, too, something ageless about that face, and a yearning that woke a response within me.

Yes, this girl could have written the poems that were locked now in a drawer of my desk. Yes, she would be loved by everyone who had the good fortune to know her.

She must have been about sixteen at the time of the portrait. The body within the soft blue frock—a misty blue, like the sky when it is brushed across with cloud—was just budding into womanhood. The hollows at the base of the neck were not yet quite filled.

A fine gold chain circled that neck. Pendant from it was a black gem, round and a little smaller than a dime. I recognized it. It was a replica of the one I had found in the nursery. There had been two of the things then—

My forehead wrinkled. At the edge of the amulet there appeared a wedge-shaped break about an eighth of an inch deep.

That was odd. The pictured Evelyn Rand was, as I have said, certainly sixteen. I might be mistaken by a year, not more. When she had sat for that portrait the gem was lost, and locked behind a door that had not been opened for almost ten years. This must be another. I was mistaken in thinking that the break was at exactly the same point, shaped exactly the same.

There was one way of finding out. The carved black stone was in my vest-pocket. All I had to do was take it out and compare it with the one in the picture.

I fished the curious gem out of my vest-pocket and looked from it to the painting

and back again. The pictured pendant and the stone in my fingers were the same. No accident could possibly have marred two different objects, no matter how similar, in precisely the same way.

Somewhere outside, a tower clock started chiming, the strokes coming dully into the room. Automatically I turned my wrist to check my watch. It was ten, right on the dot.

"An interesting bit," a low voice said. "Well worth the study you are giving to it."

I had thought myself alone in the gallery, yet now the voice did not startle me. I did, however, return the black stone to my pocket and button my coat over it as I agreed, "Yes. Very much so."

THE man was short, so short that the top of his head was at the level of my shoulder, and the first thing I noticed about him was that he was completely bald. The head seemed out of proportion, too large for the body it topped.

"Of course you have noticed," he went on, "how painstakingly every physical detail has been brought out. One has the impression that merely by reaching out one might feel the warmth of the girl's flesh, or straighten the fold in her frock a puff of wind has disarranged, or take that black pendant in one's fingers and examine it more closely."

Light reflected from the portrait of Evelyn Rand fell on the little man's face but left the rest of him obscure, so that his odd countenance seemed to hang disembodied in the gloom. It was round, no feature prominent enough to claim notice, but I did observe that brows and lashes were either absent or so light as to be imperceptible against the yellowish skin. The latter was of an odd lusterless texture, yet so smooth that I had a disquieting sense that it was artificial.

There was nothing artificial, however, about the tiny eyes; black eyes keener, more piercing, than any I had ever seen.

Their owner seemed unaware of my scrutiny. He was peering at the painting and his low, clear voice flowed on musingly, as though he were speaking his thoughts aloud, only half aware of my presence.

"How much of his subject's personality the artist has contrived to convey! She is not quite in tune with the world where she finds herself. All her life she has been lonely, because she does not quite belong. She has a sort of half-knowledge of matters hidden from others of her race and time, not altogether realized but sufficiently so that dimly she is aware of the peril which the full unveiling of that knowledge would bring upon her."

I studied the portrait. I couldn't see all that in it.

"She has learned now," the little man murmured, "what she only vaguely guessed at when that picture was painted."

That turned me to him. "What makes you say that?" I demanded, reaching to take hold of his upper arm.

I felt the roughness of fabric, the hardness of flesh beneath; then—though I was not conscious of any movement on his part—my fingers were closing on empty air and the fellow was standing beside me precisely as he had been, his speech a quiet, drowsy murmur.

"You know her." It was not a question but a statement. "You know how well the artist has done his work." Oddly enough, we both ignored the curious incident as one would a paradox in a dream.

"I know what she is," I replied. There was something puzzling here. "Though I have never met her, never spoken to her." Had something more than interest in a work of art brought this strange individual here? "What is the peril that threatens her?" I asked, to lead him on.

I expected either a plea of ignorance or an answer that would tie the little man to the vanishing of Evelyn Rand. I did not expect what he said.

"The artist sensed it. He put it on the canvas for us to see."

I looked back at the portrait. There was the girl's figure on it. There was the dark and formless background. There was nothing else.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what you mean."

"Look." I felt fingers brush across my eyes. He must have reached up and touched them, but I did not, as ordinarily I should have, resent the liberty. I forgot it as soon as it occurred.

For behind the figure of Evelyn Rand there was no longer formless shadow. I saw, instead, a desolate landscape informed with some quality, some eerie strangeness, that made me aware at once that it existed somewhere, but *not on this planet.* It inspired me with something of awe, that quality, and something of an inexplicable dread.

No living thing was visible to arouse that sense of apprehension. It seemed to come from the very pattern of the scene itself; from the sky that was too low and of a color no sky should have, and most of all from a monstrous monument that loomed against the close horizon. Black this enormous figure was, the same strangely living black as the stone in my vest pocket, and grotesquely shaped. There spread from it an adumbration of infinite threat of which Evelyn was as yet unaware—

I twisted around to the little man. "Where is that place?" I demanded. "Tell me where it is!"

"Not yet." The fellow peered at me with the detached interest of an entomologist observing an insect specimen, and somehow my momentary excitement cooled. "Not yet," he repeated. I became aware of how absurd was my thought that Evelyn was in some nameless danger from which only I could save her. "When it is time you will come to me. Here." He thrust a white oblong into my hand. I glanced down at the card.

There was not enough light to read it. I lifted it to catch the reflection from the portrait—and realized that the little man was no longer beside me.

He was nowhere in the room. I shrugged. He must have gone swiftly out, the carpeting making his footfalls soundless. *Bon-n-ng.* The tower clock was striking again. *Bong.* It was striking not the half-hour but the hour. It didn't seem that we had talked so long. Instinctively, I looked at my wrist watch.

It was ten o'clock. The watch hadn't stopped. The second hand was whirling merrily around its tiny circle, and the two longer hands insisted that the time was still ten o'clock.

They hadn't moved in all the time the little man had been speaking to me!

FOR a long minute the shadows of that hushed art gallery hid the Lord alone knew what shapes of dread. The painted faces leered at me from the walls—

All but one. The face of Evelyn Rand, its wistful smile unchanged, its gray eyes cool and frank and friendly, brought me back to reason. Her face, and the fact that behind her I could see no strange, unearthly landscape but a formless swirl of dark pigment, warm in tone and texture and altogether without meaning except to set off her slim and graceful shape.

I was still uneasy, but not because of any supernatural occurrence. A fellow who's never known a sick day in his life can be forgiven for being upset when he finds out there are limits to his endurance.

For two weeks I had been plugging away at my hunt for Evelyn Rand, and I hadn't been getting much sleep, worrying about her. I hadn't had any at all last night, returning from Westchester in a smoke-filled day coach. I was just plain fagged out, and I'd had a waking dream between two strokes of the clock.

Dreams, I knew from the psychology course I once took to earn an easy three credits, can pass through one's mind in virtually no time. That I should have imagined Evelyn in some strange land, with some obscure menace overhanging her, only symbolized the mystery of her whereabouts and my fears for her. The little man represented my own personality, voicing my incohate dreads and tantalizing me with the promise of a solution to the riddle, deferred to some indefinite future. "Not yet," he had said.

It was all simple and explicable enough, but it was disturbing that I should have undergone the experience. Maybe I ought to see a doctor. I had a card somewhere . . .

A card—there was one in my hand! Fear returned to me swiftly. The card in my hand was the one I had dreamed that the little man had given me. And it was real! Objects in dreams do not remain real when one awakes. . . .

But there was a rational explanation for this too. The card hadn't come *out* of the dream. It had been *in* the dream because I already had the card in my hand. It must have been in the catalogue. Leafing the pamphlet as I was absorbed in contemplation of Evelyn's portrait, I had abstractedly taken it out, unaware that I was doing so.

I looked at it, expecting it to be the ad of some other gallery connected with this one, of some art school or teacher. But all the card bore was a name and an address:

Achronos Astaris
419 Cobblen Street, Brooklyn

I think it was the "Brooklyn" that finally banished my renewed uneasiness. There is something solid and utterly matter-of-fact about that Borough of Homes, something stodgy and unimaginative and comfortable about its very name. I stuffed the card among a number of others in my wallet and forgot about it.

I took a last, long look at the portrait of Evelyn Rand. My reconstruction of her personality was complete. All that was left was to find her.

All that was left! I laughed at myself as I turned to leave the exhibition room. I had hoped somehow, somewhere among the things she had touched, the people she had known, the scenes through which she had moved, to come upon a hint of where and how to look for her. I had found nothing. Worse, every new fact about her that had come to light denied any rational explanation of her disappearance.

THERE was no man in whom she was enough interested to make the idea of an elopement even remotely possible. Apparently she had been content with her way of life—quiet, luxurious, interfered with not at all by the trustees of the estate. To conceive the sensitive, shy girl as stage-struck would be the height of absurdity.

No reason for her vanishing of her own will would fit into Evelyn's personality as I knew it now.

The possibility, foul play was completely eliminated. Kidnappers would have made their demand for ransom by this time. Seventy-third Street had been crowded with church-goers that Sunday morning; no hit-and-run accident, with the driver carrying off his victim, could have occurred unobserved. The police and hospital records had offered no suggestion of any more ordinary casualty that might have involved her. The charities to receive the income from the estate had not yet been decided on, so that motivation—far-fetched anyway—was out. Finally, Evelyn Rand was the last person on earth to have an enemy, secret or otherwise.

The more I had learned about the girl, the less explicable her absence had become. Except for one thing—the whispering swirl of dust.

Angrily I told myself that it was absurd to attach any importance to that detail. In Faith Corbett's dim kitchen, with the old crone mumbling over her toast and tea, the idea had seemed almost reasonable. In the brittle winter sunshine that flooded Madison Avenue, with the roar of New York's traffic in my ears and the bustling throngs jostling me, I knew how fantastic it was.

I was licked. The best thing for me to do was to go back to the office and tell old Sturdevant to call in the police.

I'd be damned if I would! I'd fought like mad to get a week's grace for myself, and I would use that week. Something would turn up. Something must—

I stopped thinking. I stood stockstill, my heart hammering my ribs, and pulled another breath into my lungs. It was

there, faint but unmistakable. The mingled scent of arbutus and crocuses and hyacinths, and the nameless redolence of dreams. The fragrance of spring—the perfume that was used by Evelyn Rand, and Evelyn Rand alone.

She was near—very near. She had passed this way minutes, seconds before, for the delicate scent could not have lived longer in the gasoline fumes and the reek of the city street.

I looked around. I saw a messenger boy lounging along, business men bustling briskly past, a rotund beldame in mink descending from a sleek limousine, someone's bright-eyed, chic stenographer on her way to the bank on the corner with a deposit book held tightly in her gloved little hand. A shabby-coated old man was poring over a tome at a second-hand bookstore's stall beside me. I was in the middle of the block and nowhere in its length was there anyone who possibly could be Evelyn Rand, even in disguise.

I must admit that I was considerably shaken. That dream I'd had in the art gallery hadn't helped my nerves, and now this whiff of Evelyn's perfume—I grinned lopsidedly. I was rapidly turning into a screwball. First I saw and heard things that didn't exist, and now I was taking to smelling things.

"You'd better start pulling yourself together," I muttered and turned to the bookstall to give myself an excuse for standing still and thinking things over. I picked up a volume at random. The blistered, water-soaked cover almost came away in my hands as I opened it. The paper of the title page was mildewed, powdery. I read the name of the book, casually at first—then with a shock of surprise. It was *The Vanished.*

Under the Old English type of the title there was a short paragraph in italics:

Here are the tales of a scant few of those who from the earliest dawn of history have vanished quietly from among the living yet are not numbered among the dead. Like so many whispering whorls of dust they went out of space and out of time, to what Otherwhere no one still among us knows, and none will ever know.

"Like so many whispering whorls of dust." Was *that* pure coincidence?"

I TURNED the page and read the list of chapter headings: Elijah; Prophet in Israel. Arthur of Camelot. Tsar Alexander the First. John Orth; Archduke of Tuscany. Francois Villon; Thief, Lover and Poet. The Lost Dauphin. Those Who Sailed on the *Marie Celeste.* Ambrose Bierce Joins the Phantoms of his Pen. Judge Crater of New York. And, How Many Unrecorded others?

That "How Many Unrecorded Others" gave me an idea. Not a reasonable one, I'll admit, but no less logical than the rest of what I'd been doing to find Evelyn Rand. The idea was that perhaps somewhere in this book I might find that hint, that suggestion of what might have happened to her, for which I'd been looking.

I shrugged. It wouldn't hurt to read the thing.

I went into the store, shadowed, musty with the peculiar aroma of old paper and rotted leather and dried glue found only in such establishments. A gray man in a long gray smock shuffled out of the dusk between high shelf-stacks.

"How much is this?" I inquired, holding the volume up. "I want it."

"Hey?" He peered at me with bleared, half-blind eyes. "Hey?"

"I want to buy this book," I repeated. "How much do you ask for it?"

"This?" He took it in his clawlike hands, brought it so close to his face I thought he would bruise his nose. *"The Vanished?* Hm-m-m." He pondered the matter of price. Finally he came out with it. "Thirty-five cents."

"Little enough." I shoved my hand in my pocket, discovered I had no small change. "But you'll have to break a five for me," I said, taking my wallet from my breast-pocket. "That's the smallest I have."

"You're a lucky man," the bookseller

squeaked. "To have five dollars these days." His shrill, twittering laugh irritated me. I jerked the bill from the fold so hard that it brought out with it a card which fluttered to the floor.

The gray man took the greenback and shuffled off into the misty recesses beyond the shelving. I bent to retrieve the white card.

I didn't pick it up. I remained stooped, my fingers just touching it, my nostrils flaring once more to the scent of spring, the perfume of Evelyn Rand.

The sense of her presence was overpowering, but I knew, this time, that she was not near. The perfume came from that card on the floor, and the printed name on it was *Achronos Astaris.*

At last I knew where to look for Evelyn Rand.

CHAPTER IV

ADDRESS OF A MYSTERY

"HEY, here's your change." I straightened, thrusting the card into the side-pocket of my coat. "Keep it," I told the gray man, grinning. "And keep the book too, I don't need it any more." I laughed out loud as I strode out of that musty store.

My exuberance didn't last long. The thing that dampened it was my sudden realization that I didn't know where Cobblen Street was, had no idea of how to get there. I was born on West Eighty-third Street and have lived in New York all my life, but Brooklyn is an unknown world to me as it is to most other Manhattanites. I always get lost when I cross the river.

I hate to ask directions. It seems to be a confession of incompetence. But I had to if I wanted to get out to 419 Cobblen Street. So when I caught sight of a policeman standing on the corner, I approached him with my question.

"Cobblen Street," he growled. "Never heard of it."

"It's in Brooklyn," I suggested.

"Oh! Brooklyn." Then we went through a procedure that seemed to me interminable. The cop got out his little red book and, after some stumbling, finally discovered Cobblen Street. Several moments later he located the number and read aloud a complicated series of directions involving the El, the subway and eventually a ferry. I clung to the subway instructions, a little dazed.

"Does that mean the station is four blocks west of Cobblen Street," I asked, "or that I walk four blocks west from the station?"

He took off his cap and scratched his head. Then he got a sudden inspiration. "Wait! I'll look in the front of the book."

I stopped him hurriedly. "Thanks for your trouble, but if it's as complicated as all that I'd better take a taxi."

I hailed one, gave the driver the address and climbed in. For the first time that day I felt like smoking. I got my pipe out, tamped its bowl with the mixture that after much experimentation I've found suits me exactly, puffed flame into it.

The bit was comfortable between my teeth, and the smoke was soothing. I became aware of how very tired I was. I moved over into a corner and leaned back, stretching my legs diagonally. I am well over average height and am invariably cramped in any kind of vehicle.

The change in my position brought my face into the rear-view mirror. There are two things that irk me about that physiognomy of mine. It is unconscionably young looking in spite of the staid and serious mien I assume when I can remember to do so. I'm sure Miss Carter, or "Persimmon Puss" as the irreverent office boys refer to P. A. Sturdevant's secretary, considers my youthful appearance ill-suited to the dignity of Sturdevant, Hamlin, Hamlin and Sturdevant. Then too, my nose is slightly thickened, midway of the bridge, and there is a semicircular scar on my left cheek, mementoes of encounters with football cleats in my unregenerate days.

Otherwise my appearance is not really

revolting. I have a thick shock of hair, a rather ruddy brown in color, eyes that almost match it in hue, and a squarish jaw which I like to think is strong and determined. I'll never take any beauty contests, but neither do I generally frighten people in the street.

We were on Fourth Avenue now for a few blocks, and then on Lafayette Street. Tombs Prison lifted its dingy bulk to my left, was succeeded by the white granite of the monumental structures surrounding Foley Square. The Municipal Building straddled Chambers Street like a modern Colossus of Rhodes and then the blare and hurly-burly of City Hall Park was raucous in my ears.

A truckdriver disputed the right of way with my cabby. "Where the hell do yeh t'ink yer goin'?" he wanted to know.

Where *did* I think I was going? Why did I think I was going toward Evelyn Rand, when all the evidence I had of any connection between her and this Achronos Astaris was the faint hint of her perfume on his card? The card might never even have been near Cobblen Street. Hundreds of them must have been inserted between the leaves of the art gallery's catalogues, and that probably had been done at the printers. If the scent did cling only to this single one, it still might have been touched by her at some place Astaris never had even heard of.

Pessimism, a conviction that I was on a fool's errand, replaced the buoyant confidence with which I'd started out. That scent of spring and dreams had made me so sure that I was on the track at last; maybe it would restore my confidence.

I fished out the card, lifted it to my nostrils. All I smelled was paper and ink.

THE fragrance had not, then, come from this bit of pasteboard. But it had been there, without question, in the street outside that bookstore and inside it. . . .

I had made a fool of myself. Just before I entered it, Evelyn had been in that store! I had missed her by seconds. I was running away from her, not toward her.

I grabbed the sill of the narrow window before me. "Turn around!" I ordered. "Turn around and go back to where we came from!"

"Nix, fella," the cabby grunted. "It's ten days suspension or my license if I turn here on th' bridge."

He was right. We were on the bridge and the traffic regulation is rigidly enforced there. We would have to go on to the Plaza at the Brooklyn end, and then return.

"All right," I said.

That was the longest, most chafing mile I have ever ridden. The noon rush was beginning and the roadway was jammed. But finally the taxi circled the curve of the open space where the bridge ends, and slowed. "Well," the hackman grunted to his windshield. "You change your mind again, or is it go back?"

I opened my mouth to tell him, "Back, of course," but the words died on my lips. He'd jerked around, his swarthy face startled.

"Boy!" he exclaimed. "The way you said 'Go on!' I t'ought you'd picked up a dame!" He turned again and the cab wheeled out of the Plaza, running down a narrow street in the direction of a traffic arrow that had painted on it, *To Borough Hall.*

The taxi's sudden burst of speed threw me back against the leather seat. I stayed like that, my teeth biting into the bit of my pipe.

Who was it that had spoken to the taxi-driver, telling him to go on to Cobblen Street?

Abruptly I chuckled. I had recalled a similar experience told me by a friend, and I had the answer. Some woman in a car passing alongside of my cab had said "Go on," to her own driver. Just the right cant of the other auto's windshield, perhaps aided by a puff of breeze, had carried her voice to my hackman's ear. Listening for a reply to his query, he had thought the words had come from within his own vehicle.

The explanation was simple and plaus-

ible and it satisfied me. It was with no sense of yielding to some guidance outside my own will that I decided to continue on and interview the oddly named Achronos Astaris. I still clung, rather hopelessly, to my first notion that he might have something to do with Evelyn Rand, and so much time had now elapsed that an hour's more delay in returning to the Madison Avenue bookstore would make no difference.

Just as I came to this conclusion there was a mild *fft* from somewhere beneath me and a violent verbal explosion from the cabby. He veered the car to the curb and braked it, still luridly sounding off.

He ran out of breath at last, and subsided from oral eruption to more purposeful action, the first step of which was to reach over and snap up his flag.

"I got a flat, buddy," he informed me, quite unnecessarily, as he heaved out of his seat. "Take me five-six minutes to fix. That's Borough Hall ahead there. Mebbe if you'd ask a couple guys where this Cobblen Street is while I'm workin' it'll save time."

"I've got a better idea," I said. "I'll pay you off now and walk the rest of the way. According to the cop's book it's only four blocks from here." I paid him his fare and alighted.

ASKING questions was one thing, getting informative replies another. In turn a newstand attendant, a brother attorney hurrying, briefcase in hand, toward the nearby courthouse, and a bearded derelict standing hopefully beside a little portable shine-box, shrugged doubtful shoulders and looked blank. Finally, I approached a policeman with some trepidation. If he produced a little red booklet—

But he didn't. "Cobblen Street," he said. "That's over on the edge of Brooklyn Heights. Cross this here street and go past that there corner cigarstore and keep going and you'll walk right into it."

I heaved a sigh of relief—but relief was premature. My brisk pace slowed as I found myself in a maze of narrow, decorous streets labeled with such curious names as Orange, Cranberry, Pineapple. I entered a still narrower one called College Place and brought up facing a blank wall that forbade further progress. I extricated myself from that *cul-de-sac,* walked a little further and halted.

I had lost all sense of direction.

From not far off came the growl of city traffic, the honk of horns, the busy hum of urban life, but all of it seemed oddly alien to this street of low, gray-facaded houses with high stone stoops and windows shuttered against prying eyes. Years and the weather had spread over them a dark patina of age, yet there was about them a timeless quality, an aloofness from the flow of events, from the small affairs of the men and women whom they sheltered. The houses seemed to possess the street, so utterly that no one moved along the narrow sidewalks or appeared at the blinded windows, or let his voice be heard.

I was strangely alone in the heart of the city, strangely cloistered in drowsy quiet.

Into that quiet there came a low sonorous hoot, swelling till the air was vibrant with it, then fading away. The sound came again, and I knew what it was. A steamboat whistle. I recalled that we had not come far from the Bridge, that the East River must be very near. And I recalled, too, that the policeman had said that Cobblen Street was on the edge of Brooklyn Heights. It would overlook the river, then, and that whistle should give me the direction.

Then I spotted a drugstore on the corner, and headed for it. I'd get straightened out there.

The shop was small, low-ceiled, the shelving and showcases painted white and very clean. There was no soda fountain. Glass vases filled with colored water, red and green, stood at either end of a high, mirrored partition.

From behind this came the clink of a pestle in a wedgewood mortar. The sound continued when I cleared my throat, loudly, but a tall, stooped man in a white

coat came out through a curtained doorway, tugging at one drooping wing of a pair of walrus mustaches. He blinked genially at me through thick, silver-framed eyeglasses.

"Warm isn't it?"

"Very warm." I agreed, fumbling in my pocket for Astaris' card. "I hate to disturb you just to ask directions, but I've been wandering around this Brooklyn of yours till I'm nearly crazy. I'm looking for Cobblen Street. Four—" I read the number printed on the pasteboard. "Four-nineteen."

The druggist followed the direction of my gaze, and then he looked into my face, the smile gone from his. "Plum Street"—he gestured to his entrance—"runs into Cobblen, but"—he paused uncertainly—"but are you sure you want that number?"

"Of course," I answered, a bit puzzled by the change in his manner. "It's right here, on this card." I held it out to him.

He made no move to take it, or even to look at it. "Listen, old man." His hand was on my arm, solicitously. "Cobblen Street is very long and there might be an easier way for you to get to where you want to go than along Plum. Sit down here a minute," he led me to a bentwood chair in front of a showcase, "while I go in back and look up just where four-nineteen is."

I couldn't quite make him out, but he was being so decent to me that I couldn't argue with him. I sat down and watched him hurry back behind the partition to consult, as I supposed, another one of those little red guidebooks.

I was mistaken. I have exceptionally keen hearing and so I caught from behind that mirrored wall, something which I definitely wasn't supposed to hear. The pharmacist's whisper, suddenly excited: "Tom! Grab that 'phone and dial Dr. Pierce. I think that fellow out there is the patient that got away from his asylum last night."

Another whisper came back: "How do you figure that?"

"He just asked me for four-nineteen Cobblen. Four-nineteen, mind you. And he showed me what he said was a card with that number on it. But there wasn't any card in his hand. There was nothing in it at all."

"Maybe he is that nut," I heard the other whisper respond. "You go back out there and keep him talking and I'll get Pierce's keepers over here. Here, you'd better take this gun along in case he gets violent."

That got me up out of the chair and out of that store in a rush. I was a block away before I slowed and stopped.

NO CARD, huh, I thought. It was the druggist who was crazy, and not I. The card was still in my hand. I could see it, feel it, read the name and address on it. I had found it in the catalogue of the exhibit.

Then I realized that I didn't *know* I'd found it there. I'd decided that the card had been between the pages of that pamphlet because otherwise I would have had to believe that it had been handed to me during a space of time that occupied no time at all, by a man who did not exist.

But if the card itself did not exist?

Here it was between my thumb and fingers, white, crisp, unquestionable. Even if the mustached pharmacist hadn't seen it, others had. The gray bookseller. The policeman on Madison Avenue.

Hay they? I had dropped it in the bookstore, had bent to pick it up, but the near-sighted dealer had said and done nothing to indicate that he was aware of what I reached for. Nor, I now recalled, had I shown it to the cop.

What if I had not? The card was real, couldn't be anything else but real. I had been meant to hear the druggist's whisper, saying that it was not. It was his perverted idea of a joke. The best thing to do about the incident was to forget it.

A sign projecting from a streetlamp told me I was on Plum Street. The sound of a steamboat whistle gave me the direction of the river. I got moving again.

This street was as deserted as those through which I had come. Yet I had an uneasy feeling that I was not alone in it, that someone was keeping ahead of me, just ahead, although I could see no one. Once I caught a flutter of blue, of a misty blue like the sky when it is brushed across with cloud. It was as if I had glimpsed something out of the corner of my eye, except that it was not to one side but before me.

The long block started to slope upward, curving. I went around the curve and ahead of me a vista opened.

The sidewalk climbed quite steeply to its end, about a hundred yards farther. Beyond was brightness, the brightness of the sky over water and, apparently suspended in that brightness, there was a white and gleaming mass, breathtakingly beautiful.

Stone and steel and glass, the gargantuan towers were gathered into a giants' city to which one must climb on some incredible beanstalk. Each separate structure was distinct, yet all merged together in a jagged pyramid that soared high and ever higher till its topmost pinnacle seemed about to impale the sun.

Manhattan's skyscrapers these were, challenging the heavens.

After awhile my gaze drifted downward to the base of that enormous pyramid, to the swirling, cloudlike haze that had obscured the foundations of the skyscrapers and made them seem to hang unsupported in midair. Odd, I was thinking, that so late in the day the mists should be still heavy on the Bay. But the obscurity was neither cloud nor mist, and it did not lie over the confluence of the Hudson and the East River. It was on the nearer shore.

What I had thought to be cloud was a low building toward which Plum Street ascended and against which it ended, a low, gable-roofed wooden house with a little green lawn in front of it. A gravel path went through the lawn to an oaken door that made a dark rectangle in the white, clapboard facade.

I halted at the end of the sidewalk. It came to the forefront of my mind that while my eyes had been lifted to the skyscrapers they had vaguely caught movement there ahead. Someone had gone up that path and through that door. That someone must be the same evanescent individual who had gone up Plum Street just ahead of me. Too bad, I thought, that I had just missed seeing her.

It did not seem strange, then, that I should be so sure there *had* been someone ahead of me, though I had seen or heard nothing substantial to tell me so.

It seemed no stranger than the presence of the gabled frame house here in the heart of New York. One comes upon just such relics of more gracious days in the most unlikely parts of Gotham. Mostly they are dilapidated, ramshackle, mouldering to ruins. This one, while it had a flavor of antiquity about it, was perfectly preserved—the pickets of the wrought-iron fence around its little lawn erect and unscarred by rust, its windows washed and gleaming, though darkened by blinds pulled down behind their panes.

From the center of the long roof a small, domed cupola rose. Around this ran a narrow, railed balcony.

Something of my school-days' history returned to me. I wondered if George Washington had not perhaps stood on that balcony, spyglass to eye, watching General Gates' redcoats filing into the rowboats that would bring them across the River for the Battle of Brooklyn Heights. Perhaps this building had been his headquarters during that momentous encounter. That would explain its preservation.

On either side of it was a four-storied, graystone house, each the beginning of a long row of similar ones. In front of the house on my left stood a tall lamp standard bearing a street sign, white letters on a blue background. I could read those letters from where I stood.

They formed the words, *Cobblen Street.*

On the third step of the high stoop behind that lamppost was painted a number—415. I looked at the stoop of the stone house to the right of the wooden one

and read, 423. I looked to make sure.

The low house, with its little lawn and its balconied cupola, was 419 Cobblen Street!

CHAPTER V

ACHRONOS ASTARIS

AS I went across to the house some errant breeze lifted a whirl of dust from the asphalt. It accompanied me across the opposite sidewalk and through the gate in the tall fence of hand-wrought iron. It whispered about me as I went up the path, and though I felt the gravel underfoot there was no sound in the hush except the soft hiss of the tiny, impalpable maelstrom.

The high portal, darkened by the years to the tone of old leather, opened smoothly, silently before me. Quite without hesitation, almost as though I were no longer master of my own movements, I stepped through the aperture into cool dimness.

The door thudded dully behind me. It shut out the city's low murmur, so familiar that I had not been aware of it till now it was gone. It was as if a barrier had come between me and the world I knew.

Passing from the bright winter sunshine to this semi-darkness, I was temporarily blinded. I halted, a bit bemused, waiting for sight to be restored.

I could make out no detail of the place. I could see only a gray, featureless blur. But I had an impression of spaciousness—of space itself. Of a vast, limitless space that could not possibly be confined within the four walls of a house, or within the four points of the compass.

Abruptly my thigh muscles were quivering and the nausea of vertigo was twisting within me. I seemed to be on the brink of a bottomless chasm. If I took another step I would hurtle down, forever down. The impulse seized me to take that step, to throw myself, plummeting, into that abyss—

Hold it! I told myself, voicelessly. Get a grip on yourself. This is only the hall of an old house. In a moment your pupils will adjust themselves and you will see it—walls papered with the weeping-willow design you've always liked, hooked rugs on a floor of adze-hewn planks, perhaps a graceful balustrated staircase . . .

Subconsciously I must already have been aware of all this, for the very foyer I described took shape now out of the formless blur. The design I remembered from the Early American exhibit of the Metropolitan Museum patterned the faded walls. Wide planks formed the floor, rutted with decades of treading feet and keyed together by tiny double wedges of wood, their dull sheen brightened by oval rugs whose colors were still glowing despite the years since patient hands had fashioned them. Directly ahead of me the wide staircase rose gently curving to obscurity above, its dark rails tenuous and graceful.

"Well," I said, turning to the person who had admitted me. "This is—" I never finished the sentence.

No one was there—no one at all.

Someone had opened the door for me, and no one had passed me, going away from it. But of course—whoever it was had slipped out as I entered. Was Brooklyn inhabited exclusively by practical jokers? This one wasn't going to get away with it. He couldn't have gone far. I grabbed the doorknob, determined to go after him.

The door didn't open. It was locked; I was locked in! That was going too far, much too far. I—

A silken rustle behind me twisted me around. I started to speak—my mouth remained open, the angry words dying unspoken.

DOWN the stairs from above were coming tiny feet, a froth of lace that could only be the hems of the multitudinous petticoats which women wore in the days when this house was built. The filmy blue of a wide hoopskirt descended into view, a pointed bodice tight

on a waist that my one hand could span.

I shook my head, trying to shake the cobwebs out of it. What the devil was this?

The crinolined maiden paused on the stairs, a slim white hand to her startled bosom. For a moment the shadow of the ceiling was across her face, and then I saw it, somehow luminous against the dark background of the stairs.

It was the face of Evelyn Rand. The soft red mouth was tight with pain, the gray eyes peering down at me haunted with a strange dread; but it was the face that had looked out from the portrait on Madison Avenue.

"Evelyn!" I cried, leaping forward. My feet struck the bottom step, pounding upward—and were suddenly motionless.

She wasn't there any longer. She wasn't above me on the stairs. She hadn't retreated, startled by my cry. She had blinked out, in the instant it had taken me to get across the floor and three steps up. But something was left of her. A faint sweetness on the air—the scent of spring, the scent of dreams.

Of dreams. Had I only dreamed that I saw her?

"Not quite," a low, toneless voice said behind me. "She was not there, but neither did you dream that she was."

I wheeled, my breath caught in my throat.

Just below me, a shaft of vagrant light gleaming on the polished scalp of his too-large head, his lashless, disquieting eyes pinpoints of flame in the gloom, was the little man of the art gallery.

But that could not be. He was a figment of my imagination, an illusion that had appeared and vanished between two strokes of a clock. My fingers dug into the rail they had grasped to aid me up the stairs. That at least was firm and hard. That at least was real.

"Less real than I," said the little man who twice had apparently materialized out of nothingness. "That staircase exists only in accord with your concept of it, as do the walls about us and the floor on which we stand."

I had not spoken aloud the thought to which he thus responded. Was he reading my mind?

"A crude way of phrasing it," he answered. "But you could not comprehend the reality."

He was laughing at me, though that round face of his with its strangely artificial skin was still as a modeled mask. He was—wait! I made a last attempt to cling to the explicable. I was in that dream again, that confounded dream. What I thought I heard him say was merely the reply of one part of my brain to the thoughts of another. I was imagining the odd being as I had imagined Evelyn Rand—

"Wrong. It was I who projected her before you. I wanted to check your reaction to the sight of her, to ascertain if it would correspond with what I had already observed, if it were constant or a sporadic aberration."

I could not have dreamed those words, for I had not the least idea of what they meant. I was beginning to be afraid. . . .

"The hell you say," I flung at him to conceal my growing fear. "What am I, some kind of guinea pig you're experimenting with?"

A faint, mocking smile brushed his fleshless lips. Or did it?

"Exactly," he murmured.

That enraged me. "Experiment with this," I yelled, and leaped down at him, my fist flailing straight for his round, unhuman face.

My fist whizzed through empty air. My feet pounded on the floor. The little man had vanished—

SOUND behind me whirled me around. The fellow was on the staircase, three steps up. He was exactly where I had been, an instant before. But how in the name of reason had he got there? He couldn't have passed me, he couldn't possibly have passed me. To get to where he was he would have had to go up the steps at the same time, by the same path, I had plunged down them.

"Matter *can* be in one place and then in another," he said in the slow, patient way of one explaining some complex idea to a child, "without ever having been anywhere between. Even you should know that. Or are you not acquainted with the observations on the behavior of electrons that already had been made in your time."

"In my time! What—?"

"The twentieth century, as you reckon it." I had the curious feeling that he was speaking of some period in the remote past. "I am certain our researches are correct on that point."

Mingled with my confused sense of wrongness about all this was a sort of baffled exasperation. Damn him! He was coldly amused by my bewilderment.

Yet no flicker of the muscles in his face, no changing light in his black and piercing eyes, revealed that to me. But I was as aware of his amusement as though he had laughed aloud.

Was I too, very dimly, beginning to learn to do without speech? Was I tapping some subtle current of communication that I had not even suspected to exist?

"Who are you?" I blurted out.

He was growing tired of this colloquy between us. "If you must think of me by a name, Achronos Astaris will do." He had stopped playing and was coming to the nub of his purpose with me.

"What, John March, is it that has impelled you to forget everything else in your desire to find Evelyn Rand? What is it that makes her a necessity to you, so that without her you are not complete? What is it that has made ambition, the anxiety for preferment, pride in the occupation you chose for your lifework, insignificant compared with the need you feel for her? What is it that draws you to her with a force greater than the attraction of gravity? What chemistry of the emotions has governed your actions since she became real to you?"

His dreadful, probing eyes demanded an answer. "I love her," I cried out. "God help me, I have fallen in love with her."

I had not known it till that moment, had not realized it. But it was true. I *was* in love with the girl for whom I had been searching so long, and never seen.

"*Ahhh,*" Achronos Astaris breathed. "I know that the *name* of your reaction to her is love." For the first time I sensed a wavering in the clear, cold surety of him. "But what, precisely, does that mean?"

I stared at him, anger once more mounting within me.

"It is puzzling," he mused. I wasn't certain whether I heard Astaris say that, or whether I was reading his thoughts. "There is more than a physical chemistry to the emotion, although that is one of the factors. Plainly there is an urge—"

"Damn you," I shouted. Again rage drove caution from my mind. Blindly I leaped forward—and jarred against nothingness! Against a wall invisible, immaterial, but impenetrable as though a screen of inch-thick armor plate had risen instantaneously in my path.

Still senseless and unreasoning in my anger, I clubbed at that unseeable barrier with my fists. There was no sound of impact, but at once my knuckles were bruised and bleeding. I kicked, snarling, at empty air and saw the toes of my shoes buckle and split against nothing I could see. Exhausted, I shoved my palms against the wall and felt perdurable nothingness that was warm as though it were composed of animate flesh, that was vibrant, somehow, with a queer kind of life, but impenetrable as granite. I backed up and lunged at it shoulder first, and was stopped dead, seemingly in midair.

AT LAST I was aware of Achronos Astaris watching me with a cold, mildly interested detachment, as some scientist might watch a Siamese fighting fish batter its nose against glass of its aquarium.

When I gave up finally and hung, panting and weak, against the invisible partition, he sighed. "You learned quite quickly. There is a definite improvement in five hundred years."

I stared at him, too choked by anger to speak.

Inexplicably, though Astaris was still clear and distinct, the staircase, the ceiling and the walls had faded again into the gray, shapeless blur out of which they had formed. I glanced down, terror rising in me now. There was only grayness beneath me. I twisted around. Nothing was behind me but a gray vacancy. I was enclosed by it, suspended in it. Once more the great fear of height possessed me, the heartstopping realization of an unfathomable abyss into which I must plunge when Achronos Astaris released me.

For, wheeling again, I had found his eyes upon me, pinpoints of black flame, and I knew that only his eyes held me where I was. There was an impalpable Force in those eyes that reached through the strange barrier I had struck and embraced me.

And those eyes were not only holding me there, suspended. They were dissecting me, probing far deeper than my flesh, into my spirit itself. Like lancets they bared the hidden psyche, searching—searching for something that was there but which they could not find.

Wrath they found, and quivering fear, and an awed bewilderment transcending fear, but not the thing they sought. Gradually they faltered, at a loss. And then I was aware that Astaris had given up his search, that he was sending a message out into the boundless ether, that he was waiting for a reply.

I do not understand even yet, how I knew all this. I know only that for a little while I had the power, and that I was soon to lose it. At the moment I write these lines I would give all my hope of salvation if I could regain it.

"No," the answer came. Not a voice. Not sound at all. Naked thought from an infinite distance. "Send him to us, but you must remain yet awhile."

Astaris did not like that. I was aware that he did not, but I was aware also that he would submit. And abruptly my baffled fear flared into terror.

For now Astaris' eyes released me! Astaris himself was obliterated by the sudden motion of the grayness; it swirled about me, a dizzy darkness.

Yet it was not darkness; rather an absence of form, of color, of reality itself. I was falling through nothingness. I was caught up in some vast maelstrom and whirling through some spaceless, timeless non-existence altogether beyond experience. I was rushing headlong through distances beyond comprehension, yet I knew myself to be completely motionless. The Universe had fallen away from me, was somewhere behind me, light-centuries behind me. I was beyond life. I was beyond death. I was beyond being itself.

And all about me was the soft, voiceless whisper of swirling dust.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

There Are Smiles That Make You Happy

A Complete Novelet

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Man Who Hated Lincoln," "Frivolous Sal," etc.

Oh, the minstrel boy to the wars has gone—but no battle could kill the flash of his grin or the song on his lips. Not until, ghostlike, he returned to Four Corners did tragedy wrap its arms around him . . .

I

AND you remember the rest of the song—"There are smiles that make you blue"? And how people whistled it, sang it, thumped it out of parlor pianos until you got to hate the thing? Well, it's funny how some song can call up the past; recreate a time in one's childhood, a mood of Yesterday, the names and faces of long unthought-of people.

We were playing a game the other night—someone whistles a tune, and you blurt out whatever it reminds you of. They call it Associative Remembering. Someone whistled *Smiles,* and I had to leave the party. For nobody ever got to hate that song as much as I did.

Smiles—that was Mary Farwell, my cousin eight years older than I; I worshipped her as any small boy can worship a beautiful and quite unattainable lady of nineteen.

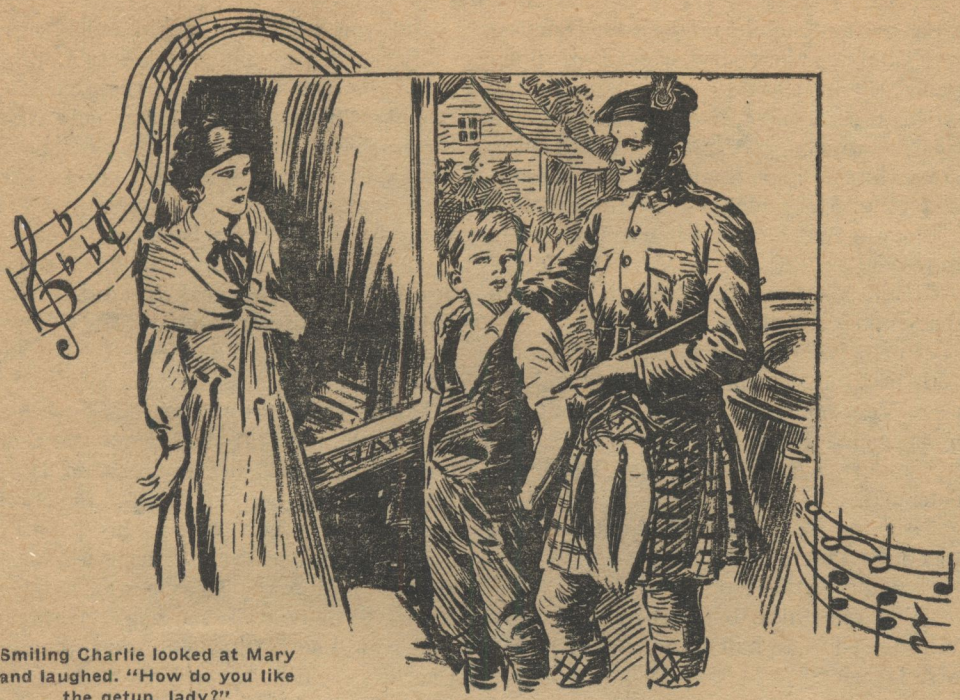
Teeth—and I see the grin of Charlie Knight ("Smiling" Charlie Knight on the billboards), the flashing, helluva-fella grin, gaudy as gold and the showmanship of minstrelsy could make it.

Dentists—? Horace Danglers with the long-chinned face and thoughtful eyes, well-caricatured by the nickname, "Horse." The deft, pale hands that were quick as a surgeon's, delving among his shiny instruments for steel pick or needle to fit the buzzing drill. He had a smile, also. Professional. Flat-lipped. The "it-won't-hurt-much" kind of smile.

No, I don't like that song, for those are the people it reminds me of—my Cousin Mary Farwell, Smiling Charlie Knight and Horse Danglers, village dentist—and the strange disappearance of one of them, and my own small part in that dark Four Corners mystery . . . .

IT BEGAN on one November night when I started reluctantly down Main Street to "get my teeth fixed"; but before that it had its roots in the past, as deep-buried as the nerves beneath my twinging molar.

Ours was a one-street village, and the history of its people could be reviewed as a passing show which had left its shadow-record along this thoroughfare. Our lives were lived on Main Street; beginning, likely as not, in Doc Trosch's little bungalow hospital down by the river; climbing the hill past Clapp's store and Post Office and No. 1 School and Miller's Tavern; taking on ceremony at Public Square, Town Hall and First Church;



Smiling Charlie looked at Mary and laughed. "How do you like the getup, lady?"

bustling by the shops and more imposing mansions of "upper Main"; then a doleful pause in Theodore Seymore's Undertaking Parlor, and journey's end in the cemetery up on Blueberry Hill.

On Main Street we played our games, courted our girls, married our women, or marched, as in the days of '61 and '98 and 1917, off to war. And on Main Street were my earliest memories of my Cousin Mary and Smiling Charlie Knight and Dentist Danglers; but that night Past and Present were obscured in a blizzard of heavy, wet snow.

Have you forgotten the darkness of November nights in country towns? Nine o'clock, it was, and Four Corners snugly indoors against the weather; windows shuttered and doorways dark; Main Street deserted, ankle-deep in gray slush, its street lamps wigged with snow, storefronts dim behind blowing, silent curtains of white flakes.

I can see a twelve-year-old boy, muffled in flannel choker, mittens and galoshes, moping out of Maple Street into Main, weighted with wet snow and a sense of injustice. Long as the Lord gave you teeth, why not ones that didn't ache? And if you had to have 'em filled, why wouldn't your father let you have gold ones like Smilin' Charlie Knight's? Why'd there have to be dentists, anyway—ones like Horse Danglers who smiled, "It won't hurt much!" then just about killed you with his shiny gadgets?

Corner of Main and Locust, I stalled to throw a snowball at Elmira Johns's cat, and it vanished into the shrubbery under my Cousin Mary's front porch. I knew that shrubbery, and I knew that porch; how many times, I had paused in that boscage of lilacs to spy enviously on my elders in the honeysuckle-shadowed hammock above—Cousin Mary pink-cheeked over a box of candy; Danglers, prim with his derby on his knees; Smiling Charlie singing the Broadway "latest" and doing wonderful things with a mandolin. But that had been before the War; the song in those days was *Alexander's Ragtime Band;* Smiling Charlie used to come to town in

a big red automobile; and Horse Danglers was studying dentistry instead of practicing it. Sometimes I'd go right up on the porch to get a piece of candy, and Smiling Charlie always gave me a nickel. Once, after Horse Danglers and Smiling Charlie had gone, Mary took me by the ear.

"Now, Bud," she admonished, "why were you so impolite to Mr. Danglers?"

"Him? That *den*-tist?" All my scorn in the emphasized word.

"But if you're going to sit on the porch with us, Bud, you must be polite and not rude. You know Mr. Danglers doesn't like to be called Horse."

"Smiling Charlie calls him Horse," I defended.

"But they're old friends. Went to school together. You're just a boy—"

"I ain't just a boy!"

"You were nice to Charl—Mr. Knight. Why do you like him so much better than Mr. Danglers?"

AS if there were any choice! Between Horace with his awls and picks and drills, and Charlie, jovial, gold-grinning, full of jokes and laughter and talk about theaters and Honeyboy Evans and the Gay White Way. As if there was any choice at all between a dentist and a minstrel!

"Well, why do *you* like him better, Mary?"

I can see her, hot-eyed, blushing, pushing back her hair in quick indignation. "That big, grinning, worthless—! Now Bud Whittier, how can you say such a thing? As if I'd ever have to stop to choose between a minstrel and a dentist!"

Funny—that was the way Four Corners had thought about it, too. I'd heard Elmira Johns, down at the Post Office, say, "As if a nice girl would even hesitate! 'Tween a man who's left th' farm he inherited to go galavantin' around th' country in shows, not to add he drinks too much, an' them flashy gold teeth an' all. An' a boy who's goin' through school an' savin' up his money to set up shop, respectable, in a good honest perfession."

But you can't fool a kid much, especially when a woman does hesitate. Right up to the last. Right up to the time when Smiling Charlie went off and enlisted in the Canadian kilties, and all the time he was in France and she didn't hear a word from him. And even after the Armistice when he didn't come back and even the Canadian officials, were saying he was dead. "I don't believe he's dead," Mary Farwell told everybody. "They never found the body, did they? I know he isn't!"

Right there in those bushes where Elmira Johns's cat had gone—in those bushes, I'd heard her say that to Horse Danglers. He'd been up there on the porch, and he had a gold ring in his hand. "I don't like to believe old Charlie's dead, either," he'd said. "Charlie was my best friend. But I've waited a long time, Mary. And you know what you said the day Charlie's regiment came back to Montreal without him. If there's no word from him in a year—"

Why, I reflected grimly, hadn't Horace Danglers gone off to war and not come back, instead? Even when the United States got in it, Horace didn't go. The Lickette boys went, and Tod Donaghue, Spinny Sailor, Jed Rambow and Andrew Dobbs. Young Billy Clapp was killed in the navy, and Twin Lickette came back with one arm. But there was something about doctors and such being needed in the community; Danglers told everybody he wanted to go, but he stayed home organizing the Boy Scouts and the Home Guard. And now he was opening up a bigger dental parlor and installing a new chair, and tonight he was down there waiting for me. Mary's house was dark and the porch and lilacs were covered with snow, and I couldn't even stop in for the solace of a piece of candy.

I went on gloomily, impelled by my father's stern, "Don't be late!", an even sterner twinge from my tooth, and gloomier for contrasting memories of Smiling Charlie. How his big red car had used to dash up Main Street, unexpected as a

fire cart. How he used to walk up the pavement, hands in pockets, straw hat on back of head, box of candy under arm, face red as sunburn, blue eyes twinkling. He could whistle through his teeth in a way that brought every boy in Four Corners tagging—and when he did the four gold ones blazed like suns.

"Hey, give us some chalk-lit, Charley!"

"Not a chance, kid! But here's a nickel!"

More likely a shower of nickels as he turned into Donaghue and Walker's Bar to dodge us, shouting, "You kids can't come in here! Hey! Look out for the swingin' doors!" From the curb we could see his legs, one foot on the brass rail. Hear his voice, "Set 'em up, Jake! Playin' Albany this week, an' just stopped back to see the old home town!" Jake Donaghue would boom, "Guess it ain't the *town* you come to see, eh, Smilin'?" Charlie would laugh, "I come to see Mary an' Horse, that's a fact. But before I one-two-three-skidoo, they're on me, boys!"

IT wasn't like that, now. It was dark in Donoghue and Walker's Bar, and the swinging doors had been padlocked. Snow swirled on the doorstep where Mary and Horse had stood one night with Charlie slumping between them; and Elmira Johns, coming on the rescue party, had looked straight in Mary's eye and snapped, "Lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine!"

That same night, later, after Horse had taken Smiling Charlie home, I came on Mary crying in her backyard swing. She didn't know I was there. "But they never did touch mine!" she was sobbing with her face in her hands. "They never did touch mine!"

People did and said strange, flourishy, theatric things back in those days—queerer still to the puzzled eyes and ears of a boy.

I did not know that, lacking radio and talkies, Four Corners had to make its own high drama; looking back, I can see its citizens, each playing a chosen part up to the hilt. Lives, otherwise dull, were inspired by local gossip, minor intrigue. Commonplace phrases were garnished with a rhetoric as flossy as Spencerian writing. A funeral was a funeral in those days; a wedding *was* a wedding!

They were getting ready for a wedding that blizzardy night when I trudged on my lonely way to the dentist's.

Lights gleamed softly in the colored-glass windows of First Church, and it was sort of like Christmas with a glimpse of girls and the ladies of the Sewing Circle decorating the altar with ferns and hanging garlands of paper flowers from the balcony.

So Mary was going to be married to Horace Danglers at last! What a great fuss everyone was making about it. Only last Sunday Minister Midden had announced the news in church, and *that* had caused a buzz. "Ain't it about time?" I'd heard Selma Barrows whisper. And Elmira Johns' harsh voice behind a hymn book, "Lucky to get Horace Danglers, you ask me, after all that flighty nonsense about Charlie Knight—"

It was going to be tomorrow night, I reflected bitterly, and then I'd have Horse Danglers for a cousin-in-law.

"Well, I ain't going," I said aloud to the snow. "I don't care if everyone in town is gonna go, or how big a supper they're gonna eat. I ain't goin' to see my cousin get married to any old dentist!"

Even so, I knew I'd be there, and I couldn't refrain from a quick look into the church to see the preparations. My sullen, snow-capped face in the vestry door must have startled Mary, all by herself in the little room, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Mary didn't look very happy for a bride on her wedding eve; she made a big show of hunting something in the vestry wardrobe when she saw me, but I could have sworn she'd been crying. "Go along with you, Bud. Tonight is for the girls—"

Yah, girls! I thought, kicking along in the slush. What'd my cousin have to go and marry this dentist for? Even if he

had saved a lot of money in the bank, like people said, and was what Elmira Johns and those women called "a good solid citizen." Having him for scout master was bad enough, without him being in the family.

I'd have taken Charlie Knight any day! Gave me a dollar the day he went off to War. I never would forget it, either; I was right there in front of Nicolson's Hardware Store with Mary when the big red car came roaring up Main Street. "Hey, look at Smilin' Charlie, back to town in his minstrel's costume!"

Charlie roared, "How d'you like the Scotch kilts, kid?" How white Mary's cheek had turned.

"Charlie, you've enlisted!"

And how his gold teeth had grinned. "Somebody's got to win this war! They sank another of our ships today. My show was playin' Montreal, an' I walked out an' joined the Canucks! Just got time to come back an' say g'by."

He took Mary and me for a ride, and then gave me a dollar and told me not to spend it all in one place. I never saw him after that; we read in the paper how his regiment went over; day before Armistice, he was reported missing. I wouldn't have cared if it had been Horse Danglers, though.

And now I was late—9:15 by the chime of Town Hall clock—and he'd charge me extra for the time, and I'd catch Hail Columbia from Father!

SO I hurried my steps through the blind November dark; soggy, wet and bitter. Only too soon, I was standing in the doorway under the big wooden tooth which advertised, *H. H. Danglers, Painless Dentist,* screwing up courage to go in. A green curtain was somber across the front window, as was usual when the dentist expected a client. And as usual, when I was the client, the place looked like Theodore Seymore's Undertaking Parlor, and gave me the same sinking feeling. I had learned to dread a dark little hall with a medicinal smell, and an inner door through which you heard an ominous, gritty buzzing.

But that night the smell was different, unfamiliar; and to my surprise I heard music instead of buzzing. I listened and sniffed in astonishment. The smell I couldn't identify; but beyond the dreaded door a phonograph was going, cheerful as you please! *There are smiles that make you happy— There are smiles that make you blue— There are suh-smiles that fill your heart with gladness—*

Walking into that parlor, I got another surprise. Flooring torn up; boards and carpentry tools ranged along the wall; a lot of tiles heaped in a corner; at the back of the shop, Horse Danglers, in overalls, mixing cement in a wooden trough. For a second I stood paralyzed by the thought that this melange of carpentry, music and cement-mixing might refer to the filling of my tooth.

Then I saw a new chair in a packing crate, and I could concentrate my astonishment on the mahogany Victrola, playing merrily alongside. Surprising as was this phenomenon, the dentist, himself proved the greater wonder. Back turned, he hadn't noticed me; he went right on hoeing cement, and whistling. Whistling an accompaniment to the record—the first time I had ever heard that song, and the first time I had ever heard Horace whistle.

That scene and that tune—the dental parlor in hub-bub—the dentist in overalls, whistling and mixing cement—Victrola playing *Smiles*— Why, that night, Horace Danglers was cordial. Jovial! Actually smiling!

"Watch where you step, my lad. You're in luck tonight, eh? Well, I'll only keep you long enough to pack that cavity; want to get this new floor down by tomorrow morning, time to set up this new chair so's I'll be ready for business right after I get back from the' honeymoon. An' how do you like that music box, eh? Wedding present for Mary, see? You tell her about it, an' I'll extract every tooth in your head! But I guess you won't see Mary before th' weddin'."

Amazingly, he chatted on. Hummed, washing his hands at the tap. Told me to, "Put that swell record on again!" as he changed into a clean white coat. He was chuckling as he sorted through his tray of dental instruments; then, tilting me back in the chair, he sang snatches of *Smiles*, peering jovially into my mouth.

"Now then, I won't be a minute. Hurt? I'll take it easy. Say, when I set up that new chair an' get in th' new drill I'm buyin', why I just won't hurt you at all. Now, there— Now, *who—?*"

A car was coming. Faint through the muffling wet blizzard, a nearing drone mounting fast to an engine-roar. Then, squealing brakes. Splash of wheels skidding up to the curb. Someone opening the door out in the hall; shutting it, slam!

"Ow—!" I wailed. 'Ow-wow! Mr. Danglers, you're hurting meee—"

Hurting me? That steel awl must have gone through my molar to the roots. Head turned, Horse Danglers was staring at the door.

It had opened with a lurch, and a man was there, on the threshold, swaying, gloved hand clutching the doorknob to support uncertain knees. A spare, stooped figure in a shabby khaki overcoat, collar turned up, hat pulled down over the eyes.

I'll never forget it—the Victrola going into a final chorus, "There are smiles that make you happy—" and that man in the doorway opening his coat collar to give us a golden grin that seemed to fill the room.

"Horse, you old devil! Hey! and there's Bud. Well—huc!—what are you two staring for? Thinking you're seeing a ghost?"

But he might have been one, for the look of him, so frail and gray and whittled down. Almost as thin and round-shouldered as Horse Danglers, he was, and but for that firebrick complexion and golden smile, I swear I wouldn't have known him. I was aware of a familiar pungence, too, and older by two years since I'd seen him last, I recognized the symptoms. He was drunk as a Lord, but he was back! Smiling Charlie Knight was back!

II

"WELL, Hell's hinges! what's the matter with you two? Still think you're seeing a spook?" (What a one he must have been to Horace Danglers, booming at him with outstretched hand!) "Horse, you old bonecrusher, I'm glad to see you. In more ways than one—huc! I'd've gone to see Mary first, but I got a toothache that's slaying me. Been takin' some snorts on th' road—first I've had in months—but it dont' help a bit. Get it out for me, will you, old man?"

I suppose he didn't realize what a shock it was—out of the night—his returning like that! In the dental chair I sat with my mouth open. Horace stood like so much wood. All the blood had drained from his cheeks. His lips were the color of ashes. His voice was like ashes, too, whispering through the music of the gramophone.

"Charlie—! Smiling Charlie Knight—!"

"Sure, I'm no goblin! But I damn near was. There was this forest, and the Boche touched off a mine, and I lay six months in a French hospital, half dead, and then it took me five months more to remember who I was. Th' Frogs threw away th' rags they'd found me in, I reckon, an' th' smash must've blown off my identification tag. Got back to Canada yesterday, by Joe! an' I would've wired, but I thought I'd give the old hometown a surprise. Yank this tooth out, Horse, it's killing me! Then we'll go up to Mary's an' I'll tell you all about it!"

He slumped into a chair, breathing heavily and grinning, eyes delighted at Horse Danglers' consternation. I don't recall what happened to my own aching molar—Danglers must have packed it somehow or other—anyway, he was through with me abruptly, propelling me toward the door.

"But I wanta stay an' see Smiling Charlie!"

THAT night my arm was black and blue where the dentist's fingers had gripped. "You know I don't allow visitors

to watch while I'm working on a patient! You can see Charlie later!"

Charlie boomed, "Sure, kid. Wait for me outside! You can drive with me—huc! —up to Mary's."

Wait outside? I'd have waited for Smiling Charlie in an Arctic hurricane. At the same time I was bursting, dying to explode the news. Smiling Charlie was back, alive and back and I'd *seen* him! Hugging the snow-whipped doorway, I blew on my mittens and stamped my feet, more from excitement than cold. Wait till the village heard this story! What would *Mary* say? There, ghostly at the curb in its coating of ice and snow, was the big red Kissel Charlie'd come down in from Montreal; and Smiling Charlie was in town—liquored up like anything, and getting a tooth pulled!

Don't think I hadn't listened for a second at that inner door. In the dark little hall I had been electric-eared.

"All right, Charlie, climb in the chair," had come Danglers' husky words. "I'll get it out quick. Do you want to take gas?"

"Gas, my eye!" was Charlie's laugh. "Had all I want in th' war! Yank her out cold; I got enough Scotch in me to be chloroformed!"

And he had it pulled without gas, I could hear myself telling awed listeners. That would show them the sort of fellow Smiling Charlie was! I didn't hear any yelling, either. But it must have been quite a tooth, for it seemed to me I waited out in the snow a couple of years. With news like that, and nobody on Main Street to shout it to, I think I would have blown up like a bomb if they hadn't come out soon. As it was, Town Hall clock was just tolling ten when I heard footsteps in the hall, and Horse Danglers voice call out, "No, I won't go with you, Charlie, I got all this work to finish, and if I was you I'd go home to bed.

There was a muffled, "G'night, Horse!" and then that lurching, khaki coated figure came out into the snow.

So I was able to swear afterward that Smiling Charlie didn't seem like himself when he left the dental parlor. The War had reduced him to a shadow, his shoulders were stooped, coatcollar up to his ears, hatbrim down, and he kept a gloved hand tight over his mouth, as if the extraction had hurt him pretty bad. He must have drank all his whisky, by the reek, and he stumbled past me to the curb, hardly seeing me.

"Go home!" the mumble came through his fingers as his elbow brushed me aside. "Beat it, kid! Ain't going to Mary's! Bad tooth! Drunk! Gotta go f'r ride an' clear my head—!"

He was in the big car and away before I could cry out my disappointment, driving off through the blizzard, lickety-split, like a man hell-bent.

Crestfallen, but none the less bursting, I raced home to tell the news to Father. Father wasn't there. It was Minerva's night off, and there was only our old beagle, Mildred.

So I had to go to bed with my world-beating headline (as it turned out next day, Father had glimpsed Charlie's car roaring through the blizzard on its way out of the village) and when I woke up in the morning it was only to find Four Corners already seething with the news, and my scoop shouted down by even bigger headlines. Gone all night in the snowstorm, Charlie and his big red car had not come back!

NOW a man can leave New York City in a big red car and not come back, and who's to know the difference? But in a place like Four Corners! And that man a soldier thought dead in the War, only just returned like a man, as the village put it, "back from th' grave"!

Well, I was in the Post Office that noon, and people were talking about something besides stamps and letters. "It's scandalous, that's what it is!"— "Oh th' very night before th' weddin'!"— "Don't blame Horace fer lookin' queer; it musta been a shock!"— "Th' very idea, returnin' like that, an' then rushin' off drunk!"— "It's Mary that's lookin'

queer!"— "No, it's Horace that's worryin'. He asked Smilin' Charlie to be his best man, and he can't understand him not showin' up this mornin'. Horace says Charlie was lit to the gills an' must've had an accident!"

Such were the reports coming into the Post Office in much the same maner as today's news flashes report a crisis over the radio. Rumor shifted with every turn of Town Hall weather-vane. Charlie had piled up his car in the blizzard. Gone to Albany to buy a present. Raced up to Montreal to fetch his dress uniform. Maybe this. Maybe that. Nudgings and pointed stares.

But I gathered enough to know that Smiling Charlie's return had somehow upset the wedding; that his all-night disappearance had upset it even more; and that when four o'clock came around (the wedding was to be at five) and there was still no sign or word of Smiling Charlie, the absence of our Man-Who-Came-Back took on the aspect of a cloudy mystery.

I knew it was mysterious when I saw Father's face at lunch time. Father was sheriff of Four Corners, and he had one face when he was off duty, and another when he was on duty. He was wearing his "on duty" expression that noon, and I knew something was up.

Some men came in after lunch, and I heard Joe Miller, a deputy, say to Father, "It sure is funny."

Father said it sure was. And by six o'clock everybody knew why.

By six o'clock everybody in Four Corners knew that Smiling Charlie couldn't possibly have driven off to Albany or Montreal. In fact, by six o'clock everybody knew Smiling Charlie couldn't have driven *anywhere!*

Because in last night's blizzard the road west to Brockton had been blocked by two big trucks that had collided in a narrow culvert beyond Peterson's Bridge. Charlie wouldn't have been able to go that way; besides, Father, who had been on his way to the smash when he glimpsed Charlie's car, said the big red Kissel had been heading east.

But the east road had been closed since September for repairs. And the road south (Four Corners really having four corners) —the road south toward Albany was under construction, too, forcing a roundabout detour through Valley Spring where a bridge was flooded out. That left the road north to Canada, straight as a string, with only one sideroad—a wagon track leading into an abandoned quarry (and no-one familiar to the country would have turned in there)—but Father's deputy, Joe Miller, had been patrolling the road at the border, on the watch for bootleg trucks, and he said Charlie's car had not gone through.

But if Charlie hadn't left the Valley, what had happened to him? Why wasn't he back to be Horse Danglers' best man? By six o'clock everybody knew that the wedding was called off; that Horse Danglers, himself, had announced the postponement, and that, certain Charlie had been smashed up and killed, Horse was demanding that my father make an investigation, and offering to organize a search-party to hunt for Charlie.

III

THEY didn't find Smiling Charlie. That night, or the day afterward, or the day after that. Through mists of memory, I see search-parties tramping up the wintry roads—men and dogs combing snowy woods and fields—lanterns gleaming at night—people coming and going on Main Street, gathered in whispering groups, shaking their heads.

I remember Father telephoning. To Brockton, Montreal and Valley Spring. I recall a letter, too, on Father's rolltop desk, a big envelope important with Canadian stamps and seals.

The Canadian Government wanted Charlie, too, it seemed. He had not yet been officially mustered out of the Canadian Army; coming to Four Corners he had only been on forty-eight hours leave. There was something about immigration laws, discharge papers and hospital pensions, I heard Father telling Joe Miller. It was a

long letter, and Father (as seen through the keyhole) frowned over it a long time.

Charlie had been missing three days when that letter came, and that night there was a conference in Father's office. I remember the men crowding the smoke-wreathed room, mystified, shrugging their shoulders, spitting their tobacco in a baffled way.

Aminadab Coward, our village lawyer, was there; and Zebulon Drake, constable from Valley Spring; and Theodore Seymore, who always hovered, black-hatted and symbolic, on the verge of any trouble. Present, also, were a couple of state troopers from Brockton. Horse was expected, but he telephoned to say he was spending the evening with my Cousin Mary.

"Well, it's funnier by the minute," my father said to the men in his office that night. "Here's a man comes all the way back from oblivion in Europe, then he vanishes to Nowhere in his own home town. This letter from Canada says he should've reported back in Montreal. He ain't there. He ain't in Four Corners, either, and I wouldn't believe he'd been here at all, if I hadn't seen the car myself, and my kid was at the dentist's when Charlie walked in. Bud was there when Charlie drove off in th' storm."

"He drove off drunk," Aminidab Coward reminded us.

"Drunk or sober, all the roads out of town was blocked," Father snapped.

"Must've turned back somewhere an' come back to Four Corners," the constable from Valley Spring said.

"But he ain't *in* Four Corners," Father glared, "and there ain't no way he could've left th' Valley. If he was drunk an' had a smashup, where's the car? That snow all melted the next morning, so he wasn't in any drift. He didn't go across some field, because a big car like that would've bogged down in th' mud. He didn't drive into any woods, either; he'd have got jammed up in the timber. We've combed every roadside ditch an' thicket around here, and looked in a lot of barnyards, figurin' he might've pulled up in some old shed. It ain't the man disappearin' that's got me, it's what happened to that big red Kissel. It's gone just like it had melted with all that slush!"

"Look here, Sheriff," one of the troopers suggested, "this guy was drivin' plastered, you say. Then, how about th' river—?"

There were grave voices, then. Father's gravest of all.

"Where that bridge was out at Valley Spring, it's too shallow; you'd see the car. Anywhere else around here, he'd have had to drive off the road and head for the water, deliberate, and that don't make sense. Smiling Charlie come back to Four Corners to see Mary. Stopped off at Danglers—my kid can tell you—to have a tooth pulled. My kid waited outside, an' Charlie came out an' hopped into his car, sayin' he was goin' for a drive to sober up. Then that car of his vanishes, and him with it." Father's hand came down flat on his desk with a concluding thump. "Anyhow, all the ice we got now, we can't look till next March. But I'll tell you one thing—wherever Charlie's gone, this is a whole lot deeper than the river!"

DEEPER than the river! Yes, the mystery of Smiling Charlie's disappearance (and how prophetically he phrased it, Father never imagined at the time) was deeper than our valley stream.

December, with Charlie still missing, and Four Corners had a puzzle to make its citizens wonder.

A thing like that can take some odd local quirks; and one of the quirks that happened—that song *Smiles* was nipped in the bud. They were singing it in Brockton and our neighboring towns that winter, but our orchestra at Grange Hall played *When You Wore A Tulip* and other things. Strange about Yankees. Tactless as mules about some matters, they can be extraordinarily sensitive to others. That tune was supposed to remind Mary of Smiling Charlie Knight, and Horse Danglers had requested her friends not to sing it. "Till poor Charlie's disappearance is cleared up—!"

I would like to have had a dollar for every time Danglers used that phrase; by Christmas I would have been a millionaire. And another for the times he told the story of Charlie's return; how he pulled Charlie's tooth; what he said to Charlie and what Charlie said to him; how Charlie, coming in like a ghost, just went out afterward and drove off like one.

"If I'd had the least inkling! If I'd only known!" He would stop anybody he met on the street. "But I should've driven home with him. I shouldn't have let him drive off that night alone."

"Sure, Horse, we understand."

"He—he looked thin that night, but he seemed in good spirits. Said he'd been badly wounded, but was all right now, and he hadn't written he was coming back because he wanted to give me and Mary a surprise." Horse would wrinkle his forehead sadly. "The tooth came out fine. He was—well, somewhat under the influence when he left my parlor—the sheriff's boy can tell you—but not much worse than he used to be in that respect. If only I hadn't stayed to finish layin' that floor. You see, I had th' cement all mixed, place all torn up, an' I wanted to get those tiles down an' my new chair set up so that after th' honeymoon—"

"We understand, Horse. It's a shame, that's what."

"My best friend!" the dentist would groan. Here he might shade his voice to a toneless alto. "Y'know, what with th' car fading out like that—what with that big car vanishing, and th' sheriff saying he don't believe it went in th' river—sometimes I wonder if Charlie ever *was* in town—!"

It added a tinge of the occult that Four Corners savoured on wintry nights. After all, who had *seen* Smiling Charlie in our village. Nobody but his best friend and a twelve-year-old boy. Well, and if the sheriff had glimpsed the car, where *was* it? You can see how the villagers might begin the weaving of legend. The ghost of a man killed in France, coming back for a last look at the old home town! The skeleton on the eve of the feast, so to speak—the spectral suitor on hand to blight the wedding!

Well, it had blighted the wedding, sure enough; postponed from week to week, it had begun to look as if the ceremony would never take place. And that was another quirk: for as certain as Mary had been, as positive sure that Charlie was alive during all that time he'd been missing after the War, now she was equally certain that Charlie was the victim of some dreadful, hidden catastrophe, lying somewhere dead.

"You've got to find him!" I can hear her telling my father. "To think he came back, and I never saw him, not even to wish him a welcome home! I know something terrible has happened! I know it has! He came back alive, and he's somewhere near us now—but he's dead—dead!"

Horse Danglers would comfort her, "There's a chance, Mary, that maybe Charlie's all right. You remember he was always racin' off somewhere—going sudden, and never writing or anything. It does seem queer an' all, that there ain't no sign of th' car—but th' troopers are makin' a nationwide hunt for th' license plates—Charlie might've hid th' car a-purpose somewhere an' gone out of town on foot, and they'll find him after all—"

"Then until that time, Horace—until they find Charlie—I can't marry you—!"

WHAT a sensation that caused in the village.

"Of course I feel the same as Mary," Horace told them all. "Smiling Charlie was to've been best man. We're both upset about what could've happened to him—I'm advertisin' in the personal columns of th' New York newspapers, and offerin' a thousand dollars reward any trace. So until we find some word of him—"

Once more the wedding was off.

But that was a winter of sensations. We had, that winter, our first real taste of bootleggers, a load of gin hijacked on its way down from Canada. Joe Miller

was shot in a gun fight. Then some firebug touched off a number of deserted barns. And January thaw, somebody tampered with a grave in the Seventh Day Adventist's cemetery over near Brockton—the graveyard's lonely over there—a farmer surprised the thief at his work, and found a coffin half dug up. Ghouls! We hadn't had anything like that since an escapade of Old Isaac Easter's.

So the mystery of Smiling Charlie's vanishment was more or less crowded off the local front page, and I, who had enjoyed a considerable notoriety as a witness to his going, was sidelined into less spectacular routine. There were school and woodshed chores to be done; snowball fights and Boy Scout meetings, trapping in Blackberry Woods and skating on the lake in the abandoned quarry. As regards the last pursuit, I fell through a thin place in the ice where some fool had cut out a cake the night before and left the freeze-over unmarked. February and March I spent recovering from pneumonia.

Father, as can be imagined, was plenty busy. He had on his "on duty" face most of the time. "Between bootleggers, firebugs and a kid with pleural pneumonia," I heard him growl to Doc Trosch, "it seems like I haven't slept for three months. No trace of that ghoul at th' Adventist cemetery—what'd they want, fishing' into Old Man Williger's grave, anyhow?—an' as for Smiling Charlie Knight, it appears like he's gone from th' face of th' earth."

"Where do you think he might've gone, Sheriff?"

"I'd give a couple of dollars to know."

They were talking outside my bedroom door, and I sat up to listen when Doc Trosch spoke in an undertone, "Know the latest they're sayin' at the Post Office, Sheriff?"

Father grunted. "That Smilin' Charlie run off an' joined these bootleggers, an' that's how he sneaked across th' border? Bosh! These tongue-waggers around here will say anything. Another story Charlie's this firebug been touching off these empty barns. About as sensible as the one's he's a ghost and that the ghoul at Adventist Cemetery was only Charlie lookin' for a place to rest. Now where do you suppose these damfool rumors start?"

Fragments. That was all I heard in those snowbound, convalescent days. Father would come in looking tired and out of sorts, and I knew better than to badger him with questions. Minerva, our colored cook, was not without information, but it was often as colorful as she was, served with a garnish of dark superstition and flavored with spicy fancy. I did learn they hadn't caught the firebug yet, or accounted for the grave-robber yet, or found hide or hair of Smiling Charlie Knight. Minerva inclined toward the occult version. Mary, however, was still insisting Charlie was dead, and had taken to wearing Sunday black.

And folks dropping in to Danglers' Dental Parlor, to sit in the new chair and see the new tile floor, said Horace appeared ailing and couldn't keep his mind on his work. Extracted three of Gramma Dill's teeth that didn't need extracting; made Banker Barrows a set of false ones that clattered like china dishes in his mouth; gave somebody else an overdose of novocain.

Visitors would find him walking the floor of his dental parlor late at night. Folks sympathized, but were taking their dental work over to Brockton. Seemed like Smiling Charlie's disappearance, and Mary putting off the wedding till he was found, was driving Horse Danglers clean to distraction.

Why, only yesterday little Mortimer Jones had gone by the dentist's, unthinkingly whistling that song *Smiles,* and Danglers had rushed out to stop him, fit to be tied.

"Son,"—Father came in unexpectedly one night before I went to bed—"I want you to tell me over again exactly what happened in the dental parlor that night Smiling Charlie came back."

So I told him. How Charlie came in out of the snowstorm, and we thought he was a ghost. How Horse Danglers sent me out

while Charlie got a tooth pulled. How Charlie asked me to wait; then came out alone and drove off by himself in the blizzard.

"You heard Horse call out in th' hall, tell him to go home?"

"Horse said he had work to finish, Charlie better go home to bed."

"Horse didn't come to the door with him?"

"No."

"How'd Charlie look when he came out."

"He looked—he looked drunk," I said grudgingly, not wanting to be disloyal. "He—he just went past me mumbling. His collar was up an' his hat pulled down, like when he'd come in, an' he was stooped over like he didn't use to be. The pulled tooth musta hurt him, because he kep' his hand over his mouth. He told me to go home, an' he slammed into the car an' drove away."

"And you came straight home? You didn't see Danglers come out afterwards?"

"He stayed in to finish that cement he was mixin', I suppose. I didn't see him. I went straight home."

Father looked blue. He sat a while, staring glumly at the picture of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* above my bed—that picture of Washington in his cloak, and a rowboat surrounded by chunks of ice—then he said, "George!" suddenly, and stood up to go.

"What is it, Pop?"

"Eh? Nothing. Just thinking of George Washington."

"Pop," I asked, "do you think Cousin Mary an' Horse Danglers will ever get married—?"

He said, closing the door softly as he went out, "No."

IV

WELL, that was odd, because when I was on my feet and back in school again, I heard that Father expected Smiling Charlie would be found. "When the ice was out." That was how he put it. It got around, as those things do, and by the end of March, with the pussy willows blowing and the first hint of spring in the air, people were roaming along the riverbank, staring at the frozen surface and fumbling thoughtfully at their chins. Farmers stood in confab down at Appleby's Ice House—"Yes sir, it's th' only place that big red car could've disappeared to!"—and Lemuel Appleby took on the proportions of an authority.

"It'll break up late this year. Couple feet thick down near Valley Spring. I'm advisin' th' sheriff to hunt near Peterson's Bridge, though. Deep enough, there, an' a car could've gone in near th' bridge-head without leavin' tracks on th' concrete."

Twice I came on Mary, wrapped up in furs, a lonely figure standing at the bridge rail, gazing down at the ice, tragedy on her face. Another time Horse Danglers was with her, arm about her waist, consoling. Men were testing the ice with crowbars, and Theodore Seymore, gaunt and black, stood on the bank with a grappling hook.

Horse Danglers glared at the men as they gave up their attempt to probe the river bottom; the ice was still too thick.

"I don't believe it, Mary." He pressed her arm. "I can't believe Charlie—went in the river. When th' ice goes out—you'll see—"

When the ice goes out! Presently it was on every neighbor's tongue. Bootleggers, our uncaptured firebug, that ghoul at the Adventist's cemetery—everything else was forgotten. Waking early, farmers went to their windows to examine the weather. Thermometers sold out at Clapp's Store. Almanacs were consulted; augurs and oracles were studied; the groundhog was referred to. Daily the crowds gathered at Appleby's Ice House and Peterson's Bridge to stare at the river's winter integument, now showing signs of dissolution and covered in places with pools of water.

Then I woke up one morning to find Father gone, Tiger Brown whistling frantically under my window, and neighbors in the street shouting and running. "The

ice is out! The ice is out! They're goin' to find Smiling Charlie at last!"

Overnight the snow had gone from the lawn; I saw a crocus at the gate; and I raced through balmy sunshine all the way to the bridge where the bridge and the riverbank were tumultuous with crowding people. True, the ice jam had broken; glistening fragments like big panes of glass crackling and swirling downstream in the unleashed flood. It was the first of April, I remember, for I had been sure, on my dash through the village, that someone had started an April Fool.

And in a way, it was an April Fool.

For we didn't find Smiling Charlie and his car that day. Not at Peterson's Bridge or at Valley Spring, or in any of the swirling ox-bows or flooded fords where a car might have gone plunging in. Our river winds and bends in and around for at least three miles in Blue Valley. Also there are ponds and willow-mirroring lakes. And the ice never goes out all at once. There are pools where it lurks in shadow till as late as May, secretive waterholes where its wintry mask persists while the rest of our landscape wears an open face.

Besides, dragging for the drowned is an arduous, nerve-wearing, guess-and-try process. Rivers, ponds and lakes do not readily reveal their secrets. June came, with clouds and sky in the water instead of ice, and we were still looking. June, with the pastures deep in clover and the air like wine. June with the Boy Scouts on the trail, and boatmen dragging the river as far down as Valley Falls, in case the spring flood had carried "anything" down. June, the month of hearts and flowers and —customary to Four Corners—weddings.

BUT there was to be no wedding in Four Corners that June. Rumor that there might be one had taken a strange turn. You know how you can feel things in the air?

Well, all of the sudden there was something in the air about Horse Danglers—one of those mysterious whispers that spring up from nowhere like a breeze. That "maybe he knew more about Smiling Charlie than he'd told." That "there's something mighty queer about the way he treats people who stop in to say hello at his parlor." That "it's like he's trying deliberate to drive customers away." That "there's something dang odd about it all, an' Horse knows where Charlie went."

I didn't know where such whispers could have started, but I knew they were circulating. I could feel an undercurrent of hostility developing toward the dentist. I knew old neighbors nodded at him brusquely when he passed them with Mary on his way to church. I knew somebody at the Post Office said, "We oughta go up there to his parlor, an' question him, that's what."

Right out of a blue sky one June noon Minerva told me there'd been talk of a "delegation" the night before—something concerning Horse Danglers, she didn't know what—but Father wasn't to know about it, and (Minerva was scared) somebody had said to somebody, "It's time we took this whole thing out of th' sheriff's hands." Father had been gone all night over in Brockton and wasn't back yet, and Minerva was sure something was going to happen to Horse Danglers.

It gave me a queer little chill, because that afternoon Horse Danglers was taking our Scout troop on a hike. "We'll keep our eyes peeled, "he'd announced at our meeting the week before. "You boys are an important part of this hunt, and it's your duty to keep doing all you can."

I was a patrol leader and I had four merit badges. But I didn't want to go that afternoon.

Reluctantly I got out my Scout axe and knapsack, and went uneasily to call for Tiger Brown. Tige's mother came to the door and said he had chores to do and couldn't go. Skin Sailor couldn't go, either —like Tom Sawyer, he had to whitewash a fence.

My uneasiness grew. When Juny Castleman's aunt declared she needed him to run errands, a little green apple of anxiety hardened in my stomach. Lordy! Of all

the troop, only Mortimer Jones was there at Danglers' Dental Parlor waiting to start; and Mortimer was the youngest kid in the troop and small for his age.

Scoutmaster Danglers seemed to think it peculiar, too. "This all that's coming? Well"—fumbling out his watch—"I can't wait. Young man, I'm driving your Cousin Mary over to Brockton to see a movie tonight, and I want to be back from this hike in plenty of time. We'll have to start now."

He seemed pretty nervous and preoccupied as we started out of the village, and when I asked him, "Why are we takin' the road toward Canada?" he didn't hear me at first, and then he said in an uncaring way he supposed it was as good as any.

I'd rather he'd taken another road. There aren't many farms along that Canada turnpike; woods stand close to the road; that time of year, too early for tourists, there isn't much traffic. With funny whispers circulating about Horse Danglers, I wished we were on a more populous highway. Mortimer, tagging my heels, seemed smaller than ever.

IN THE afternoon sunlight Danglers was tall and somber; his face was pale and sickly; he kept forgetting his staff, dropping it and picking it up in a negligent way. He kept forgetting us, too, striding ahead as if we weren't with him. Mortimer and I had to trot to keep up. We passed the Baker farm almost running.

Then when the road struck out straight for the border, woods close on either side, we went faster than ever. What long legs the dentist had!

As the road stretched on and the pines stood up taller in the afternoon loneliness, Horse Danglers grew taller, too. And Mortimer Jones and I grew smaller. Our legs couldn't match the dentist's stride. A mile at that pace, and my breath was whistling. Little Mortimer wailed, "Wait for me! I can't keep up!"

Well, how would you boys like a swim?"

I can see it all in my memory. Danglers halting in the road. Brushing perspiration from his forehead. Nodding toward a wagon-path, cool-shadowed, swerving off through the trees.

"How'd you like a swim, then? I'd thought we might hike up to th' Canadian border and catch a ride back, but there don't seem to be many cars out this afternoon. Like to stop off at th' quarry for a dip?"

Better than hiking up this road, I thought. I didn't like Horse Danglers that afternoon. His eyes were like that hypnotist I'd once seen at County Fair. I would just as soon have been home. Only a swim on a hot June afternoon could have induced me to take that wagon-road into the woods. Mortimer tugged on my arm. I couldn't be a scared-cat in front of Mortimer, or Horse Danglers, either, no matter what people at the Post Office had whispered. I wasn't afraid of any *den*-tist! Wasn't my father the sheriff?

Well, I don't know what came into me as we started off through the trees. A twelve-year-old boy can experience strange emotions and do queer things. Frightened by I don't know what seventh sense for impending peril, a foreboding deepened by the stillness of dense underbrush and shadow-gloomed pine, I unhooked my Scout axe and took Mortimer by the hand.

The scene is photographed on my mind in gray and green. Green of the drowsing woods, pine and birch and thickets of saplings. Gray for the worn-out old wagon track bending through rank undergrowth and the big, cliff-walled amphitheater looming up ahead—the abandoned quarry.

It dropped off sheer where the wagon-road skirted a clutter of weed-grown workmen's sheds and the rusty remains of a steam shovel and excavating machinery. One looked down a steep, gray precipice into the murky green of the quarry lake, a dark mirror of motionless glass, always unruffled, its surface sheltered by the surrounding walls.

Older boys sometimes dived from the cliff top—it's called the "deep end" there

—but there were dangerous submerged timbers and, supposedly, snapping turtles, and the less daring swimmers followed the wagon-path down to the "shallow end" where it led to the water's edge.

Often enough I played hookey for a swim in this lake—but there'd been a shouting gang of us—this afternoon the silence of the place was unintruded upon—the walled lake was still—I had not forgotten my experience of falling through its dark ice.

Looking down on that "deep end" from the quarry's rim scared me. I can picture the three of us—the two boys and the tall, pale man—emerging from the underbrush and pausing on that cliff top. Horse Danglers stopped and took out his watch. Clutching Mortimer's small paw in my left hand, Scout axe in my right, I began to sing.

Fright I suppose. The same impulse that makes us whistle defiance as we pass a lonely graveyard.

"There are smiles that make you happy—"

He spun at me, fierce-eyed. "Do you have to—? There! Great Scott! my watch—"

SLIPPED from his nervous fingers, it fell, a twisting silvery shine—gone almost before I saw it—breaking the dark mirror below with a small, whispering splash. Ripples circled and smoothed out; the watch was gone.

"You made me do that! Singing *Smiles*. You know how I hate that song!" He shook my arm savagely. "You can go in after it! Do you hear? You can dive—"

"Let go!" I wailed. "I ain't going in swimming! I don't want to! Let go, or I'll tell Mary—"

"No! No! It's all right!" Hastily he released me; stepped back, glaring, running his fingers through his hair. "I'm not mad! I just didn't want to lose that watch—Smiling Charlie once gave it to me! Look!" All at once there was a ten-dollar bill before my eyes. "Dive in and get it for me, Bud! I can't swim, lad! At least locate it on the bottom so I can come back and hook it out with a fishline. Ten dollars if you do! You don't know what that watch means to me—!"

Ten dollars! Why, that was a bicycle. Or the second-hand shotgun I'd always wanted down at Clapp's Store. But coming from Danglers—penny-pinching Horse Danglers! Rustled before my stare, it looked big as a million!

"Okay!" I had my shirt off quick as a fireman. "I'm awful sorry, Danglers. I'll go after it!"

When I think of it now! When I visualize a tow-headed boy stripping out of his clothes on that quarry-rim—that lean and pallid-featured man glaring down at the secretive water—little Mortimer Jones standing by, too excited to move—the sun at late afternoon and silent shadows lengthening through the trees. How, because of singing *Smiles*, I dove in looking for silver.

And how, plummeting deep in the green and shadowy depths, I saw a smile of gold!

It grinned at me, magnified under water a thousand times. A terrible smile in a terrible moss-green face with empty eye-sockets and weedy hair. It was looking straight at me; I was almost on top of it before I saw what it was; my hands might have struck it, stiff-palmed, but for its shield of glass.

As it was, my dive propelled me face to face with the thing behind that awful windshield—it was sitting upright in the mud-covered car, one hand of bones on the steering wheel. The car's canvas top had rotted through, I remember, and as I back-thrashed in terror, an enormous parrot-beaked turtle sailed up through a rent in the canvas and came flippering at me.

Terror-stricken, lungs bursting, I fought for the surface.

Too dazed for surprise, I could only stare upward and squall meaningless sounds at men who had arrived as if by magic, on the quarry rim. Mortimer Jones's father was there, and Twin

Lickette and Old Man Baker and some others. Crowding and shouting around Horse Danglers, they failed to hear my water-strangled cries.

"My kid's going home with me!" Jones was shouting. "I'm glad Baker, here, came after me to tell me where he was. I won't have my boy traipsing off with you, Danglers, not after all this talk!"

"Talk?" Horse Danglers bawled. "What d'you mean, talk—?"

Twin Lickette shouted, "You know what we mean, Danglers! About you not tellin' all you know concernin' what happened to Smilin' Charlie Knight. We been wantin' a chance to question you about it, since the sheriff—"

"Well, what about the sheriff?" That was my father's roar. Unexpected as a cannon shot from the underbrush to the left. He was there with one of his deputies, waving his arms as he ran into view. "What's going on here, anyhow? What's the—Hi! there's my kid down there swimming—!"

Horse cried, "It's all right, Sheriff Whittier! I sent him down there! I dropped my watch in the lake, and I—"

At last I got my lungs cleared of terror and water. "Pop! Pop!" I screamed. "Smiling Charlie's down here!"

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MEN clambering down the rock-hewn wall to pull me out. Father wrapping me in his coat. Mortimer Jones's parent apologizing to Horse Danglers, "I didn't mean no insults; I reckon we all been upset!" Old Man Baker arriving, breathless, with a team of big horses and a lot of heavy tackle.

Then, as daylight waned and the news went winging, the population of Four Corners reaching the scene; men with ropes and nets and bull-hooks; wide-eyed farmer boys; Doc Trosch in his buggy; Theodore Seymore with his sinister black wagon. I watched Twin Lickette work a grappling hook from a boat, and his shout, "I've caught it!" came at the last moment of twilight just as lanterns were blooming.

Then a scene I would like to forget. Horses straining along the bank at the lake's "shallow end," and a big muddy car sliding out of the water, standing stark in the lantern-shine, black and streaming, its driver's face no longer at the windshield, but a shapeless thing huddled on the seat—a scarecrow of bones and ragged khaki. People screamed as Father opened the door and something rolled out onto the runningboard and bounced to the ground.

But Father never feared that sort of thing. He picked up the mossy skull, and carried it up to the quarry rim where some cars were parked with the lights on and he could see it better. Not hard to imagine the horrified gasps of the crowd at Father's heels—when he took out his bandana handkerchief to wipe the green from that bony death's-head, then carefully polished its teeth.

"Look's like Smiling Charlie, all right. Here, Danglers. That Charlie's dental work?"

And that is the last scene I remember. Up there on the quarry brink, the carlights streaming from a background of night, the crowd a horror-stricken audience of shadows, and Father handing that gold-toothed skull to Horace Danglers, casual as you please. Dentist Danglers wasn't casual. I'll never forget the anguish of his wax-cheeked face, the brooding grief as he gazed down on the object in his hand, unable to speak. You know the scene. Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well; a fellow of infinite jest and excellent fancy —I saw it later in *Hamlet* a dozen times. Horace Danglers needed no purple cloak for the part.

"It's Charlie, sure enough." Voice pain-choked, low. "He must've done it a-purpose—drove off th' main road and here to th' quarry, straight into th' lake. I shouldn't have told him me and Mary were going to be—but I didn't know he was in love with—poor old Charlie! There's where I extracted a tooth that night. Yes,

Sheriff, I'd know those gold front teeth anywhere—"

"But where's the bullet-hole?"

"Eh—?"

Father had put the question so unconcernedly that the crowd hadn't got it, either. He repeated it in a matter-of-fact tone, nodding at the skull in Horse Danglers' hand. "Where's the bullet-hole?"

"BULLET-HOLE?" I don't know which pair of eyes were the worse—those in the skull, or the pair in the face above it, the dentist's eyes.

Father said flatly, "Yes, bullet-hole. You say that's Charlie's skull you're holdin'. You say you recognize those gold teeth—"

"I put them in myself, didn't I? Do you think a dentist doesn't know his own work?"

"I've no doubt it's your work," Father nodded, "and on your own recognition, I'm holding you." Almost as if it were friendly, his hand was on Horse Danglers' shoulder. "On your own recognition of the dental work in this skull, I'm holding you for Smiling Charlie's murder." Then, as if that wasn't enough for one night's confoundment, Father called to his deputy, "Joe! You and Seymore drive like hell down to Danglers' Dental Parlor an' rip up that new tile floor!"

"Rip up the floor?" Horse Danglers whinnied. "My new floor—?"

Father's voice grew sternly harsh; chiseled starkly by the car-lights, his face was baleful. "Where else should they look, you dog! You know it's there, same as you knew the car was here in this quarry lake! Sure, you knew the car was here all winter under the ice. You brought my kid here; dropped in your watch a-purpose so's he'd have to dive in after it. You wanted him to find it, but you had to make it look like chance. An' if you knew th' car was here, that means you put it here, so I figure you know where Smiling Charlie—"

Horse squalled, "But his body's in the car! This is his skull!"

"Like hell," Father snapped. "All winter, waitin' for th' ice to go out, I reckoned that big Kissel was somewhere under water. But I couldn't figure that for Smilin' Charlie. He was an expert driver; I never knew but once when he couldn't hold his liquor; barrin' suicide, which I couldn't believe in, he wouldn't likely go off th' road at all.

"No, his disappearance in that car didn't make sense. Leavin' your shop, after havin' a tooth pulled, and drivin' away in a blizzard like that! What? Here's a man supposed dead in th' War, comes back to see his friends. A guy supposed to be his best friend don't even take the evening off to celebrate the return, but stays indoors to lay a cement-tile floor.

"That stuck in my crop, Horse. So did Charlie, askin' my kid to wait for him, then rushin' off, not so much as offering to take the kid home in the storm. So that's why I started these rumors about you, Danglers, that maybe you knew more than you were tellin'."

Father went on, speaking to the crowd, "Yeah, for once this town's ability to blab did some good. I reckoned Horse did know somethin'; maybe he'd get scared by the gossip an' tip his mitt. Mary sayin' there'd be no wedding till Charlie was found, that hurried him, too."

A voice bawled from the sidelines, "But if that ain't Smilin' Charlie's skull you got there—?"

"I don't know whose it is," Father rasped. "Danglers figured any one would do. He's got to make it look like Charlie's been found; so he figures any man-size skeleton will serve. Who'd question the bones long as they're dressed up in Charlie's clothes, sittin' in Charlie's car, grinnin' Charlie's grin?

"All he's gotta do is rig up a substitute, sneak it over to th' quarry one dark night, an' plant it in th' car. You saw the hole in the car roof—tore with fish-hooks, prob'ly—where he lowered it in. That car was under th' spot where my kid fell through the ice last winter—where somebody'd cut out a cake. God knows where

this skeleton's from, but I'd say Horse tried first at th' Adventist Cemetery, an' this is from some other graveyard around. Ain't that right, Danglers?"

"It's a lie!" Danglers' face was green-yellow as the thing in his hand. "You must be out of your mind! You got no warrant! Stop those men from diggin' up my parlor! Your kid saw Smiling Charlie drive off by himself that night! Your own kid saw him—"

"Or was it someone," Father said sternly, "in Charlie's clothes? With the coat-collar up an' that hat pulled down, hand over mouth so's Bud couldn't see the face. Someone who'd murdered Smilin' Charlie in a dental chair, maybe, an' changed clothes with th' body, an' left Charlie dead in there, an' ducked out to make it seem like Charlie drivin' off in th' blizzard, an' then walked back later to bury th' corpse in cement where nobody—"

"You're crazy!" Horse Danglers screamed. "Stark ravin' mad!"

"It's you that was crazy," was Father's iron-voiced accusation. "Crazy jealous of Smiling Charlie Knight. You killed him, Danglers! You hated him because you knew Mary was still in love with him! You buried him under that tile floor you was layin'—it's the only place you could've buried him!"

"Only you couldn't very well dig him up afterward, when Mary said there'd be no wedding till he was found. You had to have a substitute, had to plant it in th' car you'd driven out here into the lake that night. You took this skull you got; put in a set of gold teeth like Charlie's; planted it to make it look like he'd commited suicide.

"But Smiling Charlie wasn't the man to commit suicide, Danglers. Contrary to his nature. Besides, he wouldn't have cared if Mary Farwell was getting married to you or not. He never did love Mary, although I reckon she was in love with him.

"He got married to a nurse over there in France, an' he was comin' back to Four Corners to straighten up his things. It's in a letter I got from th' Canadian Government; same letter that told me about th' bullet-hole. Seems Smilin' Charlie was hit in the head while th' French Red Cross men who picked him up were crossin' No Man's Land. A spent machine-gun bullet. Didn't penetrate the brain, only broke through th' skull. The doctors took out th' bullet an' plugged the hole with a piece of silver."

Father tapped the skull in Horse Danglers' clutch with a criticizing finger. "You done a nice job on these gold teeth, Horse, but you didn't know about the silver-plugged hole. An' with a wife waitin' back in France, Smilin' Charlie wasn't the sort to kill himself—"

Horse Danglers was.

Soundlessly, without warning, he hurled that gold-toothed skull into Father's face, and flung himself at the quarry's brink. It was steel that cheated him this time—my Scout axe lying in the weeds—the handle flying up to trip him as he stepped on the head—sending him outsprawled. Mob hands snatched him back from the brink, and he howled and foamed like an animal as Father locked iron manacles on his wrists.

Yes, songs can remind one of queer, unrelated things. There is that song, *Smiles*. It reminds me of a tall, pale dentist with froth at the corners of his lips; and my lovely Cousin Mary dressed in black (it was not until two years later that she went to New York where she became engaged to another man); and a minstrel with jovial gold teeth and a silver-plugged bullet-hole in his head, found buried in a floor of cement.

If there was any justice in the world of my boyhood after that, it lay in the fact that when Horse Danglers stabbed Charlie through the head with a dentist's awl, the point struck a plug of silver and broke off. Making it necessary for the murderer to substitute a skull that must have laughed as it condemned the killer to die in a chair, himself—and this time it wasn't a dental chair!

With the captain's door hooked open, the next big sea would sweep into the cabin and blot him out

The Sea Is a Loan Shark

By CAPTAIN DINGLE

Author of "Bearded Loons," "Tough on the Gulf," etc.

In which a derelict discovers that in the settling up of old scores, the sea has a way of exacting its payment first

HE HAD just been thrown out of *The Last Chance,* and his throat was like a lime kiln. He sat on the stringpiece of the wharf, licking cracked lips, cursing mankind, too far gone to care about the humiliation of being thrown out of a bar, only yearning desperately for a shot of hooch to quiet his rebellious stomach. He could sleep in the alley if only somebody would give him a drink. He gazed blearily at the ship just dropping anchor, and cursed her too.

It had taken years for Ben to fall to his present state. He had commanded a ship like that, but that was a very long time ago. Then a drunken mate had caused the disaster which resulted in an inquiry where much perjury was sworn, and Ben was a ruined man.

He had drifted from place to place, from job to job, always a little lower in the scale than before, until now—well, he had been thrown out of a common deep-water-man's barroom before he had told

the tale which had always secured him a hearing and a bellyful of rotgut. At sea he had been abstemious, but not since.

He looked harder at the ship. She had loaded up river, and was only waiting for the tide to lift her over the shoals. A boat put off, but he scarcely noticed that; he stood up to get a better view of the ship, and then his lips moved. He licked them.

He would know that ship anywhere. It was ten years since he had seen her; but how could a sailorman forget the ship he had proudly commanded? It was his old ship, the *Gleaner,* the ship that had run down another with grave loss of life through the fault of a drunken mate who would not give right of way.

He moved to meet the boat, but he was in no condition to move very fast; she had landed her passenger, and he had hurried briskly uptown, before Ben got there. But he knew that passenger as he knew the ship. Shack! His perjured one-time mate.

"Who's that?" he shouted. A man in the boat answered:

"Him? The skipper. Pete Shack—the bad woman's baby!"

The man leaped ashore, grinning at his shipmates, and ran towards the *Last Chance.* Ben trotted after him, telling the tale as he had told it so many times.

This time he was rewarded. He only hinted that he had known Cap'n Shack, and liquor was freely offered.

One after another the boat's crew relieved each other, and each time Ben got a drink. When the boat put off, Ben went with it, assured that a man was wanted, the skipper had gone to find one; but he wouldn't. He was too well known, but Mr. Peary, the mate, was a good scout, he'd know a sailorman when he saw one.

Ben looked as unlike a sailorman as possible, but he knew all the answers. A few drinks had made him cunning; and there were ten years of misery and humiliation to be paid for. It would be a queer sailing-ship passage which offered no chance to repay Captain Shack.

"SAILOR? You look more like a bag o' shakings to me!" Mr. Peary said. Ben begged hard for a chance, and after all the mate had seen him come aboard, shakily, stumblingly, yet with a trick of familiarity rarely found in any but sailors. Mr. Peary was a pleasant young fellow, full of cares but possessing humor too, and the *Gleaner* did need a man to round out her pitifully incompetent deck gang.

"Been round the Horn and across the Line, I suppose?" he teased. Ben nodded, feeling rotten but bent on sailing in the ship. "At Paddy's Goose?" the mate went on.

Ben nodded again, vaguely realized what he was saying, and rallied sufficiently to declare vehemently that he could hand, reef, and steer, that he knew the ropes, and almost falling from dizziness he went to the fiferail and shook and named every bit of gear thereon.

"Then you must have had the prize jag of history!" Mr. Peary decided. "Get your dunnage. The captain will sign you on at sea."

Ben the Bum had no dunnage. He had nothing but a rather uncertain idea of getting square with Pete Shack. He saw Shack come on board without a man, heard the mate report a man engaged, and saw Captain Shack glance impatiently in his direction. Ben wore a fine bush of whiskers, dirty and snarled; nobody who had known Captain Benedict could possibly see any resemblance to that respected shipmaster in Ben the Bum.

The *Gleaner* went to sea on that tide.

A period of torment began. The mates were no man-killers, they were putting in their required square-rig time for pilot licenses and the easier the passage the better pleased they would be, but they had to sail the ship, and with a forecastle crowd of the quality available in days when sail was a curiosity every man must pull his weight. Ben would have given his hope of vengeance for one good shot of rum that first night at sea; there was no rum; his ragged nerves shrieked,

he was thumped and kicked from job to job by his own watchmates.

It came his turn for a trick at the wheel; he was chased away by Captain Shack himself after getting the ship in irons when the coast lay close to leeward.

He slept in a bedless bunk, and turned out to more torment. His muscles were inert, his nerve gone. Exhaustion rendered him nearly blind. He could not go aloft, he could not steer. The second mate bullied him at first, but quit at a word from Mr. Peary who had been watching Ben more closely than appeared.

"He'll be all right when the booze is out of him, Grant. He's been a sailor, whatever he is now. Look at him next time he touches a rope."

"If you don't care, and the Old Man don't give a hoot, I can stick an old soldier," grinned Mr. Grand. "I'll let the steward have him. He wants help in the storeroom."

The Old Man apparently didn't give a hoot for anything. When Ben shuffled through the open grating hatch in the saloon floor which led into the lazeret, Captain Shack was bawling at the steward for leaving empty bottles in the stateroom and not putting full ones to replace them. When that ommission was made good, the stateroom door was closed and nobody saw Captain Pete Shack again that day.

The stowage of heavy barrels and boxes and bags wrung agonized sweat from Ben; the steward, a harassed, nervous man scared out of his wits at his commander, could sympathize. He gave Ben a shot of rum when the work was finished, and it revived him. But there was no more. Ben, being the last man to join, and there being no boys or ordinary seamen, was bullied into the position of Peggy for the forecastle; he carried the mess dishes, swept out the forecastle, and stood double lookouts because he could not steer.

BUT as the days went by, the clean air, rough food, and hard work performed their magic upon him. He began to reckon up. Shack remained out of sight most of the time, leaving the ship in the entirely capable hands of his mates who, as long as the weather kept fine, preferred it that way.

But Captain Shack did appear now and then, chiefly toward evening and always to find fault, and if there was ever to be a showdown Ben knew he must make himself a full member of the crew with a right to go anywhere a sailor might go. He asked to be changed into Mr. Peary's watch, seeing that it was while Mr. Peary was on deck that the captain usually appeared to make trouble. He asked to be allowed to take his trick again, for that gave him two hours every other watch on the poop, where Captain Shack was within reach.

Now that his nerves were steady, and his eyes no longer bleared through a red mist, Ben regained the cunning of a superb helmsman. Mr. Peary watched him quietly, then said:

"That's you, sailorman! Getting back, eh?"

Ben made no reply. There was something intimate in the simple remark which frightened him. He forgot his steering, and the weather leeches began to shake. The mate helped bring the ship to her course, sharply told Ben to watch himself, and never again spoke to him while at the wheel. But he watched him more intently, particularly when Captain Shack was on deck, for then Ben's eyes were rarely upon the compass or the leeches, they followed Shack about, though never again could any fault be found in the steering.

The steward had found Ben useful in the storeroom; he could leave stowage to him and know it would be done cleverly; any other seaman he had got to help him scamped the work and stole the stores, but not Ben.

Ben did his job, accepted gratefully his shot of rum, and departed without cadging. When there was a cask to be broken out, and stores restowed, Ben was the man asked for.

One day, when the ship was two weeks at sea and rolling heavily, Ben was alone in the storeroom chocking off some barrels, when he heard uproar in the saloon overhead. The steward came down soon afterward, weeping like a child, his face cut about. He was in a mood for confidences, told Ben that the skipper had beaten him up because he had locked up the liquor.

"Mr. Peary told me to," he whimpered. "He ought to lock the Old Man in his room and take charge! Drunk all the voyage, drunk last voyage. Nobody'll stay with him. I won't either. Four voyages I've been with him, and this is the finish!"

"Aye, he's a hellion!" Ben agreed. "But he'll get what's coming to him, laddy. Where d'ye want this cask of pork?"

He soothed the man, and the shot of rum he got for reward was a double one. It loosened Ben's tongue more than he knew, and he told the steward more than he had ever meant to tell anybody.

"And don't you go spilling what I've told you!" he warned the steward, uneasy because he had let rum loosen his tongue. "If you do, I'll give you worse than Shack could ever do to you!"

"Who'd I tell? Not Captain Shack, he'd jump overboard!"

The steward isn't born who could keep silent with such a ripe bit of news in his keeping. The steward told Mr. Peary.

"Says he was master of this ship, sir, when Pete Shack was mate. Maybe he's only spinning a cuffer. A drop of rum makes them bums talk."

MR. PEARY watched Ben with still closer interest. He meant to speak to him, but somehow hesitated how to broach such a subject. Certainly as the passage drew out, Ben revealed himself as a seaman of quality which his shocking rags could never hide.

At first the impulse that drove him had been the desire to fit himself for the big moment which was bound to arrive sooner or later; more recently, a certain pride had urged him forward. Wherever he looked, the *Gleaner* showed evidence of age and neglect; she had the earmarks of a succession of indifferent officers who only did what was essential to getting her to the end of her voyage.

Few mates had made a second voyage in her since Pete Shack secured command. The state of her gear called forth all the cunning of a real sailorman to keep her sailing equipment from being uprooted.

In Peary and Grant she had for once two officers who considered a voyage something to be completed in the best possible shape, a ship something to be cared for. Ben was the only man in the forecastle who agreed with that queer view, or had the ability to back it.

Instead of standing double lookouts, he was soon doing double tricks at the helm, and day by day felt himself becoming something like the man he had been.

But now for many days at a time he saw nothing of Shack, who was fuddling himself into a condition where he was a menace to the ship if he did appear.

Ben, who had joined the ship with one idea, and that idea more notable for its savagery than its clarity, had for some time been forced to admit that the avenging of a personal wrong in such circumstances as these in which he found himself was not going to be the simple matter it had seemed to his warped and woozy brain.

Then the *Gleaner* crossed the Doldrums, ran through the Trades, and thrust her sharp nose into the gray North Atlantic to encounter a dirty nor'easter.

The Doldrums had wracked her, laden deep she had done her full share of rolling. Now she lay down to the hard breeze and the mates anxiously watched her upper spars.

Captain Shack appeared once, tumbled out of his bunk by the swift heeling of the ship when the wind first struck down. He remained on deck for an hour, gripping the rail, staring stupidly around him, then went back to his room without uttering one word of order or suggestion though Mr. Peary told him the foretopmast looked

shaky, and followed him into the companionway asking for orders.

Half an hour later the weather looked ugly, and Mr. Peary went down to Shack's room to put the responsibility squarely up to him. He opened the stateroom door. Captain Shack was in a drunken stupor, grunted when shaken, but never opened an eye. Mr. Peary regarded him sourly for a moment, then looked around, removed all the liquor he could find, and returned to the deck, calling Mr. Grant as he went.

"Get your watch out. The Old Man's curled up. We'll get a preventer backstay up on that topmast."

"As long as he stays curled up—" replied Mr. Grant with relief, and went to lead the men to the ticklish job.

NOW and then a sea lifted and fell on board. The foremast creaked, the topmast heel squealed against the iron. Men gathered around the rigging, each one unwilling to be first to venture aloft. Sail had been reduced, but the man who carried that preventer stay aloft risked his neck.

"Come along, my lads," urged Mr. Grant. "I don't want to call a man by name. Who'll come aloft with me?"

"Look out! Watch yourselves!" yelled Mr. Peary from aft.

A bigger sea reared up to windward. The crest dropped over the rail and filled the maindeck.

Men leaped for safety; the water receded; but the strain had told upon the ancient gear. The topmast backstay drew from its turnbuckle with a screech, and the hundred foot wire began to flog like a whip, a whip with a two-foot steel screw at the end for a snapper. Men scattered as they dropped from their refuges to the deck. Mr. Grant made an impulsive grab to catch the flying stay, and the screw brushed his shoulder, hurling him ten fathoms away.

"Catch it, men!" he shouted. "All that holds the spar is the topsail halliards! Where's Ben? He's a sailor, not a soldier like the rest o' you!"

"Huh, that bum! Under a bunk, he is."

Men dodged that awful flail. Mr. Grant made dabs at it, but he had felt its murderous sting. He snatched up a rope end, with some idea of lassoing it, when a coil of line fell upon him out of the rigging.

"Haul down on it, sir!" a hoarse voice came from aloft. Ben was up there. Below the topmast spreaders he clung, hugging against his chest both the topgallant backstay and the secure end of the stay that was adrift. Between his feet he held a bowline which he had passed around both wires.

"Haul it down, sir! That'll muzzle it!"

Men laid hold with the second mate, and from a safe distance dragged down the bowline, bringing the flying backstay to a short end as the restraining rope descended, until the screw was secured and lashed.

Then, with a tackle to tauten the stay, the screw was brought down to its place. It was stripped and useless, but the tackle held the strain until a chain lashing could be passed, and then the topmast was no longer shaky; it was more secure lashed with chain than when it depended upon a slipping rigging screw.

"Stay up there! I'll send up a preventer on a buntline!" Mr. Grant shouted.

Men worked fast enough now that another man held the post of danger. A hawser was sent aloft, Ben secured it to the topmast head, a tackle was set up and then the spar was completely safe.

Ben slid down. The men had already run to shelter.

"I'll ask the mate to let the steward give you a tot," Mr. Grant said. "Come along aft. That was a smart bit of work, Ben."

Ben stepped on to the poop and heard Mr. Grant praise him to the mate. He caught the mate's eye, and wondered.

He followed Mr. Grant below and stood beside the captain's door while the steward fetched rum; and he heard a sea crash on board and come rolling aft to thunder against the maindeck door. The water jetted in, even though the door was fastened. It wet him to the

knees, and a puddle formed to leeward, against the bulkhead of Shack's room, the door of which was shut tight. Usually a seaman who slept in such weather kept his door on the hook, just in case of something happening. But Pete Shack was not a seaman. He was—

"Here you are, Ben. Go and breathe on those rats for'ard. It may ginger them up next time work's to be done."

Mr. Grant handed him a tumbler. He drank it with a thoughtful eye upon the captain's door, and that puddle of water.

BEN had the second trick in the first watch that night, and steered the old ship tenderly through a confused sea. She was laboring, her swollen canvas black with wet as high as the foreyard; she rolled, the wind on the quarter, and dipped her rails almost rhythmically, filling her decks with a thud that shook her to the keelbolts. The watch huddled in the galley, determined to hear no call short of a personal visitation.

Just after he took the wheel, Ben saw the steward come up to speak to Mr. Peary and give him his keys. Mr. Peary seemed to object to taking them, but the steward thrust them into his hands, and scuttled below, screaming that he was afraid to keep them.

Nearing eight bells, the wind increased, the sea developed a spite which disquieted Mr. Peary. He made his way to the wheel, after blowing his whistle for the watch without getting any response.

"I'll take her," he said. "Jump below and rouse Mr. Grant. Tell him the fores'l has to come in. Give the steward a shake, too. Need all hands. Get for'ard and lend a hand when you've called the second mate. Tell him to rouse out the captain—not that it's any use," he muttered as Ben entered the saloon by the after companionway.

Mr. Grant was out and gone while Ben still shook up the sleepy and resentful steward.

"Come on, my lad! All hands. You won't have to go aloft, just lend your weight to the gear. Better up there than here. Suppose the Old Man pops out, looking for a snifter! What about those keys?"

Grumbling, the steward shuffled into his clothes, while Ben, at the foot of the main companionway, peered darkly at the closed door of Shack's room. Mr. Grant had not even tried to arouse the captain. He knew it was better for the ship that he remain where he was.

The steward stumbled past him, and Ben put a hand to Shack's door. He opened it, and looked in. Shack lay snoring as if strangling, the light from his turned down lamp showing up his purple, convulsed face. The place stank of drunkenness, above all the terrific reek of churned bilge underfoot.

Once Ben's hand went out and touched the swollen neck. Shack did not move. How easy it would be to pay off the old debt like this. But it was too easy. There was little satisfaction in killing an enemy who was too stupefied to care, or to know, who killed him. A sea thundered on board, rolled aft as the ship lifted, and crashed against the maindeck door. The water poured in around it, forming another puddle, splashing even into Shack's room.

Ben heard the yells of men hauling up the foresail. They needed him. But a thought had come to him.

If he hooked back the captain's door, then went out by the maindeck door instead of the companionway, and hooked that door open too, the next sea that came on board would flood the saloon—and Shack's room too. That would be an Act of God, and Shack would never leave his room alive.

Ben hooked the stateroom door open, leaving a space of six inches. That was enough. The sea would do the rest. It would find that aperture and burst the door like matchwood.

Suddenly Ben could not do it. He couldn't set such a trap to drown a sleeping man—not even though that man was Pete Shack. He unfastened the hook, shut the door, and went to his work.

HE WAS aloft on the foreyard, taking out his thwarted vengeance on the devil-possessed canvas. The ship steered wildly, for it was many years since Mr. Peary had steered a laboring ship, and he was never the instinctive helmsman that Ben was. But he was where he ought to be, if the captain wouldn't accept responsibility; if all hands were needed up there, even the cook, steward, and helmsman, the mate's place was at the helm.

It took an hour to get the foresail up to the yard, and twice it blew adrift. The steward and cook had to clamber into the yelling confusion aloft, and went the more readily because it was safer up there than in the welter of the drowned maindeck.

Ben worked grimly beside Mr. Grant, in the bunt of the sail, and slowly they muzzled the heavy canvas. Both watches clung to the yard like cats, too careful of their own safety to be efficient. Instead of the age-old rule of "one hand for the ship and one for yourself," they took two hands for themselves and dabbed at the sail if they felt secure for a moment. But even such men must get a job finished when led by two real sailormen.

"Pass it once more!" shouted Mr. Grant, to Ben sitting on the footrope to catch the gasket. "That'll hold her! Bully!"

Ben did not catch the rope. He was staring down at a rolling mist just beneath him; his eyes followed it aft; and as he opened his mouth to shout the mate's voice pealed out from the wheel:

"Fire! Grant! Lay aft—leave that sail—"

The skylight over the saloon glowed redly, and from its leaves billowed smoke which went spiraling down wind.

Ben was nearest the rigging, in the bunt where the work had been heaviest; he grabbed a backstay and flashed down to the deck as another great sea lifted over the rail. He was swept against the main hatch, and clung to a ring bolt while the water surged over him. The men who had started down clung to their holds as the maindeck rolled waist deep in broken sea.

Ben got to his feet and ran aft when the washports freed the burden of water, darted up the ladder, and was met by a choking billow of smoke, Mr. Peary yelled at him, but he never heard.

He entered the companionway, and staggered back, half blinded, more than half stifled. The saloon was full of smoke; flames erupted through the lazaret grating. He could not see it, but knew exactly where it was, because he had so many times been down there helping the steward.

He struggled toward it, but could not get within yards of it. He heard men shouting in the companionway, hanging back, defying Mr. Grant's urgent orders.

"Do you want to fry, you rats?" the second mate yelled, and plunged down the stairs unfollowed. "You there, Ben?" he called chokingly, then stumbled back into the fresh air.

Ben tried again to reach the small hatch. He drew back only when the flames licked him. He did not need to think what to do.

Only one thing could save the ship, the thing he had briefly contemplated for the destruction of Pete Shack. Now he was glad he had shut that door. Open on the hook, any considerable inrush of sea would burst it open, fill the stateroom, and surely drown the mad fool in his bunk. Shut, it might crack, but unless it burst completely Shack would suffer no more than a rough drenching. He had earned that.

WHILE men cursed and hung back on deck, Ben ran to the port looking out on the maindeck. He saw the last sea drain clear, then had the maindeck door open and hooked back as another towering crest hissed above the weather rail.

It fell. The ship quivered. Ben leaped for a hold on the poop ladder as the briny avalanche roared aft. It buried him, tore at him, entered the open door with the hollow boom of a breaker rushing into a cavern.

Then he was blinded by the outrush of

smoke which had the sour reek of drowned fire; he dropped from the ladder, unhooked the door and shut it behind him. He stood groping in the drowned saloon, which was black now the fire glow had died. The water was already draining into the lazaret each time the ship rolled; it had put out the fire at the cost of ruined saloon fittings; then Mr. Peary was beside him, with a torch, a mob of goggling seamen at his heels, the second mate having taken over the watch to allow his superior to tackle the fire.

The torch flashed around the saloon. Every door had been shut; not one had been completely burst though panels were split. Ben opened Shack's door.

"Show a light, sir. Lamp's out here."

"I hope he's had a scare!" Mr. Peary muttered, showing his light around the stateroom. The lamp was gone from its bracket. The carpet was rolled up by the flood; but no water had reached into the berth.

"He got out!" uttered Ben, bewildered; then rushed across the saloon to the lazaret hatch, Mr. Peary followed him, his torch gleaming over the floor. The grating hatch, which had been padlocked, was missing.

Up from the burned and saturated storeroom belched suffocating fumes. Men huddled around, and one fell over the grating under the last of the draining water. Mr. Perry lifted it.

"Lock's in the hasp, but it's unlocked." He felt in his pockets, produced the steward's keys, and his eye met Ben's. Silently they lowered themselves through the hatchway into a swamp of ruined stores. The water was receding into the bilges; it could be heard washing about underfoot. A brass bracket lamp floated into the torch glare and Ben retrieved it, not before Mr. Perry had seen and identified it, Shack's cabin lamp.

"Get on deck, you!" he shouted up at the men, who were beginning to see something to grin at in the ruined storeroom. If they got down there, to clear it up, there was rum. "Get on deck, and tell Mr. Grant to run her off so you can start the pumps. Get a move on! Fire scared you, but you'll swim or drown if you don't rattle her clear of water! Jump!"

"That wiped the grin off their mugs," Ben laughed harshly. "Nothing like a bit of pumping to spoil a joke!"

Mr. Peary did not answer. He waded through the storeroom, and Ben followed him. In the after end, the steward's bonded stores locker stood open, and in the keyhole hung a bunch of keys. Keys for every lock in the ship were on that key ring, the captain's ring.

And in the farthest recess of the lazaret, jammed up by the flood into the narrowing run of the ship, they came upon Pete Shack, burned, broken, and drowned. Ben looked gravely at the awful figure; Mr. Peary's eyes, behind the torch gleam, looked at Ben. The lamp, the keys, a madly rolling ship and spilled spirits told the story vividly.

"You hooked back that maindeck door, didn't you? It wasn't an accident?"

"It was the only thing to do," said Ben slowly. "I thought he was in his room. Knew he'd get a good fright—but—"

Mr. Peary nodded, and turned toward the hatch. Daylight would bring work to be done, here and all through the after end of the ship, but now nothing was as vital as seeing the ship through the gale.

"If he'd stayed where he was, a good fright's about all he'd have got. I believe you've had some of Pete Shack before, Benedict." Ben started at the use of his name. He hadn't heard it spoken without scorn for years. Mr. Peary climbed into the saloon, and gave him a hand to help him up. There was understanding in the grip.

"Well, the sea collects all debts and Shack's been owing the sea for a good long time now. He had it coming," he went on. "You saved his ship for him. Let it go at that."

Ben took his place at the pumps. The weather looked brighter to windward.

Nolan watched Joel piling up the money and became quite unhappy

Fast and Loose

By MARCO PAGE

JOEL and Garda Sloane have almost reached the end of their financial rope when Christopher Oates, the wool-witted chain-store tycoon, appoints Joel his agent in the purchase of the only Shakespeare manuscript in existence. Joel is a young spasmodically solvent rare-book dealer who is secretly convinced that the world lost a great detective when he became interested in books. But before he and Oates and Garda have consummated the deal with Nicholas Torrent in Santa Barbara, Joel gets his chance to play sleuth.

The Torrent household is a strange confusion of deceits and conflicting loyalties. Protected by his mother, Gerald Torrent has been stealing books from his father's library and disposing of them secretly through a shady dealer, George Clifford. The elder Torrent is aware of his son's misdeeds but says nothing. Clifford's presence in the house during the weekend is the last straw, however, and Torrent determines to have a showdown with his son.

That night, Vincent Charlton is attacked before the safe in the library, which is found open. The manuscript is lying on the floor nearby. Joel realizes a substitution has been made, and the genuine manuscript stolen. Wilkes, the librarian is also aware of this, although he denies it when Joel questions him. Torrent also discovers the truth, and in a row with Gerald knocks him down and orders him out of the house.

JOEL, believing that Gerald and Clifford may be working together, searches Clifford's room. He doesn't find the manuscript but he does overhear Clifford telling his partner, Miss Bobby Neville, to beat it back to Los Angeles. He also finds Christina Torrent weeping in the hall, and correctly surmises that she has witnesed a quarrel between her father and her brother.

The next morning, Joel leaves to interview the Neville girl in Los Angeles, with little result. Just as he is leaving the police arrive to take him—and Miss Neville—back to the Torrents'. During the night, Nicholas has been murdered.

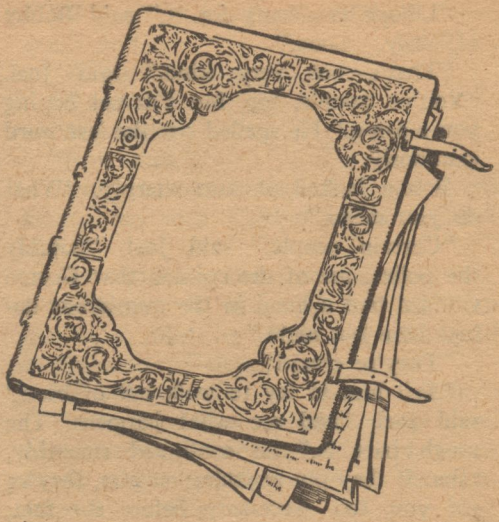
PRIME suspect is Gerald. Charlton, Torrent's friend and business manager, has told the police of Gerald's dealings with

This story began in the Argosy for February 25

Clifford, of his gambling debt to Lucky Nolan, and of his father's anger against him. When the manuscript, missing since Torrent was shot while examining it, is found in Gerald's room, the case against him seems clinched.

Joel tells Joe Hilliard, the insurance trouble-shooter, and Inspector Forbes what he knows of the manuscript substitution. The one in Gerald's room was the fake. Wilkes, he insists, will back him up. But Wilkes is missing.

Joel proposes that they announce to the newspapermen that the authentic manuscript is still in the Torrents' possession. "If somebody has sold that manuscript, whoever owns its will read that announcement, and come a-runnin'. It's a long shot—but it's worth trying. . . ."



CHAPTER XI

ONE CONFERENCE AND ANOTHER

AS a swarm of reporters and photographers swept into the library, flashlights booming incessantly from the moment the front door was opened, Joel and Hilliard made their way out to the terrace, from which vantage point they watched Forbes give out a cautious story on the tragic events of the night before.

"An attempt was made to steal the famous Shakespeare manuscript," Forbes told them, "but this was recovered early today by men of my department. The manuscript is now safe and sound."

Joel and Hilliard moved away from the library, Hilliard shaking his head doubtfully. "It's a risky thing to let the Torrent family go on thinking the manuscript is genuine," he said glumly. "If the real one has been stolen, they're entitled to make a claim."

"Go on," said Joel. "Tell them about it and pay off to the tune of a half a million bucks. I'm showing you an out."

"Maybe," said Hilliard.

"Forget it. What about Gerald. Is he going to be tapped for noose and scaffold?"

"It's him or Wilkes," said Hilliard. "Unless it's you, or somebody else."

"You mean, you don't know."

"I mean, I'm not sure. Personally, I like Gerald for the part. He had the motive, the means, and he very definitely did have the manuscript his papa took to bed last night. Furthermore, I think he and the old gent had a row last night. If we had proof of that, Forbes would throw him in the can right away."

"Keeping him there might be a stiffer job," said Joel mildly. "What about Clifford."

"We're going to hold that baby on suspicion of burglary," said Hilliard.

Joe shook his head. "A mistake," he said bluntly. "Turn Clifford loose and he's just dumb enough to do something that will give us a lead. In a cell, he won't be a bit of good."

"You're right," said Hilliard. "Why couldn't you do some of this smart thinking in time to save us all this headache?"

"I didn't think of it," said Joel. He saw Bobby Neville inside, and said, "Pardon me."

"I WANT to explain," said Joel smoothly, "that the unfortunate interruption this morning was as much of a surprise to me as it was to you."

"You've explained," said Bobby bitterly. "Now beat it."

"We ought to stick together," said Joel plaintively. "Far from being a detective, the fact is they think I did it."

"I hope you hang for it," said Bobby viciously. "Soon."

"That's not very kind," said Joel. "You've trouble, too, but I'm not hoping you h-a-n-g." He spelled out the last word cautiously.

Bobby looked at him sharply. "What do you mean."

"Certain people," said Joel, "notably the police, are of the opinion that George Clifford had a hand in the murderous doings here last night."

"They're crazy!"

"Tell him to try to walk out of here," said Joel, "and see what happens. The tough part is," he continued smoothly, "that if they pin anything on him, they've got you, too. Accessory before the fact, they call it, but it pays off at the same price as the principal in the case."

"If you're trying to throw a scare into me," said Miss Neville coldly, "you're wasting your time."

"You and Georgie," said Joel sadly, "are lamentably headed for a temporary charge of attempted burglary. They found your footprints on the lawn, and George was prowling around on the inside. Two and two makes four. Even a policeman can add that far."

Miss Neville thought it over. "Isn't there an 'unless' in that setup?"

"Plenty of them," said Joel. He smiled. "What did you do on the stage?" he asked.

"I sang," she answered, startled.

"Well, sing," said Joel, and sat down.

WHILE too upset to see the inspector or any of his colleagues, Mrs. Torrent was not too far gone to hold an excited council of war with Gerald Torrent and George Clifford. She sat up in bed, Clifford in a chair nearby, while Gerald paced the floor nervously.

"Stop walking up and down," snapped Mrs. Torrent to her son, and Gerald obediently stopped.

"Try the door," she said. "See that it's locked."

Gerald did as he was told, then came back and sat on the foot of the bed.

Clifford said, "The way it stands now, Gerald is in for a heap of trouble, Mrs. Torrent. They found the manuscript in his room."

Mrs. Torrent gave her son a long, scrutinizing look, and was apparently not impressed with the hangdog, shifty way in which he returned her steady stare. She didn't press him, but turned back to Clifford. "Don't think that we'll protect you, Mr. Clifford," she said coldly.

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Clifford, jumping to his feet.

"Quiet!" cautioned Mrs. Torrent. "I mean merely that the attack on Charlton last night was plainly your work. Furthermore, it was through you that Gerald first began to have any dealings in rare books." She phrased the matter delicately, but Clifford got the drift.

"I'm not getting mixed up in a murder rap," he said moodily, and Gerald winced. "This isn't like selling a hot book or two —and with that guy Sloane downstairs, poking around in every angle of this case . . ." His voice trailed off and he lit a cigarette nervously. "I'm scared."

"I can see that," said Mrs. Torrent contemptuously.

"We ought to get that nosy so-and-so out of the way!" said Gerald hotly.

"Gerald!" said Mrs. Torrent reprovingly.

"Sorry, Mother," said Gerald.

Clifford said, "Now you're talking, though. You're sitting on top of the world now—you've got the manuscript—the library—the estate, and if you get yourself in the clear on this mixup, everything is rosy."

"Sure," said Mrs. Torrent coldly. "And he can pay blackmail to you for the rest of his life."

"You let that guy Sloane run loose around here," said Clifford, "and the rest of Gerald's life won't be worth very much."

Thoughtful silence on the part of the Torrents conceded this point.

"Let George talk, Mother," said Gerald

nervously. "Maybe he can suggest something."

Mrs. Torrent nodded. "Go ahead," she said.

"SO YOU were on the terrace last night," said Joel, a little surprised that his theory had been correct.

Bobby nodded. "I've got a hunch I'm trusting you too far, but all they can get me for is trying. I was out there, all right, but for all I got out of it, I might as well have been home in bed. I saw a flashlight go on in the library, and I saw the safe door lit up. Naturally, I thought it was George and I came up close to the doors. Then I saw the library door open and the light went out. I heard a crash, a lot of noise, and I got away from there as fast as I could."

"Very sensible," said Joel. "And you didn't see who was working on the safe?"

She shook her head decisively. "No."

"If the light was squarely on the safe," said Joel, "you must have seen the man's hands. Did he wear gloves?"

Bobby's forehead furrowed as she concentrated on this. "I didn't notice. I was too excited, I guess. I don't think so."

"It doesn't matter," said Joe. "Tell me, what were you going to do with it after you got it?"

"Give it back to the insurance company," said Bobby ruefully. "For a little reward, naturally."

"Naturally," said Joel cordially. "It's a small world, isn't it?" He leaned over and patted her hand. "Thanks a lot, Miss Neville. You've been a big help."

Bobby's large blue eyes opened wide. "I don't see how."

CHAPTER XII

THE LACHRYMOSE LADY

JOEL wandered back toward the library, but the detective on duty informed him that he couldn't go in. He was turning away toward the stairs, when Joe Hilliard appeared.

"How's the inquisition?" asked Joel.

"If you're lucky," said Hilliard, "you won't find out."

"Who's on the fire now?"

"Gerald."

"Any luck?"

"Not much."

"Did you ask him how he came to get hooked up with Clifford in stolen book deals?"

"He said he needed some money."

"Did he tell you that he had been gambling; that he owed a gent named Nolan a lot of money?"

Hilliard was startled. "Lucky Nolan?"

"With Gerald for a customer, the nickname seems appropriate. Gerald seems barely bright enough to add up the numbers on the dice."

"I didn't know that," said Hilliard thoughtfully. "Does it tie in?"

Joel shrugged. "If I were casting a murder," he said, "I wouldn't exactly pick Gerald for the lead. That's the psychological flaw in the case against him. But if he had some gangster pals . . . if somebody was crowding him for dough . . . if it was pay up or else. . . . But I see you get the drift." He waved to Hilliard and sauntered off. He felt it was high time he paid some attention to his wife.

"AND if I ever find you bothering this nice girl again," said Garda warmly, "you'll wake up and find yourself in bed with a divorce action."

"An idle threat," said Joel, to Christina Torrent, who smiled wanly. "Actually, she can't live without me."

"I'm sure Mr. Sloane is merely doing all he can to help me," murmured Chris. "It was silly of me to pass out."

"Nonsense," said Garda. "Smartest thing you could have done. It's the only way to get rid of him. He's half man and half detective."

The word detective seemed to grate on the girl. "Thanks," she said to Garda, and stood up.

Joel stood up, too. "If my wife weren't insanely jealous, Miss Torrent, I'd like to see you to your room."

The frightened, hunted look appeared again in Christina's eyes.

Garda was exasperated. "Joel, will you stop badgering the girl?"

"I've really nothing to say," said Chris earnestly. "Believe me, Mr. Sloane."

"I don't," said Joel, and sat down. "Whatever it is that's on your mind, Miss Torrent, you're not doing the smart thing by keeping quiet about it. You're digging a hole, and somebody you like very much might fall in it."

There was a knock on the door, before Christina could answer this, and Garda said, "Come in."

The door was opened by Phil Charlton. "Pardon me," he said. "I'm looking for Miss—" he saw Christina and stepped in quickly. "Chris, I've been looking all over the house for you, dear." He put his arm around the girl. "How do you feel?"

"All right," said Chris mechanically. "I felt a little ill and Mrs. Sloane let me rest in here."

"Good!" said Charlton heartily. He turned to Garda. "This girl is completely knocked out."

"No wonder," said Garda dryly.

"I keep telling her she ought to get some sleep—rest a bit. She can't do any good walking around like a ghost."

"Sound advice," said Joel.

Garda walked to the door with the girl. "You run along, dear," she said, "and take it easy. I'll see that this bloodhound I married doesn't bother you."

Charlton gave Joel a dirty look. "Surely, Mr. Sloane," he said coldly, "you're not trying to take advantage of Miss Torrent by questioning her when she's so upset and unnerved."

"I was," said Joel soberly. "I can see it's not cricket, though, and I won't do it again. After all, it's not as if it were anything serious. It's just her father who has been murdered."

Chris was luckily out of earshot, and didn't hear this. Charlton did, though, and glared at Joel, who returned his look measure for measure. He slammed the door then.

"If you were even two per cent of a sleuth," said Garda, "you could see at a glance that Christina is one of the sweetest, nicest girls in the world."

"So sweet and so nice," said Joel, "that she'd go through Hell to protect somebody."

"That's right," said Garda, a little lamely. "You mean Gerald?"

"Gerald, of course, but let us not lose sight of Mrs. Torrent."

"It would be easier to lose sight of Mt. Everest," said Garda.

"Aside from the generous proportions of the lady, and her air-conditioned voice and demeanor, she is either mixed up in this somewhere, or fighting like mad to cover up for Gerald."

"What about Wilkes?"

"An out and out enigma. I think he was the artist who copied the manuscript, and that gives us two explanations. One, he got the wind up and scrammed; two, somebody else got the wind up and did away with him."

Garda shuddered. "What a notion."

JOEL sighed. "You know, darling, you ought to be a little more curious about who comes into your bedroom. If you'd only gotten a look at whoever sneaked into this room last night, we'd have the mystery solved."

"It's life with you that does it," said Garda. "So much happens around us that if the 23d Cavalry came into my bedroom on horseback, I'd just think they were some friends of yours and go right back to sleep."

"Try hard," said Joel, coaxing. "Stir around in the depths of your subconscious. See if you can remember anybody sneaking into this room last night."

Garda closed her eyes, her forehead puckered in thought. "This broadcast is coming to you direct from Garda Sloane's subconscious," she murmured. She opened her eyes and sat up suddenly. "Joel!"

"What!"

Garda hesitated, then leaned back again. "I thought I had something, but it was

only an old dream." With her eyes closed, she murmured. "I'm pretty far down in the old subconscious, and I don't remember anything."

"Keep on going down," urged Joel. "Maybe you'll strike oil."

Garda opened her eyes. "I can't concentrate," she said reproachfully, "if you're going to pass out lowgrade jokes."

She closed her eyes again and in a solemn, low voice intoned, "I am now in touch with Little White Flower, my Navajo Indian spirit control. Have you any messages from the spirit world, Little White Flower? Any good tips on horses, or hints on common stocks? Come on, Little White Flower, give out."

"Your Indian sounds like a complete dope from here," said Joel.

Garda opened her eyes. "Now you've hurt her feelings," she said reproachfully. "Little White Flower has scrammed back into the spirit world."

"Let her go," said Joel. "As Chief Justice Marshall once said, 'The only good Indian is a red Indian.' "

Garda shuddered. "Did he really say that? He should have been disbarred." She stood up. "I'm afraid you'll have to solve this case without any help from me, sir. I'm tired. Tired and thirsty. Do you suppose one of the servants could smuggle us in a little whisky?"

"We can try," said Joel, and picked up the 'phone.

VINCENT CHARLTON sat in a chair near the window in his room at the far end of the corridor, and nodded in agreement with what his son was saying.

"This is a terrible experience for Chris, Dad," said Phil earnestly. "Can't you do something?"

"There's no way to stop an investigation like this," said the elder Charlton. "A murder has been committed, son. The police are right in what they're doing."

"If Gerald is arrested," said Phil, "the scandal will be terrific. Chris is such a sensitive girl, the chances are she won't go through with our wedding."

"Now, Phil," said the elder man, "it's not that bad, I'm sure."

"You don't know Chris," said Phil. "Can't you talk to this fellow Sloane. He seems to have more to say than any of the others. If we could just get them to finish their investigation and clear out, I could take Chris away somewhere and give her a chance to forget all this."

"You're asking a great deal," said Charlton. "More than I can do, I'm afraid. Still, I'll try."

"Thanks, Dad," said Charlton gratefully. "You're an ace."

"You're the only person I've got to do things for," said Charlton, smiling wanly. "Now don't put too much stock in my efforts, but I'll talk to Sloane and to the police." He clapped his son the back. "Cheer up, now, Phil. Run along and try to cheer up your girl, too."

Young Charlton smiled, and nodded. Then he went out. Alone in the room, Vincent Charlton's smile faded and he looked very serious indeed. He walked to the window and stood there for quite a while, looking out onto the broad lawns.

IN George Clifford's room, meanwhile, Bobby Neville was giving a report of her interview with Joel Sloane.

"You fool," said Clifford passionately, glaring at his girl, "did you really tell Sloane about Nolan?"

"Sure," said Bobby coolly.

"But he'll make a beeline down there!"

"I rather thought he would," said Miss Neville, smiling sweetly.

Clifford gathered that there was some method behind her madness. "I don't get it," he said, at a loss.

"You wouldn't," said Bobby scornfully. "You dumb ape, do you think Lucky Nolan will let him out once he's got him in?"

Clifford's puzzled look dissolved into one of complete gratification. "That's smart," he said, in complete awe now.

"Let me do the thinking from now on," said Bobby. "Now if they let us out of here tonight, all well and good; if not,

we've got to find some way to get word to Nolan."

Joel was able to induce one of the servants to bring up some Scotch, soda, and ice, and with these conventional ingredients he was able to mix a palatable Scotch and soda.

"Not bad," said Garda, tasting hers. "You must give me your recipe some time."

"It's a jealously guarded family secret," said Joel. "Handed down through ten generations."

"Do you use Scotch in a Scotch and soda?" asked Garda.

"Just as a base," Joel informed her. "The real artistry comes in the injection of the soda water. Too many careless people splash this in recklessly, instead of lovingly, as do the master mixers. Why, I remember once when—"

There was a knock on the door, interrupting this rhapsody. Garda got up to answer it, and admitted Vincent Charlton.

"Hello, Mr. Charlton," said Joel cordially, and pulled up a chair for the visitor. While his back was turned he motioned to Garda to get out, but Charlton intercepted the gesture and said, "No, please, Mrs. Sloane, don't let me put you out."

"I'm putting her out," said Joel. "Anyway, she has to see about our car. Don't you, dear?" he asked pointedly.

"I guess so," said Garda. "What car?"

"Any car," said Joel recklessly.

Garda said, "I can take a hint," and with a bright smile for Charlton she went to the door. She put her tongue out at Joel and went out.

"A lovely woman, your wife," said Charlton. "I'm afraid this hasn't been a very pleasant journey for her."

"I'm afraid it's been a hard day for you, too, sir."

"For us all," said Charlton. "At any rate, the manuscript is safe, and when this has been cleared up, I suppose the heirs will want to go through with the sale."

"I'm sure we'll be able to come to terms," said Joel. "Is that what you wanted to talk to me about, sir?"

Charlton smiled wanly. "I see there is no point to mincing words with you."

"Every mince is wasted," said Joel.

"Very well, then I'll be frank. I'm torn between two strong desires, Mr. Sloane. One is to see the murderer of my dear friend brought to justice; the other is the happiness of my son. The boy Christina are very much in love. He is quite properly afraid of the effect of a scandal on their romance."

Joel nodded. "I can see that. She's a sensitive girl."

"Extremely," said Charlton. "Now what's to be done?"

"What do you want done?"

Charlton hesitated. "Can this case be conceivably closed?"

"Out of the question," said Joel promptly.

"I'm a rich man," said Charlton.

"Probably rich enough to bribe me"—Charlton winced at the word—"but not rich enough to call off every cop and newspaper in Southern California. When a man as rich and prominent as Nicholas Torrent is killed it's a Roman Holiday for the police and the papers."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Charlton. He paused, then said: "Can I retain you to look after the family's interests in this case, Mr. Sloane?"

"You can," said Joel, "but I doubt if you'd find it worthwhile. Right now I happen to think that Gerald either killed his father or knows who did."

Charlton bit his lip. "You're sure of that?"

"By no means," said Joel, and Charlton heaved a sigh of relief. "Things point that way right now, but there isn't a case against him yet."

CHARLTON stood up. "Do what you can for us," he said earnestly. "For my son's sake. He's all I've got. I want to see him happy."

Joel nodded. "You can count on me, sir."

Charlton extended his hand, without another word, and Joel took it. Joel watched him go, then thoughtfully went downstairs to the library where Hilliard and Inspector Forbes, definitely not the Happiness Boys, were sitting glumly.

"Well, that story is out," said Forbes, "and just the way you wanted it."

Joel nodded. "It ought to bring us something."

"Maybe not," said Hilliard dourly. "Say, I hear your business in New York has been crumby lately."

Joel grinned. "I thought you'd be checking up. As a matter of fact, I was counting on a fat check from Christopher Oates for helping him buy the Torrent manuscript."

"Or a fat check from the insurance company for recovering it," said Hilliard.

"I see what you mean," said Joel thoughtfully. "Don't forget, I never saw the manuscript—not the real one, anyway."

"That's what you say."

Forbes looked at Hilliard, genuinely interested in this outbreak. "What do you mean, Joe?"

"I mean this baby knows something we don't," said Hilliard hotly.

"Plenty," said Joel. "I know that I can walk out of here this minute, for instance, and if I do, you and your cheap alarm-clock mind won't *ever* find the manuscript."

Hilliard glared, and Forbes said, "Calm down, Joe. I'm sure Sloane realizes it's to his interest to get the case cleared up."

"You make it sound like self-defense," said Joel. "If you don't get the murderer, you'll take me—is that the idea?"

"Take that chip off your shoulder," said Forbes. "Nobody's threatening you. How did you know Gerald Torrent was gambling at Lucky Nolan's?"

"I guessed it," said Joel, still sore.

"That's the old cooperation," said Hilliard bitterly.

"Mrs. Torrent is coming down in a few minutes," said Forbes. "Want to stick around while we talk to her?"

"She doesn't like me," said Joel, shaking his head.

"Any questions you think we ought to ask her?"

"Not a one," said Joel. He stood up. "Any objections if my wife and I step out a bit tonight? We'd like to see some of the sights."

"No," said Forbes. "Go ahead." Joel went out and started up the stairs. Mrs. Torrent was coming down. He said, "How do you do, Mrs. Torrent."

Mrs. Torrent glared. "I want to speak to you, Mr. Sloane."

"Yours to command," said Joel.

Mrs. Torrent ignored his gallantry. "I want you to leave here at once," she said coldly. "At a time like this I realize that we must put up with the activities of the police, but I dislike having detectives as my *guests.*"

"Naturally," said Joel. "Mrs. Sloane and I will leave at once."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Torrent.

"Before we leave, though, I'd like to speak to Inspector Forbes for a moment." He smiled ingratiatingly. "As your guest, there were some things I preferred not to tell him—as a dispossessed guest, my duty is clear."

Mrs. Torrent looked at him uncertainly.

"Miss Christina," said Joel, "was crying. Not a very important fact in itself, but when you add to it that she was crying as a result of something her father said, it takes on stature. Add to it the fact that Mr. Torrent had just stepped from Mr. Gerald's room—"

Mrs. Torrent's eyes were blazing.

"I see you get what I mean," said Joel. "Well," he added smoothly, extending his hand, "I'd better say goodbye, and I do hope your troubles will—"

Behind Joel, the library door opened, and Forbes stepped out with Hilliard. "I won't hear of your leaving," said Mrs. Torrent graciously. "You and your charming wife must be our guests until you're ready to return East."

"That's very kind of you," murmured Joel. She turned and went up the stairs.

Joel waited a few minutes, still rather dazed, then went up after her. He started for his own room, then turned away and walked quietly up to the door of Christina Torrent's room near the end of the hall. He stood up close, and heard Mrs. Torrent's low, passionate voice:

"You little fool! Do you want to hang your brother? My own flesh and blood running to outsiders and strangers with—"

"But, Mother, I didn't—"

Joel winced as he heard a loud smack, then Christina's sobbing. He tiptoed away from the door, a troubled look on his face.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GRINNING GODDESS OF CHANCE

"WE MIGHT as well pack up and go home," said Oates glumly.

"Stick around," said Joel. "You might be able to buy this place. It would be a swell location for a grocery store."

"Not enough pedestrian traffic," said Oates solemnly, then realizing that it was a joke, he smiled vaguely, and said, "I wish I'd never started collecting books."

"What a wish," said Joel, shocked. "Do you want me to starve to death?"

"You coaxed me into coming to California," said Oates plaintively. "The whole thing was your idea." He caught himself. "No, it was my idea, but you shouldn't have let me do it."

"Sure," said Garda, leaping to her husband's defense. "He should have looked in his crystal ball and seen that Torrent would be murdered, the manuscript stolen, and he'd be suspected of both."

"Is he?" Oates looked at Joel with new interest. "Did you kill him, Joel?"

Joel blinked, then said, very earnestly, "A long time ago Nicholas Torrent stole a diamond eye from an idol in an Indian Temple. I was that idol. Vengeance!" He drew his finger across his throat in a swift gesture.

Oates shuddered. "What was he doing in India?" he asked.

"I give up," said Joel, and meant it.

Oates then became suddenly aware that Joel and Garda were both in evening dress. "Do you dress for dinner here all the time?" he asked petulantly. "I only brought one shirt."

"Just wear your overalls," said Garda, "and the shoestring you started on. As a matter of fact," she added proudly, "Joel is taking me out tonight."

"It's very bad taste to celebrate at a time like this," said Oates. "Besides, what have you got to celebrate?"

"We've been married three years, six months, two weeks and four days," said Joel.

"And twenty minutes," added Garda.

"Eighteen," said Joel. "Your watch is fast."

"No!" said Oates, with sudden vehemence. "You're not leaving me alone in this place. You can't do that, Joel."

"You're not scared, are you?" asked Joel.

"Yes, I am. A murder was committed right under this roof."

Joel looked up at the roof. "Looks harmless right now. Cheer up," he said. "You'll probably be murdered in your bed tonight, but then it's time something happened to you."

Oates was still protesting volubly when Joel and Garda left the premises a few minutes later. Before Joel left he went into the library for a chat with Forbes.

"Well," said Forbes glumly. "The story on the manuscript has been out all over the country for hours now, and still not a peep from anybody."

"Too soon," said Joel. "Or maybe too late."

"It doesn't seem to bother you much." The inspector eyed Joel's festive attire.

"It does," Joel assured him. "Are you turning Clifford and his girl loose?"

"An hour ago."

"With competent, fearless men to watch over them?"

"Yeah."

"It'll get results," said Joel confidently. "I hope," he added.

"You're coming back here?"

"Your shadows can bring me in if I don't," said Joel.

"What makes you think I'd have you followed?"

"You'd be a sucker not to," said Joel. "Well, so long. See you later."

"So long," said Forbes.

NOLAN'S was a rather imposing, gray-stone edifice, once the California home of a prominent banker, transformed into an up-to-date, elaborate palace of amusement and chance. On the single floor, broken into several levels by easy-grade ramps, there was a swank, modern bar, a large dining room with a good-sized dance floor and an orchestra stage.

Through a long corridor were the gaming rooms. The Sloane family made for the bar first, had a drink, then danced once. They came back to the bar, and found their seats usurped by a young and attractive couple, who apologized profusely, and a little alcoholically.

"It doesn't matter," said Joel, and insisted that they keep the seats. He and Garda stood by the bar, with another drink each, and fell into aimless conversation with their new friends.

"Nice place," said Joel.

"Your first time?" asked the boy.

Joel nodded.

"I come here often," said the boy.

"And believe me, it costs him plenty," said his girl.

"There's a place where you can gamble," said the boy, half-apologetically. "I've been having tough luck."

"That would be fun," said Joel enthusiastically. "What do you say, Garda?"

"I'd like a good game of lotto," said Garda.

Their guide stood up, and led them out of the bar through a long corridor. At the entrance, a thin, rather scholarly looking man in a double-breasted tuxedo was eyeing Joel carefully, though he made no move to stop the party.

"That's Nolan, the boss," said Joel's guide. "He owns the place. They call him Lucky Nolan."

"Why?" asked Garda.

"Because he's lucky," explained Joel. "*Lucky* Nolan—get it?" He smacked her lightly.

"I get it," said Garda ruefully. "My, what a place!" she added breathlessly, as the gaming rooms burst upon them in full brilliance. There were two elaborate roulette wheels, well attended by nice-looking people, a crap table, with a good crowd around it, two blackjack games, doing a bustling business, bird-cage, baccarat and faro.

"I don't see any lotto," said Garda, guarding the vital zone as Joel was behind her.

"They've got everything else," said Joel. He fished in his pockets and brought out a hundred-dollar bill.

Their guide made a beeline for the crap table, fishing a roll of bills from his pocket as he went. "See you later," he called, over his shoulder. "Good luck."

"Thanks," said Joel. He went to a grilled cage, marked *Cashier*, and broke the bill into twenties. He gave Garda two of them, and said, "Try your luck, kid."

"Gee, thanks," said Garda, eyeing the money beatifically. "Is it mine?"

Joel nodded.

"And you won't be mad if I lose?"

"I'll break every bone in your body," said Joel. He turned to the crap table, leaving Garda at one of the wheels. Mr. Nolan was in this doorway now, still eyeing Joel, who had the uncomfortable feeling that Nolan was interested in him.

HE GAVE the stick-man two of the remaining twenties, got eight five-dollar chips and put one of them on the pass line just as a raucous blonde, laughing hilariously, threw the dice. It was a seven, and Joel let the ten dollars ride as she threw again. It was another seven.

With twenty dollars riding, Joel began to take an interest in the game, but as he looked up from the dice table he saw Nolan talking to a hard-faced, substantial-looking yegg. Nolan was plainly pointing out Joel, and Joel took the hint.

The dice rolled as the thug started walking his way. Two aces came to rest face up and Joel walked away from the table just as the newcomer reached it.

He walked over to the wheel, where Garda was standing, and saw the gratifying stack of chips before her. She had five chips on twenty-six and as Joel came over, the ball fluttered into twenty-six. "Bingo!" cried Garda in a loud voice.

The croupier grinned and pushed a good many chips in her direction. "They're a dollar each," said Garda proudly.

Joel pretended he didn't hear. Looking straight ahead, he whispered. "I might have trouble getting out of here. No! Don't look worried. You wait a couple of minutes after I go away, then cash in and leave. They might not stop you.

"If I don't come to the car in fifteen minutes, phone Forbes right way and get him down here. Go on, kid, make your bets."

He sauntered away, proud of the fact that Garda distributed her chips on the board with a steady hand, and didn't even look back. He went to the dice table again, taking his place next to the present shooter. Nolan's man was still at the table, eyeing him openly, and as Joel got the dice, he left his place and walked around near him.

Joel put down five dollars, passed, shot the ten dollars and passed again. Nolan's friend, apparently detailed to watch him, was alongside now, and he said, very friendly, "Better get a bet down, friend. I feel hot."

The dice came back, Joel tossed them, saw a nine, and threw the dice again. "I vibrate to number nine on the numerology charts," he told his watcher, and the dice came to rest with a nine up.

Counting the bet behind the line, Joel now had a stake, and he made the most of it.

When he lost the dice, finally, nearly ten minutes later, he had a sizeable pile of chips and stepped away from the crowd to count them. He noticed, too, that Garda was gone from the wheel, and heaved a sigh of relief. To his own surprise he found that he had amassed nearly a thousand dollars on the roll, and was just dropping the chips into his coat pocket when somebody bumped into him, nearly sending him sprawling.

Joel straightened up to find Nolan's henchman glowering at him. "Whyncha watch where you're goin'?"

Joel sighed. He had been expecting some such encounter. He saw the customers at the various tables looking on with curiosity and alarm, and also saw the doorway leading out of the gambling room filling up with gentry whose tuxedos concealed little or nothing of their underworld background. In the split second's time, too, he saw Lucky Nolan standing in the corridor with Miss Bobby Neville.

"My apologies," murmured Joel to the man who had bumped into him. "It was careless of me to ram my back into your elbow like that."

"We don't allow no disorderly drunks in here," said the thug in a loud voice. "Beat it."

"Gladly," said Joel, and turned to the doorway. The little knot of men parted and Joel walked through. Lucky Nolan, a cigar in his clenched teeth, said, "I'll cash your chips in for you—Mr. Sloane. This way, please." He motioned toward a little room marked private.

Joel looked toward the cashier's cage.

"This way, please," said Nolan, and somebody standing behind Joel gave him a determined push.

"I can take a hint," said Joel, and followed Nolan into the office. None of the other men came after them, and Nolan closed the door and snapped on the lights.

CHAPTER XIV

HAY—NONNY, NONNY

WHILE Nolan composed himself behind the desk, Joel sauntered over to the bookcase and examined with genuine interest the books contained therein. He turned back to Nolan, who was watching him and smiling amiably.

"Very interesting little collection," said Joel. I'm in the rare book business, as a matter of fact."

"Are you really?"

Joel smiled. "As if you didn't know." He came over near the desk and sat down.

"I hope you're having a nice time, Mr. Sloane," said Nolan. "We try to make visitors happy in our little place."

"It's fine," said Joel. "Some of the servants are a little obstreperous, though."

"I saw that clumsy fellow bump into you," said Nolan. "He will be discharged."

Joel laughed out loud.

Nolan frowned. "You were lucky with the dice tonight," he said.

Joel fished a pile of counters from his pocket. "Won about a thousand," he said.

"Ten thousand," replied Nolan casually. "Those are two hundred and fifty dollar chips."

"That's funny," said Joel, examining one of them. He held it up. "They're marked twenty-five dollars—or is that just a typographical error?"

"When I like a man,' said Nolan soberly, "I adjust the prices of chips to suit myself."

"And if you don't like a man?"

"I am prepared to like you very much, Mr. Sloane."

"Thanks," said Joel dryly. "I suppose Bobby Neville told you what a great guy I am."

"She did mention your name," said Nolan. "Frankly, she said you had been bothering her. I want you to go away. Move out of the Torrent house, go back East and mind your own business."

"You're interested in the Torrents?" asked Joel politely.

"You talk too much," said Nolan pointedly. "I want you to do as you're told." He smiled. "I know I can talk frankly to you, Mr. Sloane. You're an honorable man, and what's more, I know I can take your word. Do me a favor," he went on earnestly: "cash in those chips for what I tell you they're worth and forget all about this business."

"I can't," said Joel. "The police think I had a hand in killing Torrent."

Nolan smiled. "That's pure nonsense," he said.

"That's exactly what I told them," protested Joel, "but I couldn't convince them. So you see, in order to clear myself I've got to putter around in this case—much as I dislike it," he added.

Nolan frowned. "I want your word that you'll drop it."

"Is that a threat?"

Nolan nodded.

"You've got me here, and you're going to keep me here? Is that the idea?" Joel looked around the room.

Nolan said, "That's about it. Later tonight, maybe tomorrow, you'll probably have an accident."

"Serious?" asked Joel.

Nolan nodded.

"I feel that I ought to tell you," said Joel, that my wife left your place about ten minutes ago, with instructions to phone the police if I didn't join her in fifteen minutes. They're about up, so"—he stood up— "I'm sure you'll understand why I must leave."

"Sit down," said Nolan quietly, and Joel had a sudden premonition of disaster. He sat down.

"Your wife is quite safe," said Nolan. "Possibly not as comfortable as she might be, but she's alive."

"Where is she?" asked Joel.

"Downstairs, with some of my boys." He smiled. "I saw your little tableau at the roulette wheel, and figured quite accurately that you were sending her out in case of trouble. She didn't go out." His smile broadened. "A very pretty young woman, Mr. Sloane; some of my boys commented on that."

"You dirty son of a—!" said Joel.

"You see," Nolan cut in, "I've got my heart set on seeing you leave town. You're a reckless and brave man, I know, but I doubt if you want to jeopardize Mrs. Sloane's safety. You can look at the books for a few minutes if you want to think about it."

DOWNSTAIRS, in a little private dining-room below the level of the entrance hall, Garda Sloane was being held prisoner by three of Lucky Nolan's henchmen, each an outright thug in appearance and speech.

"We're sorry we have to do this, lady," said one of them earnestly. "It's orders from the boss."

"I know how it is, boys," said Garda cheerfully. "You have to do as you're told."

Her captor heaved a sigh of relief. "That's the spirit, lady."

Garda looked around. "Cute place you have here. If I stay for any length of time, I'll make you some curtains."

He beamed. "Gee. Thanks, lady."

"Don't mention it. Say, do you boys know how to play lotto?"

The principal thug looked at his henchmen. "Lotto?" he repeated blankly. The others were equally nonplussed. "Never heard of it," said one.

"Never mind," said Garda. "We've got to do something to pass the time." She saw a small radio on the table. "Get some music."

One of the boys turned it on, and the strains of a hot rumba band filled the room. "May I have this dance?" said Garda politely.

The man's face fell. "Gee, I can't do them dances," he said.

Garda looked at the others. They shook their heads blankly.

"I'll teach you," said Garda. "Now the way you do it is you keep the upper part of your body perfectly still, and down below, you work up a little wiggle . . . like this."

IN THE brief interval he took to think it over, Joel had time to notice two important things. One was that Nolan's chair was pushed back a few feet from the desk, advantageously out of reach of any push buttons to summon help. The other was that the gambler's neat dinner-jacket showed a bulge over his left breast.

Being right-handed, he could hardly draw with his left hand. Joel walked around to the back of the desk, his face impassive and stony. "It's a deal," he said briefly, and extended his right hand.

Nolan took it, and Joel gripped his hand hard, yanking him forward.

Nolan's pleased, gratified smile faded, and as Joel pulled him he reached frantically upward with his left hand. Clumsily and awkwardly, as Joel guessed he would, and then Joel's left fist landed on the side of Nolan's face.

It was a hard blow—hard enough to deprive Nolan momentarily of the power of speech.

He toppled over backward, across the desk, and Joel threw himself on top of him, ripping open his dinner jacket and yanking at the gun with his left hand.

As it came free, he dropped Nolan's hand and crashed his right fist to the gambler's jaw, knocking him cold. He flew to the door, bolted it, and came back to the desk just as Nolan reached up on it toward a push button. Joel brought the butt of the gun down smartly on his fingers. He yelped sharply, and Joel said, "Do that again, and I'll break it off."

Nolan sat on the floor, rubbing his hand.

Joel sat on the desk, and smiled down at Nolan. "The biter bit," he said dryly. "How would you like to have me blow your ugly face off?"

"Not at all," said Nolan coolly. "It wouldn't do your wife any good, either."

"Stand up. Get away from the desk."

Nolan stood up and backed away, as directed.

"Let this sink in," said Joel slowly, "because it's important. To save my wife even one moment's discomfort, I'd cheerfully kill a dozen rats like you."

Nolan nodded.

"All right. You're going to talk to your man downstairs and tell him to let my wife go. She is to phone here from the first spot outside she comes to." He brought the gun up level with Nolan's eyes. "Do it."

Nolan reached for the phone, his eyes

on the revolver, and dialed the extension number. He repeated the instructions Joel gave him, then hung up without another word.

Joel said, "Sit down."

He perched on the desk opposite Nolan and they sat in silence for only a few minutes when the buzzer sounded and Nolan picked up the phone. Joel heard Garda's voice and yanked the phone away from him, covering him all the time with the gun.

"Darling where are you?"

"In a drugstore down the street. Joel! What's happened to you?"

"Wait there for me," said Joel, and hung up. He turned to Nolan and said, "I'm going now. You can have your men stop me if you want to, but I'm warning you that I'll shoot my way out if I can." He grinned, feeling better now that Garda was safe. "You don't want any trouble here; you don't want the place to get a bad name, do you?"

"You are quite free to go, Mr. Sloane," said Nolan evenly.

Joel said, "Thanks," and walked away from the desk, the gun in his hand. He was just unlocking the door, when he remembered something and turned around. Nolan was sitting watching him.

"I nearly forgot," said Joel. "I won some money here tonight."

Nolan smiled and picked up the stack of chips, counting them deftly without looking at them.

"One thousand and twenty dollars," he said. "Right?" He reached in his breast pocket for a wallet, laid down a thousand-dollar bill and a twenty and pushed them across the desk.

"Thanks," said Joel, and picked up the money. He put it in his pocket and turned to the door again.

HE SAW Nolan's men eyeing him as he went through the corridor to the street, but no attempt was made to stop him. In the drugstore on the corner he found Garda, waiting anxiously at the fountain. She seemed to have suffered no ill effects from the brief confinement, but the story she had to tell was harrowing. "First they held lighted matches to my feet," she told him breathlessly. "Then they stuck pins in me—long ones—and made me undergo the Chinese water torture—still I wouldn't do it."

"Do what?"

"Oh, you know." She hung her head shyly. "They wanted me to play lotto with them."

Joel grinned. "Nolan painted a rather black picture of what might be happening to you."

Garda laughed. "Those nice gangsters—they wouldn't hurt a fly. I promised to come back some day and sew some buttons on their revolver holsters—the poor boys, they need a woman around."

They were both silent for quite a while on the long drive home. As they got out of the city limits and a straight, clear road gleamed ahead, Joel said, "This trip isn't being very much fun, is it?"

"Not bad," said Garda. "We've had robbery, murder, threats . . . all very amusing. Garda and Joel," she declaimed, "in five minutes of good, clean killing."

"I was just thinking," said Joel, "that probably you'd be having a better time back in New York."

"Are we going home?" asked Garda ingenuously.

"I can't," said Joel. "I wish I could, but I've got to stay here until this mess is washed up. But there's nothing to keep you here."

"No?" Garda looked up at him, but Joel kept his eyes on the road. "Nothing but you?" she said softly.

"Chances are," said Joel casually, "that I could follow you in about a week."

"Feet first?" asked Garda.

"What do you mean?" asked Joel, ostensibly greatly surprised.

"Oh, come clean, Sherlock," said Garda impatiently. "Did that two-bit thug throw a scare into you?"

"In a word," said Joel, "yes." He frowned. "They're going to try to get at me through you. It puts me in a spot."

"I can see that," said Garda.

"Nolan is mean," said Joel, "and the clouting I gave him tonight won't improve his disposition. They tried to get us both tonight and they struck out. The next time they might hit safely . . . a single or maybe a double." He glanced back over his shoulder, at a car following them a hundred yards behind.

"Something wrong?" asked Garda.

Joel looked worried.

"Are they following us?"

"I hope not," said Joel. "I'm going to slow down when I get to a curb. You get out."

"Not me," said Garda. She looked in the mirror and saw that the car was coming up. "Probably too late, anyway. Step on it."

THEIR car was a small but quite powerful roadster, with the top down. Joel nodded and said, "Slide down in your seat."

He did the same, and as the car crept up until it was only a hundred feet behind them, Joel gave it the gun. The car shot forward, and around a bend.

Before the pursuing car could follow suit they were well in the lead and luckily out of easy gunfire.

"Attaboy, Seabiscuit!" cried Garda.

Joel grinned, his eyes straight ahead, but when he glanced up in the mirror, the grin faded.

His speedometer showed a little better than seventy, which he feared was tops for the car, but the car behind was creeping up.

They were on a lone, deserted stretch of road, running parallel to a row of farms. No gas stations or lighted builidings were in sight and Joel decided to run it out.

The car behind was nearly up to them, staying to the left side of the road, and Joel stayed as far over on the left as was safe. There were two men in the other car, a long, black, low coupé. Then he couldn't see the car in the mirror at all and knew that it was coming up alongside.

He shot a glance toward it and saw two cold, impassive faces staring at him stonily. Then he saw the driver twist the wheel, the car swerved toward them, and Joel yanked the wheel hard to the right to avoid a crash.

They hit, though, a swerving glancing blow, and Joel's car left the road, swaying dangerously on two wheels. He knew they were going to turn over and instinctively threw his arm out to protect Garda.

Then, with a sickening crash, the car fell over, turned twice, and Joel, thrown clean, landed head first in a haystack. He scrambled out of it, crying, "Garda! Honey! Where are you?"

"Here," said a weak voice, and Joel scrambled up on the top of the stack. Garda grinned up at him weakily. Her face was smudged, her hat demolished, and her skirt was torn but she was all right.

"Thank God!" said Joel piously. He put his arms around her to lift her up but Garda pushed him off.

"Get up, darling," said Joel. "We'll flag a car and be home in no time."

"And leave all this wonderful hay," said Garda, lying back on it. "No, sir!"

CHAPTER XV

PEOPLE DO GET HUNGRY

THE library was ablaze with lights when Joel finally swung the crudely repaired car into the Torrent driveway at three A.M. "Something doing," he said.

"Another murder, no doubt," said Garda casually. "Ho hum, I wonder who it was this time."

"You're getting quite blasé," said Joel.

"And little wonder," said Garda. They went up the steps to the house and into the library. Forbes and Christina were having a drink together, and were shocked at the disheveled appearance of the Sloane family.

"Hello, Sloane," said Forbes, very cordially. "What on earth happened to you?"

"A little accident," said Joel briefly. "I'll tell you later."

"Too bad, old man," said Hilliard warmly.

The undoubtedly genuine nature of the welcome startled Joel. "Don't tell me you boys are glad to see me," he said cautiously.

"Pull up a couple of chairs," said Forbes cordially. "Have a drink."

"We never touch the stuff," said Joel, and poured two drinks. "Are you just being nice to a condemned man?"

"You didn't really think we suspected you? Ha-ha, that's rich."

"In due time," said Garda, "these boys will no doubt tell us what has happened. Let's be patient."

Forbes put down his glass and leaned across the desk. Very earnestly, he said, "Your hunch was red-hot. About an hour ago we got a frantic telephone call from Victor Starret . . ."

"You mean, Victor Starret the collector?" asked Joel excitedly. "Something about the manuscript?"

"Plenty about the manuscript," said Forbes briefly. "Starret is on his way here now, and he's bringing *his* manuscript." He looked from Joel to Hilliard, then back to Joel, and shook his head in admiration and awe. "How you worked it out beats me, and Starret wasn't very coherent on the telephone, but I know this much . . . four years ago he bought the manuscript from Torrent for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"From Torrent?" said Joel blankly, his face falling.

"I gathered it was through an agent," said Forbes. "He was excited and hung up, finally saying he would leave right away and bring the manuscript down here." He turned to Hilliard, and raised his glass. "Well, Joe, a nice night's work, eh?"

"Not bad," said Hilliard.

"Don't forget Joel Sloane when you give out the story to the newspapers. A little advertising won't hurt my business right now."

"We'll take care of you," Forbes promised.

"Yeah," said Hilliard. "On the level, Sloane, did you guess all that about the manuscript having been sold?"

"It was a shot in the dark," said Joel earnestly.

"You've got a good aim," said Hilliard.

"I've got every available man out hunting for that librarian," said Forbes quite pompously. "He's either a crook or a nut, but either way, he's at the bottom of this. It's a two-man job the way I see it: Gerald Torrent and Wilkes."

"Is that your analysis, too?" Joel asked Hilliard.

"It sounds pretty good," said Hilliard in non-committal fashion. "Frankly, I don't care much, just so I get the real manuscript."

Joel turned to Garda. "Aren't you terribly tired?" he asked solicitously.

"No," said Garda. "I'm wide-awake."

"Nonsense," said Joel sternly. "Your eyelids are heavy and drooping; you're worn out."

"Who, me?"

"You're faint with fatigue," Joel assured her. "You can't wait till you get upstairs and into your little bed."

Garda stood up. "All right," she said with a sigh. She walked out of the room muttering, "I can remember when I had a mind of my own."

WHEN she was gone, Hilliard looked at Joel curiously. "Well?" he asked.

"What you say about Wilkes is all very interesting," said Joel, "Fascinating, even, but I can't see a man like Lucky Nolan taking an especial interest in Arnold Wilkes."

"What?" snapped Forbes. "Did you say Nolan?"

Joel reached in his coat pocket, lifted out Nolan's gun and dropped it on the table with a crash. "Exhibit A," he said. "I took this away from the well-known sportsman about an hour ago." He told them what had happened in the gambling house, and about the accident on the ride home.

Hilliard and Forbes looked blank. Forbes, too, was obviously puzzled and worried. "It must be Wilkes," said Forbes. "I can't see it any other way."

"Then you can't see very far," said Joel. A man like Nolan gets mixed up in a case like this for only one reason—money. I'll go along with your Wilkes theory only far enough to concede that he probably copied the manuscript. He knew something about this case, and that's why you ought to have every available man out—not for Wilkes but for his body."

Forbes blinked. He saw a theory going on the rocks, but he stayed with it. "You're going off half-cocked on some theory of your own," he said persistently. "Wilkes knew you had spotted the manuscript for a phony, and he knew that if Torrent found out his life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. So he scrammed, first shutting up the old man."

"All right," said Joel. "Now explain Nolan's interest in this."

"Suppose you do that," suggested Hilliard.

"Gerald probably owes Nolan a lot of money," said Joel. "Maybe enough to make Nolan tremendously interested in keeping Gerald out of jail. The boy is co-heir with his mother and sister to some whopping insurance policies and if Gerald was convicted of his father's murder, he wouldn't get a cent. Nolan offered me ten grand if I would leave town and forget about the Torrents. That's a lot of money if he just doesn't like my face." He looked from Hilliard to Forbes—they were interested but not enthusiastic. "It'll take a long time to clear this mess up if you just go on hunting for Arnold Wilkes."

"But we'll have Starret in the morning," said Forbes, "we'll get the facts."

"That's our only chance," said Joel. "Even then, you may find that the guilty man has covered his tracks somehow. And A number one brain figured this out, gents. Not a dope like Gerald Torrent, or a book-worn recluse like Arnold Wilkes." He stood up, said, "Goodnight, fellow sleuths," and started out. As he neared the door the telephone rang, and he waited while Hilliard picked it up, passing it to Forbes. "It's for you—Ned Price, with a report."

Forbes took the 'phone eagerly, said, "Yes, Price," and listened for a moment. "Okay," he said, finally. "Stay with them." Then he hung up and said, "Just a routine report on Clifford and the girl."

"Did your bloodhound mention Nolan's place?" asked Joel, from the door.

"No. Why?"

Joel smiled amiably. "Bobby Neville was in there. She put the finger on me for Nolan."

Forbes looked hurt, and Hilliard said, "That's a great pair of boys you've got trailing those two." He said it bitterly.

"Anybody can make a mistake," said Forbes defensively.

"Mistake, my foot!" said Hilliard hotly. "That Ned Price is a chiseler from way back in prohibition days. He's working for Clifford, not for you."

"The girl *was* in Nolan's place," said Joel pleasantly. He started to leave but Forbes stopped him.

"Wait a minute. Will you make a complaint against Nolan?"

Joel shook his head. "It's my word against his. He would call me a liar and that would be the end of it."

Forbes looked worried. "I've got to have a complaint," he said. "This Nolan is awfully well connected politically, and if I had him pinched on just somebody's say-so, he'd have me back on the pavements in twenty-four hours."

"There's the gun I took away from him," Joel pointed out.

"He's sure to have a permit," said Hilliard skeptically.

"I have it," said Joel. "Between my good wife and myself, we have a fine case against Nolan. Assault, attempted kidnaping, all sorts of heinous crimes."

"That ought to be good enough," said Hilliard. He turned to Forbes and said, "Sloane is right about that. We don't want Nolan running around loose with whatever he knows about this case."

Forbes nodded and reached for the 'phone. Joel heard him give orders to have Nolan picked up and brought out to the Torrent house.

GARDA was in bed, the lights were out and she was ostensibly asleep, but as Joel tiptoed over to the closet, she stirred and said, "Joel?"

Joel said, "No, it's a strange man."

Garda smiled sleepily, and said, "Oh, goody!"

"Why aren't you asleep?" asked Joel.

"I'm not sleepy," said Garda. "Daddy, tell me a bedtime story."

Joel sat down on her bed, patted her affectionately on the head and said, "of course, dear. Let me see. Once upon a time there was a good fairy and—"

"I'm sick and tired of those lousy good fairies," said Garda.

"All right," said Joel, "Once upon a time there was a rare book dealer who was—"

Garda made a face. "I want a true story. Don't you know any true stories?"

"If I did," said Joel, "I would hardly be sucker enough to tell them to my wife."

"Tell one about something to eat," said Garda, sitting up now.

Joel was aghast. "Are you hungry?"

"I think so," said Garda. "If I had something to eat I could make sure."

"Go to sleep," said Joel. "It'll be time for breakfast soon." He got up and went into the dressing-room, returning in a few minutes to flop down on his own bed. He snapped off the light. "Good night, Garda."

"You haven't got an old bone, or a crust of bread?" asked Garda plaintively.

"No," said Joel, with great finality.

"If you should happen to dream about a table d'hote dinner," said Garda, "will you be sure to wake me up?"

"I will," Joel promised. "Good night, Garda."

"Goodnight, dear."

Garda lay awake for quite some time, and then, as Joel's rhythmic breathing indicated the depths of slumber in which he sank quite easily, she turned over, looked across at him, then sat up in bed and reached under it for her slippers.

She put them on, got out of bed and into a robe, then pattered noiselessly to the door. She closed it behind her gently as she went out, then proceeded down the hall to the stairs.

Behind her the door of Gerald Torrent's room opened noiselessly, he stared after her for a moment, then stepped out into the hall and along to the stairs. He wore a dressing gown over his pajamas and his right hand was clutched tight around something that made a bulge in his pocket. He stood at the top of the stairs, while Garda noiselessly and stealthily went down, then started down after her. There were lights still glowing in the library, evidenced by a shaft of light from under the door, and Garda went by this room very quietly and very slowly, making not a sound.

Gerald followed suit, trailing her toward the back of the house.

Upstairs, the door of Christopher Oates' room opened and the old codger himself appeared, in an old-fashioned nightgown, a peaked cap on his head. He looked up and down the hall, then went to Joel's room and knocked on the door.

In bed, Joel stirred. "What is it?"

"It's me. Oates!"

Joel groaned. "Go 'way."

Oates opened the door and stepped in. Joel sat up in bed and snapped on the reading light.

"I was lying awake," explained Oates, "and I thought I heard somebody moving around in the hall. After what's happened here, I was worried."

"Go on back to bed," said Joel, and just then he glanced over to the other bed—empty. He swung out onto the floor like a fireman.

"What is it?" asked Oates.

"Garda! She's gone!"

CHAPTER XVI

Night In Armor

JOEL caught up the dressing gown on the run, and made for the door, Oates after him. He took no particular pains to be quiet, the door slammed after him, and

as they reached the stairs and went down, doors opened behind them.

Mrs. Torrent appeared, as did Vincent Charlton.

Joel was halfway down the stairs when he heard some sounds below.

Stealthy sounds, as if someone moving quietly about. He edged over to the far side of the steps, where there were less likely to be creaks and went swiftly but noiselessly down to the floor below.

He stopped, and then as he heard sounds in the back of the house, he moved along the hall in that direction.

It was dark, and he moved slowly for fear of stumbling. At the end of the hall, he saw a beam of light under a door and went swiftly toward this, just as a voice behind him snapped, "Don't move!"

Joel froze in his tracks and turned slowly around.

It was dark and he could distinguish only vaguely the outlines of some person, but he saw the gleam of something shiny in the right hand. The man with the gun moved forward, stumbled suddenly, and fell.

The gun went off.

There was a woman's scream which Joel recognized as Garda, and he hurled himself like a football player in a flying tackle at the prone figure. There was the sound of a terrific struggle, and suddenly the hall lights went on.

Joel found himself atop of Inspector Forbes, hammering away at that luckless sleuth. The valiant Christopher Oates, had snatched up the lance from the suit of armor which stood in the hall, was bashing away at the inspector with this old-fashioned implement. He stopped short, the lance in midair, as he saw who was really the object of his assault, and turned around in bewilderment, the outstretched lance sharply poking Joe Hilliard as he approached.

Joel got up, murmured, "Sorry," and whirled around to look for Garda.

His wife, terror-stricken, was cowering against the wall, one hand behind her back. Down the hall stood Gerald Torrent, wide-eyed in amazement. Vincent Charlton and Mrs. Torrent, equally non-plussed were standing near the stairs.

Forbes picked himself up and advanced menacingly on Garda. "What is going on here?" he rasped.

"I didn't mean it," said Garda, trembling. "I was—"

Joel stepped over to her side. Gently he asked: "What's the matter, honey? What happened?"

Garda moved over to the grim medieval armored figure and put her left hand behind this, hiding whatever she had clutched tight in this fist. Forbes stepped forward, pushed Joel away, and said, "Let me see what you've got there."

Garda hesitated, "It's nothing, really, Inspector. Honestly, I was only—"

"Let me see it," said Forbes sternly.

Garda slowly started to withdraw her hand, then changed her mind. "But really, Inspector, it's nothing at all that might interest you. It's only that I was—"

The irritated Forbes yanked her arm away from the iron gentleman behind which she was shielding it, then his eyes popped in amazement as Garda held up a partially-gnawed chicken wing. "I was hungry," she said weakly.

Joel roared with laughter, while Inspector Forbes glared sheepishly, then Forbes and Oates joined in the merriment.

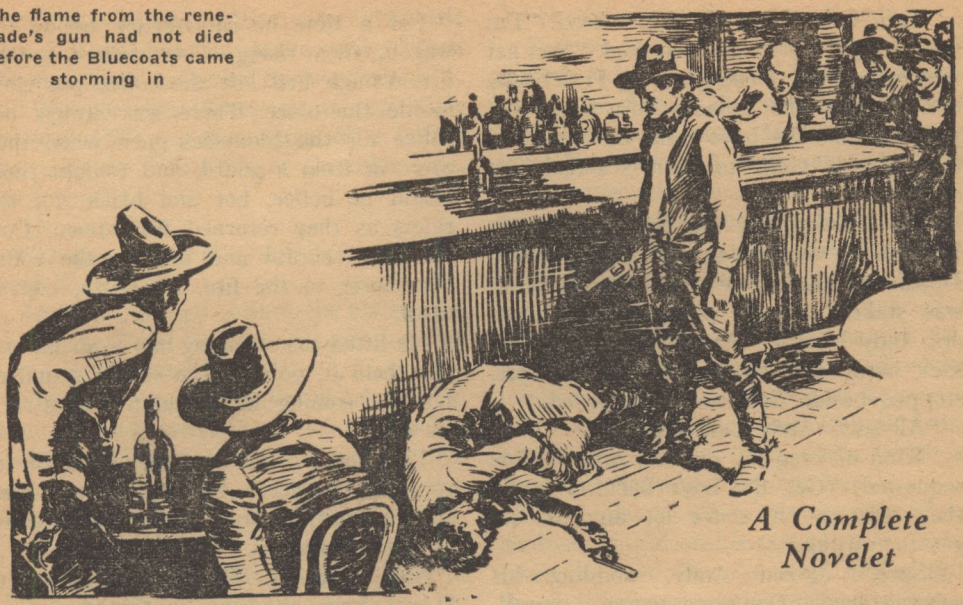
Garda, all over her fright now, laughed heartily, too. Their laughter died suddenly, however, as as piercing scream from Mrs. Torrent broke in on them.

Her features convulsed in terror, she stood open-mouthed, her index finger pointing to the armor.

When Oates clutched the lance he tore away the gauntlet, too. Dangling from the metal arm was a limp, human hand. Forbes followed her stare, jerked visibly, then jumped forward tearing at the helmet.

In his haste, he toppled the figure from the stand onto the stone floor and the metal fell apart revealing the lifeless body of Arnold Wilkes.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



The flame from the renegade's gun had not died before the Bluecoats came storming in

A Complete Novelet

Rifles at the River

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Cowboy, Oil Your Gun," "Moo Moo, Black Sheep," etc.

There's nothing so dangerous as a hungry Sioux—and unless the beef could be delivered on time, there was no man on earth could keep the redskins from rampaging off the reservation . . .

I

EARL WORTH was at the fire, sitting on a box with Ben Lumas cutting his hair; and Button, the day wrangler, had unearthed a new pair of leather foxed California pants and was thrusting his spindle shanks into them.

The Floursack outfit was getting ready to go to town; and over beside the chuck wagon Cole Favor, thirty-year-old foreman of this Floursack trail herd, sat morosely leaning against a wagon wheel and watching the preparations. He wondered if he had been right in giving permission for the boys to go in.

They were ahead of schedule, a week's drive from their delivery point, and the crew had been mighty fine. Still there was doubt in Cole Favor's mind. Things might go wrong; something might happen there in that little town of Division.

Cole looked across the dark flats to where the tiny pinpoints of light showed Division's location, and shook his head. Dough Smith, the fat Floursack cook, came around the tailgate of the wagon, replendent in his town finery, and stood surveying his boss. Dough was the best wagon cook west of the Pecos and as such was privileged.

"Ain't you goin' in, Cole?" he demanded.

Cole shook his head.

"Ain't you goin' to take one little drink with the boys an' kind of look around to see what makes the owl hoot?" Dough's voice grieved.

Again Cole Favor shook his head. "I'm goin' to stay here," he answered. "You get that grub order, Dough, an' for Pete's sake don't forget the tobacco this time. An' you see that the boys come out to stand their guards. Goin' to town is a fool idea anyhow."

Earl Worth's hair was cut; and Button fastened his California pants. With a grunt, Dough waddled over to where his horse was staked; caught a stirrup and went up. Andy Nichols, *segundo* for the Floursack herd, rode in out of the darkness, stopped beside Cole and dismounted.

"All set," Andy announced.

"Kind of keep tab on 'em, Andy," Cole requested. "Get the boys back to stand their guards, an' don't let any of 'em get too drunk."

"Sure," agreed Andy, nodding his grizzled head. "Don't you worry a morsel, Cole. We're goin' to be good boys."

There was a little resentment in Andy's voice. Cole acknowledged the resentment. After all, Andy was right. The Floursack crew were not children; they were grown men and, with the exception of Button, to a man they were older than their foreman. "Get along then," Cole snapped, "an' tomorrow don't think yore headaches are goin' to keep you from movin cattle!"

Andy grinned cheerfully and stepped up on his horse. The crew, except for the men on guard at the herd, was ready to go. "I'll bring you back a drink," Andy offered, and without waiting for Cole's reply, started his horse.

COLE FAVOR sat stock-still beside the wagon wheel. The crew was gone. The beat of hoofs came back across the grass and the night, and mingling with the hoofbeats came a shrill whoop. Cole Favor grinned. That would be Button, he surmised. Button, the baby of the outfit, the spoiled kid of the eleven men and a cook, the butt of their jokes.

The night air was chilly and Cole huddled a little closer into his thin coat. Good little Button. He made a hand. He would do, Button would.

For a time he sat quietly beside the wagon, then rising, Cole walked to the fire. Dough had left the coffee pot close beside the blaze. There was always hot coffee for the Floursack men when they came in from a guard, and tonight there would be coffee, hot and black, for the riders as they returned from town. Cole poured a cupful and kicking the coffee box closer to the fire, sat down, cup in hand.

He lifted the steaming cup to drink and then held it, poised. The steady sound of a horse coming in to camp had struck his ears.

The horse came on, the sound of its approach muffled by the crisp-curled buffalo grass; stopped, and a voice hailed form the darkness. "Hello, the camp!"

Cole stood up. "Howdy," he answered. "Light down an' come in to the fire."

There were sounds of a man dismounting and then a stranger strode into the firelight. Cole placed his cup on the box.

The stranger was handsome, Cole Favor noted. He was big, black-haired, smooth-shaven except for a closely cropped mustache. His nose was even and regular and his red lips were smiling. Somehow Cole Favor did not like the handsome man. He was too assured, too bold. Cole nodded. "Howdy," he said again. Coffee?"

The handsome man shook his head. "No thanks," he answered. "Is this the Floursack herd?"

"Yeah," Cole agreed and then in more detail, "This is the Roundtree an' Favor herd, bound for Spruce Point."

"You are . . . ?" said the stranger.

"I'm foreman," Cole completed, not giving his name.

"I'm Morgan Andreas from the agency." The handsome man came around the fire and held out his hand. Unwillingly Cole took it. "I happened to be in Division and thought I'd ride out."

Cole was matching names and facts in his head. Morgan Andreas. That was the name of the agent at Spruce Point. Cole let go the man's hand. "Yo're the agent, ain't you?" he asked.

Andreas nodded. "You're quite a little ahead of schedule," he commented. "When do you figure to reach Spruce Point?"

"We got Tin River to cross," Cole drawled. "We got three days' drive before we reach the Tin. Yo're on the other side, ain't you?"

"A short way."

"Then we ought to be deliverin' this week," Cole said.

Andreas gestured toward the coffee pot. "I believe I will have a cup of coffee," he said, apologetically.

Cole got a cup from the chuck wagon, filled it and extended it to the Indian agent, who took it. Cole lifted his own cup from the box and gestured. "Set down," he said.

ANDREAS sat down, took a drink of hot coffee, swallowed, and glanced up at the Floursack foreman. Favor was thirty but didn't look it. Indeed, there in the firelight he appeared scarcely twenty. There were no marks on Favor's face to show the man underneath, nothing in his body's attitude to speak of his watchfulness.

Favor was a partner of old man Roundtree, a full half-owner in the five-hundred-thousand acres and the thirty-thousand cattle that made up the Floursack. He had earned his place, earned it the hard way, in ten years. He had looked through smoke and walked away to leave a man lying on the ground. He had ridden the northers. He had taken the rough and the smooth and had come through. Face and body did not show that, and Morgan Andreas could not see Favor's eyes. If he had been able to, he might not have spoken his next sentences.

"You said you were . . . ?"

"I'm just the foreman," Cole Favor said.

Andreas pursed his lips and nodded. "I suppose you're anxious to windup your drive and get home," he suggested.

"We want to get done, sure."

"I might help you," Andreas said, eyeing Cole speculatively. "You know we had trouble last fall with our contract herd?"

"No." Cole's voice was unaccented.

Andreas nodded again. "Quite a lot of trouble," he continued. "The herd was stampeded before it reached the agency. Renegades, I suppose. Anyhow the troops from Fort Brossard went out after them. They never did get all the cattle and I understand that Greenman who had the contract last year, is suing the government for the cattle he lost."

"So?" said Cole.

"Yes. I tell you what I'll do for you. I'll take delivery right here at Division tomorrow. That will turn you loose and avoid any chance of the trouble being repeated." Andreas' eyes were bright as they searched Cole Favor's face.

For a long minute Favor was silent. Andreas moved on his seat, drinking again from his cup. Favor's voice was a slow drawl. "We contracted to deliver to Spruce Point," he said gently.

"Certainly," Andreas agreed. "But if I take delivery here at Division—"

Cole drawled on as though he had not heard the man: "So we'll deliver at Spruce Point. About a week from now."

Andreas opened his mouth, closed it again, and then once more he spoke. "You may have trouble," he warned. "The troops at Fort Brossard have not been able to keep the young bucks on the Reservation. I can't answer for what will happen to your cattle."

"I can," Cole Favor announced coldly.

Andreas got up and put his coffee cup on the box. "Well then," he said, "I've tried to save you trouble. I've made you an offer."

"An' I turned it down," Cole Favor said.

Andreas shrugged. "It's all I can do," he said. "Good night. Thanks for the coffee."

The Floursack foreman made no answer and after a moment Andreas walked out from the fire. Cole Favor heard the man mount, heard the steadily diminishing beat of the hoofs. He drank from his coffee cup, lukewarm now, grunted and refreshed the cup from the pot.

"Now," said Cole Favor, staring at the fire, "what sort of jackpot is he buildin' up, I wonder? First time I ever heard of a man tryin' to save another man trouble that away."

II

AT MIDNIGHT Cole Favor once again sat against the wagon wheel. He had been to the herd twice, he had ridden out with the change of guards, men who had come out from town to take their fellows' places and allow the others to go in for a taste of urban hospitality. The returning revelers had spoken highly of Division and its lures. Wine, women and song were prevalent in Division, not to speak of whisky and games of chance.

Now Favor was waiting for the second guard to return from town. He hoped all the boys would come back.

Cole straightened from his position against the wheel when he heard the horses. These riders were not revelers, reluctantly returning to duty, but men who came in haste, urgently. Horses appeared in the firelight, Ben Lumas flung himself down and, seeing Cole rising from beside the wagon, paused in midstride.

"What is it, Ben?" Cole Favor asked quietly.

"The kid," Ben Lumas answered. "Button. The kid."

"Yes?" Harsh overtones in the foreman's voice.

"They killed him!" Lumas flung out the words. "Jesse an' me come out for you. Andy sent us. The boys . . ."

"I'll get a horse!" Favor snapped, and disappeared into the dark.

They rode toward Division, the steady *pu—pu—pup, pu—pu—pup* of the lope punctuating Ben Lumas' words.

"At the Palace Bar. There was a roulette game an' the kid bucked it. We didn't see, but the danged tinhorn shot him! We'll take that town apart, Cole!"

Cole Favor said nothing. The horses slid in the dust in front of the Palace Bar and on the sidewalk a hard-faced man stepped out from the little crowd, reached the hitch rail, and stopped.

"Don't start nothin', men!" he warned them; and Cole could see the light reflected from the star on his coat. "Yore pardner asked for it. He reached."

"Where's the kid?" Favor demanded, and hardly recognized his own voice.

"Yore outfit is down at Schriver's store," the marshal answered. "Don't yuh start nothin' in Division!"

Cole did not even hear him. He was walking down the street, leading his horse, Ben and Jesse Hatton following him. Before Schriver's store, Favor stopped, dropping his reins. "Wait," he commanded, and went inside.

Button was on the counter. Andy Nichols was standing beside him and Dough Smith was near the boy's feet. Behind the counter was a lanky man with stringy hair—Schriver. Dough's face was puffy as though he was drunk or had been crying. Over beside the wall the rest of the Floursack crew stood together, a tight, hard knot of men.

"What happened?" Cole demanded.

"You can see," Nichols said bitterly. "There's the kid."

"How?" Cole's voice was harsh.

"He played roulette," Andy said. "We were all over town. Nobody from our outfit saw it. By gum, Cole, we'll take this town apart for this! We waited for you . . ."

Under the impact of the foreman's eyes, Andy Nichols stopped. "And who will deliver the cattle?" Favor's voice was cold. "The gang is outside, waitin' for you to start your war. When it's over, who handles the herd?"

Andy Nichols choked down a curse and Dough was almost crying. "But it's *Button*, Cole!"

"I know," Cole Favor said.

"You think we're goin' to let this pass as if nothin' had happened?" Rufe Ewing demanded, his face white and sick.

Ewing's little eyes were bloodshot and the scar across his mouth made one corner dip in a perpetual snarl. Cole had been

with Rufe below the border when that scar was acquired. His eyes met and held Ewing's.

"Do you think I *will* let it pass, Rufe?" he asked quietly.

The light flamed in Ewing's eyes and he snarled, "Then what are we waitin' for?"

"To deliver the herd," Cole Favor said quietly.

The quiet spread with the words. Dough sighed, lifted a fat hand and lowered it. "We got cattle," he said, and Andy Nichols nodded.

COLE turned toward the man behind the counter. "How do we go about lookin' after him?" the foreman asked. For the moment he had won. He had come in time.

Ten minutes later would have been too late. The Floursack would have been in action; but now Cole could hold them.

"Why," said the storekeeper, "Bailey down to the barber shop . . ."

"Get him." Cole nodded toward Rufe. Rufe hesitated and then moved reluctantly toward the door. As he reached it, a man wearing a blue uniform and a black slouch hat with gold cord around the crown, came through the entrance and directly toward Cole Favor. Cole read the insignia on uniform collar and shoulder. A cavalry major. He waited until the officer stopped, pausing before him:

"I came in to warn you," the soldier's voice was stern, his face a hard mask, "don't start trouble in Division. There is law in this town."

Cole looked over the officer from hat crown to boot toe. "We don't like the Army," he said slowly. "They're always a little late."

The major flushed. Cole turned away his head and spoke again to Schriver. "I want two new blankets," he ordered, softly. "You"—he turned to Andy Nichols—"ride on out to camp. It's time to change guards. You all better go. I'll stay here an' look after Button."

The major was fumbling with his gloves. His voice was awkward and apologetic. "I'm sorry," the officer said. "I . . ."

"You can't do no good," Cole said bluntly, "an' the boys don't like your kind."

The major flushed again, began an angry sentence and then turned and stalked out.

Rufe Ewing came back with a fat man who said that he was Bailey; he exhibited a professional nonchalance as he picked up Button's limp arm.

Schriver came around the counter and spoke pleadingly to Cole. "Cain't you take him out of here? It's ruinin' business. Cain't you git him out?"

Cole nodded. Andy Nichols and Dough were talking together, low-voiced. Rufe was helping Bailey cover Button with the clean new blankets.

"You boys go to camp," Cole said again. "Ride out now!" His voice was sharp. Andy hesitated. Dough took a step toward the door, and when the cook moved the others followed. Cole breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Bailey. "Where do you want to take the kid?" he asked.

"Down to my shop," Bailey answered. "You take his feet."

When Cole left the barber shop—the shop where now Button lay lifeless in the back room—he walked along the street until he came to Schriver's. There he found his horse standing before the hitchrail. Cole mounted and rode slowly along.

IN FRONT of the Palace there was still a crowd that grew silent as he came abreast. Cole turned his horse toward the sidewalk, stopped, and without dismounting, spoke to the man who wore the star.

"Who shot the kid?"

The marshal stepped out into the street. He put his hand on the swell of Cole's saddle and looked up. "Doss Norman," said the marshal, his tone matter of fact. "Yore man reached for his gun. There was half a dozen witnesses."

Behind the marshal Cole could see Morgan Andreas, his handsome face in the full light. There were soldiers in the crowd, teamsters, a cowman or two; but for the most part the men that were as-

sembled in front of the Palace bore the ineffable badge of renegades, loiterers, men who owned no honest occupation.

"Witnesses?" drawled Cole Favor. "These lice?" With that he turned his horse and rode on.

The marshal stepped back, and in the crowd a man said: "By gosh, he's takin' it."

Beside that man a grizzled teamster spoke. "Texas men," the teamster said softly. "They'll be back, buddy. They'll be back."

Cole was grimly silent when he returned to the Floursack camp. Andy, Ben Lumas, Jesse Hatton and Dough, one at a time, came to him and spoke, and Cole answered with a grunt. The others did not try to speak to the boss.

It was nearly morning when, finally, Cole broke his silence. "We'll take the wagon to town today," he said. "And bury the kid. Two of you got to stay with the herd. We'll draw straws."

Earl Worth and Rufe got short straws and stayed behind. Dough drove the bed wagon, and the rest of the Floursack trail crew rode behind it.

They said nothing, made no display of anger or of desire for revenge when they reached Division. From Bailey's barber shop they took Button's body and loaded it in the bed wagon.

On a little rise above the town they dug a grave and placed the blanket-wrapped form of their kid horse-wrangler in the earth. When Ben Lumas had thrown the last shovelful of earth on the rounded mound, he leaned on the handle of his shovel and looked down at the town.

"All wood," Ben Lumas said, referring to the buildings of Division. "She'll burn nice, Cole."

"After we've made delivery," said Cole Favor. "Let's go. We've finished here for now."

And so, with no more disturbance than that, the Floursack trail-crew and the Floursack herd pulled on north, leaving Division behind.

III

IT WAS a glum crew. There was no more laughter and horseplay about the camp when night came and the herd was thrown off the trail. There was no hilarity among them. This was a new trail to the Floursack crew but they were veterans of many others and they handled their big steers with the cold precision of a cavalry regiment.

As for the steers, they walked steadily throughout the day, bound for the Spruce Point Agency, and at night, loosely bunched, bedded down on the crisp brown grass, horns clicking as they moved their heads, breath frosty with the chill of the northern air.

A day north of Division and a little more than two days' drive south of the Tin River crossing, the Floursack had visitors.

They had watered the herd and thrown off the trail when the strangers came into camp, a tall man riding like an Indian, and another shorter figure beside the tall one. Dough was officiating at the tailgate of the chuck wagon and Cole had just saddled his night horse when the two reached camp.

As Cole walked out to meet them he saw that the shorter rider was a girl.

The man, white-haired, white-bearded, threw up his hand, palm out, in the time-honored peace-sign. The girl made no movement. Cole, calling a welcome, bade them dismount and come in. Man and girl slid down from their ponies. The man, long rifle resting across his arm, stalked ahead toward the fire.

Reaching Cole he stopped, lowered the rifle butt to the ground, and gave greeting. "How!"

"Howdy," Cole answered. "Come on in to the fire."

When the three reached the camp Cole and the newcomers scrutinized each other before speaking. Finally with a voice hoarse as though from long disuse, the white-haired man spoke. "Name's Nulty," he announced. "Tim Nulty. I been trappin'

in this country. This yere's my daughter Aspen."

The girl smiled shyly and Cole returned the smile. "My name is Favor," he said. "This is the Floursack herd, bound for Spruce Point."

Deliberately Nulty leaned his rifle against the bed wagon and sat down. The girl sat down beside him, and Cole, squatting on booted heels, waited patiently. Cole had met many an old-timer and he knew that, like the Indians, they were not to be hurried.

Presently, Nulty pulled a beaded tobacco pouch from his belt and tendered it. Cole rolled a cigarette from the mixture of chopped willow-bark and tobacco in the pouch, and in turn offered his own slim sack. Nulty loaded a foul pipe, lit it and puffed reflectively.

"Cloud Man," he said suddenly, "is a friend of mine." Cole waited, knowing that there was more to come. Nulty puffed along and then spoke again. "They're Sioux on the Spruce Point Reservation," he announced. "Brule Sioux. Cloud Man is the big boss of 'em."

The wait was so long that Cole hurried things a trifle. "Yes?"

Nulty frowned. He didn't like to be rushed. "Last year," he said, "they was short of beef on the agency. All the herd comin' to Spruce Point didn't get through."

"I heard about that," Cole commented.

"There was some lean bellies," Nulty drawled. "The way to keep a Sioux happy is to fill him up with beef." Nulty looked at Cole, his eyes appraising.

Cole, not knowing what was expected of him, nodded. "I've heard that," he said.

"It's so." Nulty took his pipe from his mouth. "Is this yere herd goin' to be delivered to the agency?"

"On the fifteenth of October," Cole answered.

"Sure?"

"As we're sittin' here."

"I'll tell Cloud Man," Nulty drawled. "He's gettin' restless an' his young men are plumb jumpy."

"And . . .?" Cole prompted again.

"It'd be plain hell if the Sioux left the reservation," Nulty drawled. "There's little settlements. . . . I've got some friends amongst the Sioux, too."

The girl spoke rapidly in liquid gutturals and Cole eyed her.

"She says that the Injuns need this beef," Nulty interpreted.

"They'll have it," Cole assured, shortly.

Dough lifted his call: "Come an' get it!"

The Floursack riders in camp who had been watching their boss and his guests, moved toward the line of dutch ovens, kettles and frying pans.

"Eat with us," Cole invited. "You better plan to stay the night."

"We'll eat but we won't stay," Nulty decided. Then, reverting to his subject, "If the bucks went out of the reservation the troops at Fort Brossard would go after 'em. There'd be more soldiers an' more trade for the sutler. There'd be some people kilt, too."

For the first time the girl spoke in English. "The railroad camps buy meat," she said, her words sounding with an oddly foreign flavor. "There . . ."

"I hear that there's been a beef contract let local," Nulty interrupted.

FAVOR was watching the girl. Her eyes were gray and large in her tanned oval face. Her hair was black. It was fine and silky. Was she a breed? Cole wondered. If she was, she was the prettiest he had ever seen. Something about her face, something about the erect carriage of her body as she stood up, spoke to the man. Cole too got up and Tim Nulty uncoiled his long frame.

"And you think . . .?" Cole said.

"I don't think nothin'," Nulty said dryly. "I've told you some things. You had any trouble, say at Division?"

"I had a man killed there," Cole answered shortly.

"Draw yore own map," Nulty drawled and slowly stalked off toward the line of pots and pans. The girl hesitated, and then followed him. Cole Favor leaned

back against the wagon wheel and his lips pursed as he began a little, tuneless whistle. With Favor the whistle was an inevitable accompaniment to thought.

So that was it?

Pieces fitted together in a closely knit sequence in Cole's mind. Morgan Andreas' visit and offer to take delivery of the herd at Division. His implied threat. The killing of Button. Each clicked into place in light of Nulty's warning.

If he had turned over the herd, Morgan Andreas would have had it. Delivery point was the agency and that was the contract. Andreas would have had the cattle, the Sioux at Spruce Point would have gone without their beef issue, and the Floursack could have whistled for their money.

Button had been killed because, if the Floursack crew tried to avenge his death, they would have been cut down in Division's streets. Cattle without a trail crew to handle them would be easy pickings.

Those two attempts had not worked. Would there be another?

Favor grunted. He was wagon boss and partner in the Floursack because he could anticipate trouble. He would bet money, chalk, marbles or chinaware that Morgan Andreas either had the beef contract with the railroad builders or that Andreas was a silent partner in that contract. He would bet too that Andreas was a partner with the Fort Brossard sutler.

The tuneless whistle ceased and Cole took a plate and cup and started down the grub line.

Tim Nulty and the girl had gone back to the bed wagon and were eating when Cole joined them. He sat down, took a drink of coffee and went to work on the contents of his plate. Presently he spoke to Nulty. "You've been here some time?"

"Quite a while."

"I'm looking for a location," Cole continued. "We want to locate a steer outfit up here. There won't be many more herds coming up the trail. Cattle will be moving by rail. We want a steer layout where we can put some beef on cattle. Know where we can find one?"

Nulty's mouth was full. He nodded.

"Where?" Cole asked. "Could you show me?"

"You deliver this herd an' I'll show you the best dang ranch-location in the territory," Nulty stated.

Cole eyed the man, nodded, and made a promise. "I'll be lookin' for you the sixteenth," he said.

"I'll be around," Nulty drawled.

When the old man and the girl had finished their meal they put their dishes in the wreck pan and without comment or word of thanks, went to their horses. Favor watched them ride away into the growing dusk and when the man's tall figure and the girl's shorter silhouette had dropped out of sight over a rise, he walked over to the fire.

Andy Nichols and Jesse Hatton were sitting there and Cole stood looking down at them. "How many rifles in the outfit?" he demanded suddenly.

Jesse scratched his head and Dough, who had heard the question, called, "I've got my Sharps."

Jesse ceased his scratching and looked up. "There's four, countin' Dough's Sharps," he said.

"We'll carry 'em from now on," Cole announced. "We'll run two boys with rifles along behind the ridges as we move the steers, an' we'll kind of sleep in our clothes at night."

Jesse grinned and Andy Nichols, a wicked smile on his leathery face, got up. "An' I've got a Winchester an' about forty loads for it," he announced. "There'll be no more ridin' in the dust of the drags for me."

THESE precautions were carried out to the letter. Two men, carrying rifles, rode the high country above the herd as it moved next day, men who were shots and who scouted the country carefully. They were the element of surprise, should attack come. But none came.

The Floursack herd moved peacefully from bedground to bedground, and nothing happened. Not a thing.

But in the middle of the afternoon next day Cole left his position at point and rode ahead. He could cover, during the balance of the afternoon, the distance to the Tin River crossing. By riding at night he could rejoin the herd. The Tin River crossing was ahead and Cole wanted to look it over.

He reached the crossing in three hours, but he did not ride down to it. He stayed on high ground, his horse hidden behind a ridge. Lying on his belly, he surveyed the scene. There were bluffs along the Tin and just above the crossing a grove of cottonwoods, leafless now. Against the river bank there was a drift of wood and wreckage. Cole's eyes brightened. He slid back over the ridge, untied his horse and rode back toward his herd.

When he reached the herd the men were throwing the cattle off water and Dough had already made camp and was cooking. Cole told Dough to hurry supper, and went out to the cattle.

"Don't bed down," he ordered. "Keep driftin'. We're goin' to drive awhile tonight. We'll cross the river tomorrow instead of day after."

"That'll make us cross awful late," Andy Nichols expostulated. "We'd lose . . ."

"We're goin' to reach the Tin tomorrow afternoon late," Cole announced, "an' we're goin' to act like we're crossin'. Andy, you an' Rufe an' Jesse go on an' get yore supper an' get fresh horses. We're goin' to make a ride tonight."

Andy Nichols nodded and rode down stream to get the men. Cole gave Earl Worth orders about moving the cattle along as soon as they were off water. He and the rest helped throw the steers back from the river. Then they rode to camp and the balance of the men kept the cattle moving.

As soon as Cole and his group had finished eating they relieved the men at the herd, keeping the weary steers drifting along. With fresh horses, the rest of the men came back to the cattle and Cole, Jesse, Andy Nichols, and Rufe trotted off into the dark. There would be a moon about twelve o'clock but now it was pitch-black.

With the instinct of the plainsman, Cole kept to his selected route. He had been over the ground twice, once each way, and now the loom of the bluffs against the dark sky told him where he was and how to travel. He was taking a chance. But he took it willingly, almost joyfully.

If what he believed was true, he was coppering a bet. If there was another card in the box then Cole was sunk.

When they reached the crossing of the Tin, Cole made his dispositions. Andy, he placed in the drift. Rufe, the best shot, took a position in a gully that ran down to the Tin River; and Jesse Hatton, Cole stationed in the cottonwoods. Having assigned each a place, Cole spoke.

"Mebbe it will be here, mebbe not," he said briefly. "You each got a lunch an' a canteen. You got a long, lazy day tomorrow. You got to stay hid from sunup on, an' don't smoke. That would give you away. We'll be here with the cattle along about dusk. We'll act like we was fools enough to try to cross 'em. If there's to be a play made it will be made then. They'll be watchin' us if they're figurin' on anything. I reckon you know what to do?"

"Just keep the boys back," Rufe answered. "We'll take care of anythin' that comes up."

Cole nodded. "Now I'll take your horses an' pull along back," he said. "The boys will throw off an' they'll have the herd bedded when I get in. I'll tell 'em where you are an' to look out for you, but you keep low. We don't want to hit any of you boys when it starts. If it does start."

Andy grunted. "It'll start. Nice a trap as I ever seen an' seventeen hundred big steers for bait. Cole . . ."

"Yes?"

"You leave the fightin' to us an' make the rest of the boys handle the cattle. We'll take care of it."

"They'll be thinkin' about Button," Cole said briefly. "I can't keep 'em out. You boys know what to do. So long."

IV

WHEN he reached the herd everything was still. Dough was sitting beside the chuck wagon and three men were sleeping. The others, Dough told Cole, were standing guard with the herd and two with the remuda. Cole nodded and went on out to the cattle. A low challenge stopped him before he reached the herd and, riding over, he found Earl Worth.

"All set?"

"Set," Cole agreed.

"Damn it. I wish I'd brought my rifle. I was goin' to an' then I thought it was just so much extra to pack around an' I left it at the ranch."

"They'll be close enough," Cole promised. "Who else is out here, Earl?"

Earl named over the men and Cole rode away on a round, meeting and speaking to each guard. He was weary. He had ridden a long way since leaving the crew, but there was an exhilaration in him, a feeling that was tight and tense and that would not let him rest.

When he returned to camp he drank a cup of coffee with Dough and unrolled his bed. It took him a long time to drift off to sleep and with the first faint tinge of light in the east he was up.

All the crew was tense. They ate breakfast hastily. The men selected their best horses. Dough packed his wagon. The nighthawk climbed to the seat of the bed wagon. The wagons pulled out and the Floursack crew, three—no, four men short, for Button was gone—threw the herd off the bedground and the long day began.

Everything appeared just as usual. If there were fewer men with the cattle today, who could know? Riders worked back and forth along the swing, dropping into the dusty drag and emerging again. It would have taken long and close observation to note that the Floursack crew was short. And so the cattle moved and the wagons rolled along and the remuda, just in sight, paralleled the march.

As the lead steers entered the bluffs that dipped along Tin River, Cole rode out from his position at point. Here was a danger spot and Cole was watchful.

The wagons were ahead of the herd and Cole, passing them, rode along the low dip of the passage and reached the river bank.

As he halted beside the stream, Dough turned the wagons out of the pass and pulled to a halt on higher ground. Trust Dough, Cole thought. He would pick a place where, when needed, his Sharps could do some good.

The head of the marching column of steers appeared. Cole, glancing toward the drift, the clump of cottonwoods and the top of the knoll to his left, rode slowly down into the river. He had seen nothing in the drift or in the cottonwoods, but there was a mound of rocks on the knoll that had not been there last night. Cole hid a grin. Rufe Ewing had built a fort on top of the knoll.

As trail boss it was Cole's duty to pick the crossing. His horse splashed into the river, stepping warily, advanced and halted. He had reached the channel where there was deep water. The Tin was not a wide stream and the channel was narrow. Cole's horse swam strongly, splashed in the shallows on the other side, was turned, and once again swam the channel. To an observant eye it was apparent that the trail boss of the Floursack crew had picked his crossing and found it good. Just to make sure, Cole, reaching the bank, lifted his hand and called to Earl Worth who was at the point of the slowly moving cattle.

"We'll cross 'em. Dough, we'll camp on the other side."

AT THAT prearranged signal, two riders back in the swing pinched off the moving cattle, letting perhaps fifty head of steers come on toward the crossing. These lead steers were in sight but the men who had cut across the line of march were still hidden in the little bluffs. The first steers came on, reached the river and stopped as though to drink.

"Bring 'em along!" Cole called.

Earl Worth rode up to him, stopping beside him and shaking his head. Again watchful eyes might have interpreted the scene. Worth, apparently, was urging the advisability of waiting until morning to cross. Dough was at the chuck wagon, just puttering around. The night-wrangler had leaned back until he was on the bedding in the bed wagon.

The sun was low in the west, just the top rim showing above the horizon. There was still light but there would not be any great time before darkness came. Cole and Worth rode toward the watering steers. It seemed that Worth had won the argument for they began to shove the cattle back from the river.

A bait was offered and was being withdrawn. It was too much. From up the river sounded a whooping: high, shrill, terrible. A rider, brown body bent low, swept into view from behind the cottonwoods. Other riders, wild, free running, swept down, yelling as they came, shooting as they yelled. The steers at the river tossed their heads, wheeled, and awkwardly but running swiftly as only longhorns can move, stampeded back.

Cole and Worth taken by surprise at the attack, drove their horses after the steers.

There were twenty men in that attacking band, twenty half-naked, painted, feathered, yelling Sioux. Their yells rose high and shrill and victorious as they bore down upon the crossing, and then from the drift and from the little knoll and from the clump of cottonwoods, rifles spoke out, not rapidly but steadily, awful in their ominous monotony.

A feathered rider plunged from his mount. Another seemed to spring straight up and fall whirling. A horse and rider went down in a heap, the horse scrambling up and the man remaining on the ground, a little broken bundle.

At the wagon, Dough's old Sharps blazed, and then from the little bluffs came the Floursack crew, riding with Cole and Worth in the lead, sweeping down upon the invaders.

Those men, caught between the river, the crossfire from knoll and drift and cottonwoods and the advancing line of cowmen, were trapped. They bunched together, seeming to hesitate, and the rifles and the six-shooters took more toll. Then screaming their fright or grimly silent, the painted riders swept toward the gap in the bluffs, striking straight toward Cole Favor and his men.

There was no stopping that frenzied flight. Rifles and pistols still took their due but those painted men went on, through the thin line of riders and into the gap in the bluffs. The Floursack men wheeled to follow those fleeing riders.

A Floursack man went down. Another slumped on his horse and held tight to his saddlehorn. Then the invaders were gone and the Floursack trail crew, close-bunched, halted in the gap. They heard a rifle speak twice from above them and, too, they heard another sound: the rumbling roll of hoofs.

"The herd's runnin'," Cole Favor said. "We can't stop 'em now."

"Somebody up above," Earl Worth panted. "Somebody . . . Here comes Rufe an' Andy."

Rufe was walking down from the knoll, carrying his rifle; Andy Nichols had come from the drift. Jesse Hatton had stepped into view from the cottonwoods and came on. Cole Favor snapped orders.

"Get the corral set, Ben will bring in the horses. We want fresh mounts."

"Connors is hit," a voice announced. "He's hurt pretty bad."

"You got a slug yourself, Dave," another man spoke.

"It ain't bad," Dave answered. "Through the shoulder."

Dough, carrying the Sharps, spoke beside Cole. "Somebody's comin' down from the hills."

COLE turned. A rider, moving deliberately, was threading a way down from the bluffs. The rider came on, halting at the edge of the group. It was Tim Nulty.

"By glory!" Nulty said, and there was awe in his voice, "you was lookin' for 'em. I never thought it."

"What are you here for?" Cole demanded.

Nulty slid down from his horse. He looked at Cole Favor and, suddenly his harsh face broke into a creased smile. "I'd come to tell you they was layin' for you at the crossin'," he said. "I was a little late but I dropped one from up on top when they made their getaway."

Andy Nichols, standing beside Worth's horse, rasped a comment. "Injuns," he said. "Damn' Injuns!"

Nulty turned to look at Nichols. He shook his head. "Not the Sioux," he corrected. "Come on, I'll show you."

"Dough," Cole ordered, "you an' Jesse look after Dave an' Connors. Get 'em to the wagon."

Tim Nulty had moved away and was bending over a fallen man, his hand at the man's chest. Cole joined him. Rufe Ewing, Earl Worth, all the Floursack men who were not engaged with the care of the wounded, gathered close about. Nulty's big bony hand stripped away a leather shirt. Beneath the leather, white skin showed. The dead man's opened eyes were blue.

"Renegade!" growled Tim Nulty. "This yere's Andreas' man, Doss Norman."

So the man who had killed Button, lay there. Cole felt a fierce exultation.

FROM body to body the trail men went. One man they found who breathed and who cursed wearily—in English. The paint, the brown dye, the beads and the feathers no longer could disguise these men. They were white, not red.

The wounded man was taken to the wagons and the Floursack men rode and walked to where Dough now had a fire glowing. Dough and Jesse Hatton and Ben Lumas, who throughout the fight had held the remuda, had been busy.

Bob Connors and Dave Twitchell, wounded in the battle, were resting on unrolled beds, their wounds bandaged. Connors was groaning, for Dough had soaked his injured shoulder in horse liniment. The remuda, wild-eyed, was in the rope corral that Dough and Hatton had made by running ropes from the wagons to posts. Favor got down wearily.

"Now what, Cole?" Andy Nichols demanded.

"The cattle ran," Cole Favor said. "We'll let 'em go for awhile. "The rest of that bunch is gone. I reckon we know where."

"South to Division," Jesse Hatton said slowly.

"It looks like it," Cole agreed.

"They were Andreas' men," Tim Nulty said again. "Aspen heard some talk an' she told me. I came to warn you but I was a little late. Anyhow you didn't need no warnin'."

"Where is your girl?" Cole demanded.

Nulty looked at him oddly. "She went to Fort Brossard for the cavalry," he answered. "What do you aim' to do, Favor?"

Every eye was on Cole Favor. He stood, head lowered, looking at the ground. "Andreas," he said slowly. "Know where he is, Nulty?"

"He ain't at the agency," Nulty answered.

"Then he's at Division," Cole said.

"Division's forty miles south," Nulty warned.

"A five-hour ride," Cole answered. "We can rest our horses when we get there." Sudden decision set upon him. His head came up and his eyes were narrow blue gleams behind his eyelids. "Dough," Cole said crisply, "you an' Ben will stay here. You can look after Dave an' Bob an' that fellow of Andreas' that ain't dead. Ben you hold the horses. We'll need 'em. The rest of you boys catch fresh mounts. We'll make a ride."

"The steers?" Andy Nichols said doubtfully.

"They're scattered anyhow," Cole answered. "A day will scatter 'em some more, but what of it? We got this other thing to do."

There was no answer to that and Tim

Nulty, his face impassive, drawled a question. "You loan me a horse?" asked Nulty. "I'd kind of like to go along."

Favor nodded. He turned to Dough. "Rustle somethin' to eat while we change saddles," he ordered.

With a grunt Dough waddled off toward the wagons.

V

IT WAS full dark when the Floursack crew, eight of them, and Tim Nulty, rode south from Tin River. They left behind them a wistful Dough, an angry Ben Lumas, and a sulky Bob Connors who claimed that a wounded shoulder did not keep him from riding.

Dave Twitchell made no objections to being left behind. Dave lay on his bed and kept his gray face turned to the stars. He was hit hard. The other wounded man had died during the time the Floursack made ready to go, died without saying a word that was not profane.

The Floursack headed south at a trot and as they entered the bluffs the camp and the fire were hidden. It was seven o'clock when the trail crew pulled out and they had forty miles before them, a long three days' drive for a moving herd but just five hours for a man on horseback, less than five hours if that man hurried.

"What you goin' to do when you reach Division?" Tim Nulty asked, keeping his borrowed horse beside Cole Favor's.

"See when we get there," Cole grunted.

Division was still alive when the Floursack reached it. The five hours had dwindled to four and a half. There were lights in the Palace and in the Crown and in some of the stores and squat loghouses. Without any direction, acting as though my mutual agreement, the men rode with Cole Favor and Cole Favor himself stopped in front of the Palace and, dismounting, tied their horses. With Cole in the lead they walked into the Palace.

Cole Favor and Rufe and Jesse Patton went to the bar, Tim Nulty with them. The others, stiff-legged from their ride, stood along the wall and beside the door where they could watch. There was not much of a crowd in the Palace and although the night was cold, the bartender who came to Cole and Tim Nulty was perspiring freely.

"What'll it be, gents?" asked the bartender. "The first drink is on the house."

Cole was looking at the room. He had never been in the Palace. He saw the faro layout and the roulette wheel where Button had been killed, and the three card tables. There was an open space that served as a dance floor, in the rear of the long room, and the bar was long and highly polished.

Tim Nulty, leaning against the bar, drawled a question. "Where's all the decorations, Harry? Where's all that Injun stuff you had tacked up behind the bar?"

Harry, the bartender, gulped, and Cole Favor, wheeling toward the man, held him with his eyes.

"Morgan Andreas," he demanded. "Where is he?"

The bartender did not answer. There was a sound behind Cole but he did not turn. "Where's Andreas?" he snapped. "Tell me or we'll start lookin' for him."

"That won't be necessary, Favor," a cold voice said, and turning, Cole faced Morgan Andreas.

The agent had come through a door at the end of the bar. He stood, leaning forward a little, his elbow resting on the bar top. The man was immaculate, handsome and debonair, and even through his hatred Cole could not but admire Andreas' poise.

"You wanted to see me?" Andreas asked.

Looking at that handsome face with the close-set, narrow eyes, Cole tried to pierce Andreas' mask. He could not. No man could read Andreas' face, but as his eyes strayed from Andreas' eyes, Cole saw something. There, just under the agent's ear, was a daub of bright vermilion.

"You didn't," Cole Favor drawled, "get all your paint off, Andreas. We caught your renegades at the river but we missed you. Under yore ear, Andreas. There's a little of yore warpaint left."

NOW the man's composure broke. His hand went up and touched the smear of paint and his close-set eyes widened. At the door a man said, "I'm marshal of this town. I won't stand for trouble . . ."

Andy Nichols' growl checked the words. "Step in here an' shut up!" Andy ordered. Cole did not turn his head but he knew that Andy had the marshal in hand.

Morgan Andreas' face was calm once more. "What did you want to see me about, Favor?" he drawled. "If you've business . . ."

"I wanted to see you about havin' a kid killed," Cole answered. "I wanted to talke to you a little about tryin' to steal the Floursack herd. Would you like to talk it over, Andreas, or—?"

Andreas did not want to talk. Favor knew too much and Morgan Andreas realized that the play was finished. There were, in that grimly quiet room, enough guns to blow him into Kingdom Come. His men had been decimated in the fight at the Tin River crossing. Of the adventurers who had followed him, not a half dozen remained, and of those not a man was untouched. The rifles stationed at the river had taken their toll and the hard-riding men of the Floursack crew had added to the casualties.

Morgan Andreas was finished: done!

Not quite done. There remained the opportunity of taking this brown-haired blue-eyed man along on that journey that Morgan Andreas was to take. Swift as a striking snake, Andreas' hand brushed aside the tail of his Prince Albert coat, reaching for his weapon. Cole's gun was high on his hip but his hand flashed in a swift arc and in the Palace bar room two shots thundered. Morgan Andreas, struck in chest and belly, went down and as he fell, a high quavering yell came from the Texas men.

They were loose! They had come back to Division!

Trail drivers, hard faced, hard-muscled Floursack men, went into the room that Andreas had left to confront Cole Favor. There was a battle in that room, a battle from which the trail drivers emerged dragging a man who still wore the paint and disguise of the raiders.

Within seconds after Cole Favor's two swift shots, the Floursack owned the Palace saloon; the bartender dragged from behind his bar, the game keepers, faces white and hands held high, lined up against the wall, two men hard shot lying on the floor and Morgan Andreas dead.

"An' now we'll take the town," Andy Nichols snapped. "Let's go!"

But Division was not to be so easily taken. Division was awake and Division had been warned and was organizing. There were plenty of hard cases in Division, men as hard as the Texans in the Palace Saloon.

When Andy Nichols started out of the saloon's door a shot thumped into the lintel beside his head and he dodged back. Other shots crashed through the windows, shattering glassware and the mirror behind the bar.

Division was objecting to the presence of interlopers and momentarily, the objection became more forceful. If Cole Favor and the Floursack crew left the Palace Saloon they would not live to reach their horses at the hitch rail.

The Floursack took measures for defense.

A card table was shoved up to the window, another placed on it to form a screen. Two men tried to get the bar loose from its moorings so that they could move it to block the door. The bar was fastened down and the movers called for help. And outside guns flashed and lead thudded into the table across the window and whined through the door.

And then suddenly the firing stopped.

OUTSIDE there was silence and then the sound of horses moving. A sharp voice lifted in command. Accouterments rattled and at the door of the Palace a stocky man appeared, a man who wore the blue uniform of a cavalry major. Stern-faced, he advanced into the room, a big sergeant following him. Past sergeant

and officer a girl flashed: Aspen Nulty. She ran to her father, seized his arm, caught him to her. The major's eyes caught and held Cole Favor's.

"The man who doesn't like the Army!" the major snapped. "Take charge here, Sergeant!"

The sergeant, reinforced by troopers, moved into the Palace Saloon. Texas men, outnumbered, still willing and ready to fight but with no word from their leader, lowered their weapons. The prisoners, the town marshal, the still-painted renegade, the others were seized and held by sturdy troopers. The major, striding across the room, stopped before Cole Favor.

"Major," Cole said slowly, his eyes dancing, "I take it all back. I like the Army fine an' they do get there on time."

A smile flashed across the officer's face. "We were called out to chase renegades," he announced. "When we reached your camp by the river we found that you had saved us most of the trouble. Your cook told us where you'd gone and we followed along. Well . . ." With a hitch to his sword belt and the cavalry swagger in his stride, the major moved away from Cole and into the center of the room. "Sergeant!" he snapped.

"Sir?" the sergeant answered.

"Bring those men here." The major's gauntleted hand indicated the painted man and his companions, clustered now together with the marshal and the bartender in one little group. "We'll get to the bottom of this right now."

Things moved rapidly after that. The painted man, under sharp questioning, confessed to the raid on the Floursack herd and how Morgan Andreas had organized it. Two others, their arms held by troopers, also confessed to a part in the raid, but it was not until Major Watts questioned the town marshal of Division that really worth-while things came to light.

At first the marshal was defiant, claiming to be a law officer, claiming jurisdiction over the major's, demanding that Cole Favor be turned over to his custody.

"He murdered Andreas," the marshal snarled. "Stood there an' shot him."

Cole Favor interjected a word at that point. "Turn him loose, Major, an' give him his gun," Cole drawled.

Some of the marshal's color faded as Cole spoke and Major Watts, noting that fact, spoke crisply. "All right," he said. "Turn him loose, Sergeant, and give him his pistol. And, Sergeant . . ."

"Sir?" said the sergeant.

"Don't interfere with what happens after that," the major ordered.

The big sergeant grinned. "Here you are, Cully," he said, pulling the marshal's six-shooter from his belt and extending it. "Step out like a little man, now."

The marshal refused to take the gun. They wanted him to be killed, he accused. They wanted to turn him loose against a cold-blooded murderer. The major capitalized on the marshal's fright.

"You'll either answer my questions or you'll take that gun and we'll walk out of here," the officer promised. "We'll leave you to these Texas men."

That was too much for the marshal. He talked then, lying, trapping himself, tripping over the major's crafty questioning. And it was the marshal that, eventually, told of how Morgan Andreas had caused Button to be killed, how Andreas' man, Doss Norman, had picked the fight and done the shooting, hoping that the Floursack crew would go berserk in Division and so be wiped out.

And finally Major Watts beckoned to Cole Favor. "I don't know what jurisdiction I have here," the major said sternly. "Probably none. But you've killed a man and . . ."

Tim Nulty interrupted. "Why, Major," Tim Nulty said with aggrievement in his voice, "I thought you said that my scouts could do most anythin'. Here me an' my scouts run down a bunch of renegades all dressed up like Sioux. We finish 'em up an' you go actin' that away. It ain't right, Major Watts, after you give us a free rein."

For the first time the major showed his

astonishment. His mouth flew half open and his eyes were wide as he glared at Tim Nulty. "Your scouts?"

Tim Nulty nodded. "I'm yore chief of scouts, ain't I?" he asked.

"Of course!" Watts snapped the words. "Of course you are. But this doesn't make sense. What . . .?"

"These fellers," Tim Nulty waved an expansive arm, indicating the Floursack men, "have been workin' under me since away back. They went to work this afternoon."

The major closed his jaw like a trap snapping shut. Tim Nulty winked at Cole Favor and over in the group of trail men Rufe Ewing could not repress his voice.

"Scouts!" said Rufe Ewing. "Now what do you think of that?"

The major closed his inquiry then. Prisoners, including Division's marshal, were marched out by troopers. They were to be taken back to Fort Brossard, there to stand trial. Major Watts was not just sure what the charges were to be, but, so he informed Cole Favor, there should certainly be some offense against the Federal Government in the mess of wickedness that had been uncovered. Courteously the major invited Cole and the Floursack men to accompany him north again.

"I don't believe that you will want to stay in Division," the major suggested, and Cole agreed with him.

"It is almost morning," the officer said, glancing at his watch. "We'll leave this town and make a camp some distance out. We have rations and our blankets. You will be welcome to share them. Or would you rather stay here?"

"We'll go with you, Major," Cole said. "We wouldn't feel quite right about stayin' in Division."

"So you find the Army bearable then?" the major snapped, and stalked off, leaving Cole staring at his broad back.

AND so it was arranged. The half troop of cavalry, the Floursack crew, Cole Favor, Tim Nulty and Aspen rode out from the town of Division. They were glad to leave and Division was glad to see them go. They rode along through the night, the moon, risen now, bright above them, and the troop pennon flapping against the moon. Beside Cole Favor rode Nulty, and on Nulty's other side his daughter rode, drooping with weariness.

"I reckon you'll gather cattle tomorrow," Tim Nulty said. "I reckon you'll collect 'em an' take 'em across the Tin into the agency."

"Yes." Cole Favor's voice was weary.

"When you get yore delivery made, hunt me up at Fort Brossard," Nulty continued. "I ain't forgot that I promised to show you a location."

Cole said nothing and Nulty drawled on. "Prettiest place you ever seen," he said. "I was goin' to locate there myse'f one time. Never done it though. I never got around to it."

Still Cole had no comment. Nulty was silent for a time and then spoke again. "I buried Aspen's mother there," he said. "Didn't have a chance to take her back to Missouri where she come from. Aspen won't mind if you take a look at the location, will you, Aspen?"

The girl raised her head and looking at her father said, "No." Her voice was soft and Cole Favor could see her face in the moonlight.

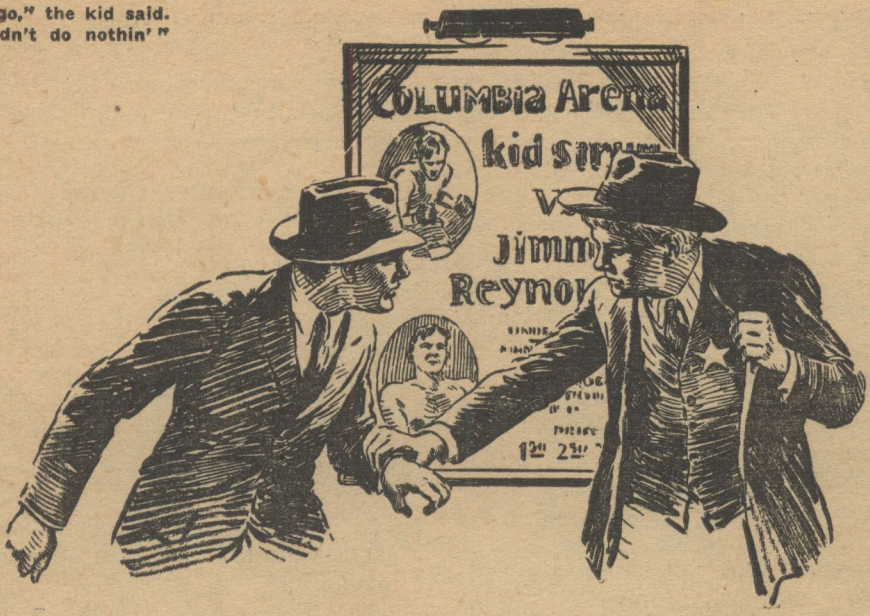
Up ahead Major Watts lifted his arm. The troopers swung off toward the left.

Nulty's voice drawled on. "It'll take a while to gather yore cattle an' deliver 'em. When you get that done you an' me an' Aspen will take a pack an' go over to the place I've got in mind. It's a couple of days' trip north of the Fort. I think . . ."

Cole did not hear what Nulty thought. He lost track of the drawling voice. Bone-tired Cole was, weary with a weariness that permeated him, filled him, and yet, for the moment he forgot the weariness.

"You an' me an' Aspen," Tim Nulty had said. Somehow in Cole Favor's weary mind the knowledge came that it would always be Tim Nulty and Aspen and Cole Favor.

"Leggo," the kid said. "I didn't do nothin' "



Professor, Take a Blow

By ROBERT GRIFFITH

Author of "A Sentimental Guy," "Brag," etc.

When you've got a punch-crazy young pug taking instructions from a man who was better off dead, you've got a setup to make Fate throw in the towel

HE WAS a short, pudgy man, with a round and ruddy face and straw-colored hair that struck out beneath the wide brim of his new black hat. The waitress in the coffee-pot stared at him hard; this was the fifth time in two hours that he'd come in for a cup of coffee.

He had sleepy, greenish brown eyes; his nose was short and stubby. His mouth was broad, permanently fixed in a pleasant little smile. Back home in Miami they called him "Dopey"—Dopey Schwartz. He looked a little out of place, here in New York.

"Guess I'll have a cup of coffee," he said to the waitress, smiling, as if it were the first he'd had all day.

She couldn't figure him out. Not a masher, certainly; he'd hardly looked at her—just gazed dopily up the street. She drew a mug of coffee and set it before him. He looked at it a bit dubiously and laid a nickel on the counter.

And then, very casually, he got up from his stool, and in his leisurely manner, walked out of the Coffee Pot. The waitress gaped. She saw him outside, in the middle of the sidewalk; he was yawning, looking up and down the street, as if wondering which way he would go for a stroll to kill time.

His eyes came to rest finally on the billboard in front of Lafey's Gym, next door. He moved toward the billboard lazily and

stood gazing with some interest at the pictures of fighters displayed thereon.

There was another person looking at the pictures: a slender, dark-faced boy. Without looking up, and very casually, Dopey Schwartz spoke to the boy.

"Workin' out today, kid?"

The boy looked up quickly. Dopey met his gaze briefly, noting the curly brown hair, the startled blue eyes, the firm chin and the incipient cauliflowering of the left ear.

There was mild curiosity in Dopey's round face. "Seen you fight somewheres, haven't I?"

The boy edged away. "No—no, I guess not. I never boxed around here—"

"No," Dopey said. "In Miami, I mean."

BENEATH its tan, the boy's face changed suddenly. He was tense, his eyes fixed on the billboard. Very easily Schwartz' big hand closed on the kid's arm. The boy whirled, his eyes wide with alarm. Dopey flipped back his coat to display a worn silver badge.

"Like to talk to you a minute. Have a cup of coffee?"

Gently he guided the boy into the coffee pot; they sat at the counter.

"Two coffees, please."

The waitress stared.

Dopey's hand dropped from the boy's arm. "Don't be scared, kid. Just want to talk to you. Your name's Sammy Day, ain't it?"

The boy nodded dumbly.

"You was fighting round Miami last winter, hey? Ever know a guy by the name of Harry Maginn?"

The foggy green eyes of Dopey Schwartz didn't change when he saw the kid start at the mention of that name. But the funny little smile twitched at the corners of his broad mouth. The kid inhaled deeply.

"I knew him. Sure, I knew him—"

"You *knew* him? Knew him? He isn't dead—is he?"

"No—no!" Sammy Day licked his dry lips. "I just said I knew him."

"You know a fella named Kid Strub, too?"

Schwartz was watching as the boy's eyes drifted to a green fight bill displayed behind the counter—

COLUMBIA ARENA
KID STRUB vs. JIMMY REYNOLDS

Sammy Day said quickly: "Strub didn't have anything to do—" And then he caught himself. "What's the matter, anyway? What's up?"

"You don't want Strub mixed up in this, hey?"

Schwartz studied the boy's face. He said: "You and Strub were pals, weren't you? Stablemates—Harry Maginn managed both of you. You were in Miami the night Kid Strub knocked out Mike Bazik, weren't you?"

The boy nodded, avoiding Schwartz' eyes. He was biting his lower lip; his two fists were clenched tightly on the counter.

Schwartz sipped his coffee, making a wry face. "You see Maginn or Kid Strub since that night?"

"No."

"Not since that night? No? But you did see them that night?"

Sudden terror moved the boy's face; his teeth held his lower lip. He turned quickly, facing Schwartz, with his face twisted in emotion.

His voice was high, with a suspicion of tremble. "I left Miami that night, right after the fight. I didn't see anybody. And since then I been bumming around the country. I been fighting—New Orleans, Frisco, L.A.—I just got back in New York today."

"Sure," said Schwartz. "I believe you." He took another sip of coffee, actually liking it this time. "You know," he went on conversationally. "It's a funny thing how Harry Maginn sold Strub's contract just when he got going good; just when he'd stopped Mike Bazik and stood to get a chance at the title."

Sammy Day said: "Maginn didn't sell Strub's contract. He lost it in a poker game, the night before the fight."

"Hmmm," murmured Schwartz. "Did he lose your contract too?"

"Yes."

"And you had—a little argument about that?"

"Sure—sure!" the boy blurted out. "We had an argument. I socked him in the chin! I socked Forbin too—"

"Ah," said Dopey Schwartz. "Forbin?"

The boy's blue eyes were desperate. He was afraid, apparently, but he was angry, too, thinking of what had happened in Miami. He began to talk rapidly. "Forbin ran a gambling joint in Miami. Maybe you know that. Maginn had got an advance of five hundred bucks on what Strub was getting for the Bazik fight. Maginn lost that dough shooting craps. Then he started playing poker to change his luck. He bet the contracts against fifty bucks. He lost—"

"And when you found out, you and Strub—"

"Strub didn't have anything to do with it, I tell you!"

The boy had been sitting very stiffly on his stool. With a sudden twist he whirled to face Schwartz; he smashed his fist savagely to Schwartz' jaw. The detective toppled backward, floundered to the floor. He got his feet under him quickly; he saw the boy running out the door and started after him. But then he stopped, turned around and came back to his stool.

Rubbing his jaw, he smiled sheepishly at the startled waitress.

"They call me Dopey," he remarked amiably. "And I guess that fits perfect. Gimme another cup of coffee . . ."

THAT afternoon Dopey Schwartz went for a drive down through Jersey. It was half past two when he drove up the lakeside road to Dupre's Health Farm. Here, according to the sign, the world's most illustrious prize-fighters trained daily. In the lists Dopey Schwartz found the name of Kid Strub.

For two hours he sat patiently in a bleacher seat, while hooded athletes went through their training drills. He scrutinized every person that entered the canvas-walled enclosure, looking for a familiar face. He saw none.

Then Kid Strub came into the ring. Schwartz had seen Strub once before: on the night he had jumped to top place among lightweight contenders by stopping Mike Bazik, in what was supposed to be a warmup fight for Bazik, in Miami, three months before.

Watching, Schwartz' brows knitted. Though the red-headed veteran's face was almost hidden by the padded head-gear he wore, Schwartz felt that some change had come over the man. In the Bazik fight he had been reckless, showy, possessed of a savage fighting spirit.

Today he was spiritless, slow.

Schwartz left his seat, ostensibly to leave the arena. But passing near the ring, he observed carefully the gray-headed man who sat in the first row behind Strub's corner. This man had come down the aisle with Strub; he must be Forbin, the Miami gambler who had won Strub's contract in a poker game.

Forbin didn't affect the towel-draped sweater of the other managers. He was dressed very fussily, flower in lapel; he stood aloof, while a big-eared handler attended Kid Strub. Forbin interested Schwartz. He was tall, slender, handsome, with a long, thin, clipped moustache. There was something artificial about his manner and his every move. His thin face betrayed no interest in Strub's ring-work.

Looking at him, Dopey Schwartz wondered if Forbin had ever been an actor.

On the way home that evening Schwartz slowed his car and brought it to a stop at the urgent thumbing of a hitch-hiker beside the road. He opened the car door, when the fellow came running to catch up to him.

"Going into the city?"

"Yeah." The boy was in the car. Dopey had him handcuffed before the kid had recognized him. "Yeah. I can take you right where you're going, Sammy—to jail."

Schwartz was puzzled when the boy only laughed and held out his manacled hands.

"You don't need these things," he told the detective. "The reason I was going back to the city was to look you up. I got something to tell you . . ."

A FEW minutes later Dopey Schwartz turned his battered old car into the parking space beside a brightly lit roadside restaurant. His little smile was gone; he was very sober when he unlocked Sammy Day's handcuffs.

"Come on in and have a cup of coffee; we'll talk this over."

Inside, facing the boy across a narrow table, in a corner booth, Schwartz sat running his hand through his coarse yellow hair. A waitress took their order.

"Now, kid. Let's have it."

There was high color in Sammy Day's boyish face. He was grinning; he was very happy about something. He was excited; he started to talk rapidly.

"Mister, you gave me an awful scare this morning. I thought you was after me —and Kid Strub—for murder!" He laughed sharply. "You see, I thought Maginn was *dead!*"

Schwartz seemed bewildered. He didn't smile. "Oh. You thought he was dead."

The waitress came in with sandwiches and coffee. Schwartz reached for his cup eagerly; he took a deep draught and leaned back, relieved, and sat watching the boy. The waitress went out.

Sammy Day leaned forward, smiling. "Look," he began. "I'll tell you the whole story. Like you said, Maginn gambled my contract and Kid Strub's, and I had an argument with him. I got sore and told him flat I wouldn't fight for Max Forbin, and that was that. But Strub, he took it more serious. You see, Strub is a good fighter; but he never got the breaks. One reason is, he ain't too smart. But with Harry Maginn handling him, he'd just begun to go places. He needed Maginn; and he felt pretty bad when he heard what Maginn had done.

"But if he was sore about that, he was about crazy when he fond out Maginn had stole his money and lost it shooting craps. It ain't that Strub is tight; God knows, Maginn has gypped him plenty the two years they've been together. But this was different. Kid Strub's got an old man, lives on a farm, back in Michigan. The old man was hard up, and Strub, he'd been promising a long time that he'd send the old man some dough. And this was the first chance he'd had—"

Dopey Schwartz nodded. "He had a fight with Maginn, too?"

"That's it. Understand, Maginn was a drunk and a gyp artist. But he knew fighters, and Strub needed him. Strub had stood him for two years; but this time it was different. It wasn't Strub Maginn was robbing; it was the old man. And Strub felt awful about that. Up at the house, before the fight, I heard Strub shouting at Maginn, calling him names and telling him he'd get that dough back, every damned cent of it—or he'd kill Maginn."

Remembering, Sammy Day's face was very serious. "Strub was kind of hot-headed. I didn't think he really meant what he was saying . . ."

Dopey Schwartz sat watching the boy and saying nothing.

Sammy Day went on: "You prob'ly heard about that fight with Bazik. Strub was supposed to be a setup. But with Maginn in his corner, he fought like he never fought before. He got dumped on the deck seven times in the first round. I thought he was a goner. He went down four-five times in the second. But he'd begun to look better. He was socking; and he was getting to Bazik. He was so busted up his own mother wouldn't known him; but he kept pluggin' in—"

"Yeah," Schwartz yawned. "I saw the fight."

"In the third he knocked Bazik out. But he'd got an awful beating. He was all cut up; he was crying like a baby when they took him to the dressing room."

Schwartz asked: "How'd Maginn feel then, with Strub all of a sudden right in line for a shot at the champ—and Forbin had his contract?"

"He was mad," Sammy nodded. "And,

knowin' him like I did, I figured he'd try and gyp Forbin out of it someway. But he never had a chance that night."

Schwartz asked quietly: "Why not?"

The kid leaned forward, his arms resting on the red-checkered tablecloth.

"On account of me socking Maginn that morning, I didn't hang around the dressing room before or after the fight. But after Maginn and Strub left the club, I got worrying about the beating Strub had gotten. I knew Maginn never took care of a fighter that was hurt. I figured maybe Strub ought to go to a doctor. So I went out to the house—the three of us rented a cottage right there in Miami."

The boy licked his lips. His eyes were drawn now and his face twisted, as if he didn't like to recall these things. But after a moment he went on.

"The house—it was a small place—was lighted up when I started up the sidewalk. But all of a sudden the light went out, and I heard a scream. It was Maginn. He was hollering: "My God, you killed me—you killed me!"

Sammy Day paused; the boyish face was grim now. He wet his lips.

Schwartz' voice was very quiet: "And then . . .?"

"I ran into the house. There was moonlight coming in the window, and I saw them lying on the floor. I heard Strub talking. *'You dirty thief,' he was saying. 'You dirty thief. I told you I'd kill you. I told you I'd kill you for that.'*

"I snapped on the lights. Maginn was on his back. Strub lay on top of him. I talked to Strub; I tried to lift him up. He'd passed out. I rolled him over. I saw there was blood all over Maginn's shirt. And I saw the big knife, sticking in his belly . . .

"While I was standing there somebody knocked on the door. I didn't know what to do. The door opened and it was Forbin. He looked at Maginn and Strub on the floor. He saw the knife in Maginn. He said, 'Strub's stabbed him!'

"I was pretty rattled, but Forbin wasn't. He made up his mind quick. He said we'd got to cover it up. 'I'm going to make Strub champion,' he said. 'We got to get rid of his body.' . . . Well, Strub was my pal. I didn't want him to go to the chair for something he done when he was out of his head. So I said I'd help him . . .

"We got hold of Maginn and carried him out to the car. Then we drove out of town, way down the Okeechobee road. We stopped when we come to a swampy place. Forbin and I carried him into the swamp a ways and covered him up with palm leaves and moss and left him there . . ."

SCHWARTZ' green eyes had lost their dullness; they were wide, filled with a curious light. His voice was a hoarse whisper: "And then . . . ?"

Sammy Day laughed sharply. "Why, that's all. I was scared sick. I didn't want to stay in Miami. I didn't even go back to the house for my clothes and stuff. I got a bus out of Miami that night."

"And so," Schwartz said, "Kid Strub murdered Harry Maginn."

"No—no!" The boy's eyes were bright; his face cleared. He seemed greatly relieved to have told his story. "That's what I was coming back to tell you about tonight. Maginn—he isn't dead! He's alive! Alive as you and me! He's up at Forbin's camp. Helping to train Strub!"

"Maginn . . . is alive?"

"Yes—yes! That's what I wanted to tell you! He ain't dead!"

Schwartz's green eyes were steady on the boy's. "You saw him?"

Sammy Day laughed. "No—not me! He don't like me much; neither does Forbin. They wouldn't let me even watch Strub's workout. But I found out they were living in a camp down the lake a ways. I wanted to talk to Strub—to tell the truth, I wanted to tell him you was after him; see? So I went down to the camp; I sneaked in a basement window."

"And you saw Maginn?"

"Wait. Wait. I'm telling you. I saw Strub, but I didn't have a chance to talk to him. You see, they've got a little gym

fixed up there in the cellar. And it just happened that when I sneaked in there, Maginn and Forbin were giving Strub a little coaching. Some stuff they don't want the public to see; understand?"

"You saw Maginn?"

"No. I was in a kind of closet. I could just look through the cracks. I saw Strub and Forbin, but I only heard Maginn's voice. I heard him saying: 'Come on, Palook'—he always called Strub 'Palook'—'let's see you dig into the big bag now.' Oh, it was Maginn, all right."

Dopey Schwartz looked up with relief, when the waitress came again to the table. "Have another coffee, Sammy? —Two coffees, please."

They waited till the girl brought the two cups. Schwartz refreshed himself with a few good draughts; then he leaned back, his eyes closed and his face frowning in concentration. When he straightened up, the frown was gone. He was smiling again, but it was rather a grim smile.

He said, rather off the point: "You ain't a murderer, kid. I could tell that the first time I set eyes on you. I was sent up here to get you. You see, the last time anybody saw Harry Maginn in Miami, was when he and Forbin and Strub drove up to the station in a taxi an hour or so after the fight. Two or three people that know them said they saw them drive up to the station. Forbin and Strub got out of the cab; they said goodbye to Maginn and the cab drove away. Strub and Forbin got on the New York train. That left you. Nobody saw you after the fight. . . . Can you figure that out?"

Sammy Day scowled; then he laughed. "That's crazy. It couldn't have happened. But what's the difference, anyway? Maginn is alive; there wasn't any murder."

Dopey Schwartz drew a big automatic pistol from his shoulder holster; he released the clip of cartridges, inspected it and slipped it back into place. He drank the last of his coffee, shoved back the cup and leaned forward. His green eyes were on Sammy's face, intensely serious.

"Sammy," he said very quietly, "the state of Florida sent me up here to get the murderer of Harry Maginn."

Sammy stared. "You—you don't believe me?"

Schwartz smiled, reached over to pat the kid's arm. "There's something a little funny here," he said. "I forgot to tell you. Two weeks ago, in a swamp near Okeechobee road, they found the body of Harry Maginn, with a big knife stuck in his belly!"

SAMMY DAY jerked upright in his chair. His face was grotesque in its stark incredulity.

He muttered: "But he wasn't dead; he isn't dead. I heard him; I heard him talking. It couldn't have been anybody else. Talking to Kid Strub, just the same way he always did. I heard him . . ."

Schwartz shook his head. "Maginn is dead. He's been dead for three months. And it looks like Kid Strub did it." He sat there, looking into the stricken boyish face of Sammy Day. "But there's something awful funny here. Maybe we'd better go back there and talk to Kid Strub. Maybe that's the best thing to do. Will you come along and help me?"

Sammy Day nodded dumbly. The waitress came again, and Schwartz straightened up, smiling. "Maybe we got a tough job on our hands. We got to be prepared.

"Another pair of coffees, sister."

When the two got into the car again they were silent. Schwartz turned the car about and headed back toward the lake. It was a matter of fifteen or twenty miles; in all that distance, not a word was spoken. They turned up the road that led to the Health Farm; they drove on past the place, down a narrow road that grew narrower and rougher as they progressed.

Sammy Day, peering ahead, said finally: "We're pretty close to it now."

They passed a grass-grown road to the left. Schwartz stopped the car and looked back. "Maybe we'd better go the rest of the way afoot," he said.

He backed the car into the side-road far enough to be out of sight. Then he and

Sammy started down the road. It was pitch dark. Except for the lapping of the waves along the shore, the night was still. They passed several camps, untenanted at this early season. They had walked rapidly for ten minutes, when Sammy stopped Schwartz and pointed ahead. A light flickered through the scrubby spruces.

They proceeded warily now. A hundred yards further on, they both stopped dead at a sudden noise, like the sound of a creaking, rolling door. There were far-off voices and then the brief churning of a self-starter, the muffled grumble of a car motor. A glare of headlights broke the darkness before them. Schwartz pulled the boy quickly into the darkness of the trees. They crouched there as a big car eased slowly past them down the rough roadway.

Schwartz said: "That's a break. Maybe we'll have a chance to look the place over before they get back."

Walking along the road whence the car had come, they came suddenly upon the camp. It was a squat, one-story wooden building with a high foundation of field stone. There were lights in two of the four windows facing the lake.

"Nope," Schwartz muttered. "There's somebody here."

He walked boldly up to the front door and knocked. The sounds echoed strangely across the lake, but there was no movement from within. He knocked again, loudly; still there was no response. He tried the door; it opened.

He stuck his head inside. "Hello! Hello, there . . ."

He called again, and then entered the house cautiously. Sammy followed him. The door opened directly into a lighted room. It was a large, low-ceilinged apartment, comfortably furnished. Four chairs had been pushed back from a table in the center of the room. On this table were half-filled cigarette ash trays, scattered playing cards, a bottle and glasses.

Schwartz noted the four chairs. He remarked absently: "There were only two people in that car." He fished a small flashlight from his pocket and went through the house, searching the rooms briefly. He opened a door at the end of a short hall; it led to the cellar; he flashed his light down the stairs and turned away.

He was closing the door when he heard the voice from below:

"Harry—Harry!"

Sammy Day's head snapped up quickly at the sound of that voice.

"Hey, there—Strub! Kid—is that you?"

There were footsteps below; the voice came again: 'Harry . . . ? I been waiting for you, Harry. I thought you'd come."

The green eyes of Dopey Schwartz were wide with question. In the glare of his flashlight, a figure appeared at the foot of the stairway; a face looked upward. It was an odd face, with eyes that were dull and fixed, like those of a man who walks in his sleep. Sammy Day pushed past Schwartz and went rapidly down the stairs. He faced the man, put both hands on his shoulders, looked into his strange face.

"Kid—Kid, what's the matter? Don't you know me, Kid?"

Strub stared at him, and then backed away a step. "I thought it was Harry. I been waiting for Harry."

"Kid—don't you know me? It's Sammy, Kid—Sammy Day . . ."

"I thought it was Harry. I wanted to talk to Harry." The fighter's voice was laboured and slow, without tone or expression.

Schwartz cut in: "You talking about Harry Maginn? You seen him around here?"

Strub's clouded eyes stared up unblinkingly into the glare of the flashlight. "No. I ain't seen him. I ain't seen Harry for a long, long time. But he talks to me. He tells me what to do. Nobody can hear him but me. Sometimes Forbin is right with me; but he doesn't hear Harry talking.

Sammy stared at the man in horror. "My God, Kid—what's happened to you?"

Schwartz said: "Better come up here, Strub. We want to talk to you."

Starting down the stairway, with his light on the fighter, Schwartz saw the

strange, suspicious expression that crossed Strub's face.

Strub's voice was harsh: "Wait. Don't come down here."

Schwartz stopped, puzzled. His hand went to the shoulder holster; the big gun came out. But his voice was easy and reassuring. "Now, look, Kid: we just want to talk to you. You remember Sammy, don't you? Sammy's your old pal, Kid. Don't you remember?"

Strub's face was sullen, baleful. "You can't fool me. Harry told me not to talk to anybody. Just to Forbin. Don't talk to anybody, Harry said. You better go away. Don't come down here."

He pushed Sammy back toward the stairway. "Go on. Upstairs."

Sammy's voice was tight with anguish: "Kid—Kid! What are you saying, Kid?" But he went up the stairs to Schwartz. He said: "Put the gun up, will you? It just makes him worse. Don't you see what's happened to him? He's gone—he's punch-crazy. That beating he got from Bazik . . ."

Schwartz said: "Keep your shirt on, boy. We won't have any trouble."

HE started down the stairs toward Strub; despite his words, he knew there was going to be trouble and he was ready. He faced Strub at the bottom. A moment the two men looked into each other's eyes. Then Strub grabbed for the detective. Schwartz leaped back.

Strub fell on him, and Schwartz swung the heavy pistol, crashed it down on the fighter's head. Strub relaxed suddenly. He fell against Schwartz and then slipped slowly to the ground. Sammy came down again; he pushed past Schwartz and stooped over the fallen Strub.

"Sorry," Schwartz said. "I had to do it."

Strub lay inert and silent. Together Sammy and Schwartz carried him upstairs to the lighted room.

Schwartz turned again to the stairway. "Give him some water," he told the boy. "He'll come around all right."

Schwartz was downstairs, rummaging about the place, when Sammy came after him. "Strub's acting funny," he said nervously. "He's twitching around and talking to himself. He keeps talking about Bazik."

Schwartz said absently: "I'll be up in a minute." He was hauling some dusty luggage out of a closet. He turned his flashlight on an old valise; there were large letters across the side. He brushed off the dust and read aloud: " 'Professor Montagu'—wonder who that is."

Prying at the lock of the valise, Schwartz asked suddenly: "Do you know anything about this Forbin? What racket was he in before he ran that joint in Miami?"

"Some kind of an actor, I guess," Sammy said. "I think he used to be in vaudeville." The boy was uneasy about Strub. "I wish you'd come up and see if he's all right."

Schwartz had opened the bag; he turned his flashlight into it.

"Hmmm—what's this—what's this—"

A switch snapped sharply. Light flooded the room. Schwartz and the boy whirled toward the stairway.

"Stay where you are! Don't move!"

Forbin stood at the top of the stairway, half crouched, peering down at them. He started to come down the stairway. In his hand was a small, blue automatic. He saw Schwartz changing position, and he cried out sharply and brought the pistol up. "Don't move! I'll shoot!"

But even as he spoke he saw the big gun in Schwartz' fist and he pulled the trigger. Flame spat. The shocking explosion seemed to rock the house. Schwartz grunted. He doubled up and sprawled clumsily upon the half-open valise.

Forbin came down another step; he beckoned Sammy to come forward. "Come out of it, boy. Keep your hands up."

SAMMY moved out from the shadow of the closet. Forbin saw his face; he started suddenly. Sammy, looking up at him, saw the man's whole expression change, as if a mask had been lifted from it. A moment Forbin regarded the boy. He wet his lips, looking from Schwartz

to the other. And then he smiled. Sammy saw a strange light in the man's eyes.

There were stumbling steps behind Forbin, but he recognized them and did not turn his head. Sammy saw the blood-smeared face of Kid Strub.

Forbin had raised his pistol now; it was pointing straight for Sammy Day. And Forbin was grinning crazily. "So you've turned burglar, eh? That makes it very convenient; I've wanted to get you out of the way." He laughed; his voice was high and sharp. "I'll be very sorry, of course. I'll tell the police I didn't recognize you. Two burglars, looting my camp. They fired at me. In self-defense I was forced to shoot them. Unfortunately, I killed them both . . ."

Forbin spoke in a low, affected tone, as if he were speaking the lines of some play. It seemed a tremendous joke to him. "I killed them both!" he said again. "I had to kill them both!" And he raised the pistol again.

Sammy Day's legs were powerless to move. He stood there, staring up at the insane face of Forbin.

Kid Strub spoke suddenly. "That's Sammy!" he said. "It's Sammy!"

Sammy looked at Strub quickly. Strub's voice had changed; the dull monotone was gone. His face. despite the blood, seemed changed, too.

Strub's hand was on Forbin's arm. Forbin jerked it loose; he snarled: "Let go! Get back there!"

Strub said: "Wait a minute—wait a minute." He seemed bewildered. "What's all this, anyway? What you pointing that thing at Sammy for?"

Forbin pulled away from him, clubbing savagely with the pistol. Sammy leaped for the stairway.

And then another shot roared out; a thundering blast that left Sammy suddenly deaf. He stopped, gazing in horror upward, thinking that Forbin had shot Strub. But it was Forbin who screamed shrilly and dropped, came floundering down the short stairway.

And Dopey Schwartz, with his big gun smoking, was on his feet, grinning, coming over with his gun covering the writhing Forbin.

"Nice shootin'," he complimented himself. "If that didn't break his arm just one inch above the elbow, my name is Sherlock Holmes!"

He was carrying the shabby old valise in one hand. He put the gun away; leaned down to snap the cuffs onto Forbin's wrists. "Grab a hold," he ordered Sammy. "Let's get this guy upstairs."

Kid Strub watched them in silent wonder, following them to the living room. "Hey, Sammy," he kept saying. "What's this all about, Sammy?"

They dropped Forbin onto a couch. He was moaning, lifting his wounded arm with the other, staring at the scarlet stream that flowed down his wrist.

"We've got to get a doctor for this guy," Schwartz told Sammy. He looked Kid Strub. "I guess you'll need one, too. How you feeling now?"

The fighter was completely bewildered; his eyes went from Forbin to Sammy. He said: "Why don't you tell me? Did Bazik knock me out? Did he knock me out?"

Schwartz eased Strub into a chair. "Take it easy, Kid," he said. "You knocked out Bazik in the third round—but that was three months ago!" He told Sammy: "Your pal here wasn't punch-crazy—he had some kind of amnesia. That wallop over the coco I gave him must have brought him around. I think he's all right. The only trouble is, his memory is three months slow!"

Schwartz was at the phone. "I'm going to call state police headquarters," he said to Sammy. The boy's face dropped suddenly. He blurted out: "You gonna have have him arrested . . . for murdering Maginn?"

Schwartz nodded grimly—toward Forbin. "Yeah," he said. "Him."

Forbin struggled to his feet suddenly. His eyes were wild, his face haggard. "You got nothing on me! You can't do that! I didn't kill Maginn! I wasn't even in Miami—I left before it happened!"

Schwartz grunted: "You know all about it, don't you?" He put down the phone and pushed Forbin back onto the couch. "I want to ask you a couple questions. First: were you ever in show business—?"

"What about it? What's that got to do with it?"

"—under the name of Montagu—Professor Montagu?"

Forbin snarled unintelligently. Schwartz was opening the old valise. He fished inside, pulled out a strange object. Strub and Sammy Day stared. It appeared to be a doll. It *was* a doll!—the figure of a miniature man with a round, clownish face and eyes that rolled grotesquely.

Now Schwartz sat in a chair; held the doll on his knee. He put his arm about the doll, behind its head, and worked his fingers; the creature's mouth opened and shut rapidly. The eyes rolled ludicrously.

Sammy stared. "Hey—what's this?"

Schwartz said: "It's evidence—enough to get the hot seat for the Professor there!" He nodded toward Forbin. Then he asked Sammy: "Ever see the Professor's act?"

"Me? Of course not."

Schwartz made a grimace. "That's what *you* think! I got an idea that the Professor gave a special performance for your benefit—in Miami, the night Maginn tried to welsh on handing over Strub's contract"—he was looking directly at Forbin—"the night be stabbed Maginn!"

"Hey," Sammy said, bewildered. "I don't get this at all—at all."

Schwartz said: "Easy. I figured it out the minute I found this long-lost cousin of Charlie McCarthy's here. The guy's a ventriloquist. Remember the night you came back and found Maginn dead? You heard Strub talking—saying he'd killed Maginn—it was the Professor throwing his voice!"

Schwartz said to Forbin: "You're a quick thinker, aren't you, Professor? You gave Maginn the works. But Sammy here almost walked in on you. You figured the best way to keep him quiet was to make him think it was Kid Strub that killed Maginn. And Strub?—he was out, probably. You dragged him over; you laid him on top of Maginn. You turned out the lights and waited till Sammy came in. Then you made it seem that Strub was talking. Fine and dandy. The kid here was so wrought up, he thought you'd just come in the room when he heard you knock and looked around and saw you. My guess is, you were in the room all the time. . . . How about it?"

Forbin's eyes were bulging; he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

Sammy was listening, his face knitted in a frown. "And," he said to Schwartz, "today, when I thought I heard Maginn talking—that was Forbin?"

Schwartz nodded. "The Professor himself. It's probably the only way he could get Kid Strub to train—sort of ghosting for Harry Maginn."

"But," Schwartz grinned, "the best act was the one Forbin pulled at the Miami railroad station. It must have been hours after you hid Maginn's body. A dozen people swore that Maginn and Strub and Forbin drove up to the station in a cab. Strub and Forbin got out and took the train; Maginn went away in the cab. The tip-off was that none of them could tell just what clothes Maginn was wearing. But they all had heard him say goodbye to Forbin; and they heard Forbin say: "So long, Harry," the Professor throwing his voice again; you see?"

While Schwartz was phoning for the state police, Sammy puzzled the thing out and got it through his head. But Kid Strub, just awake, after a nightmare that had begun three months before, in the ring at Miami, needed a lot of explaining.

Sammy was doing his best when Schwartz put down the phone. Kid Strub still looked pretty bewildered, and Schwartz grinned at him.

"I know what you need," he assured Strub. "Nothing like it to clear up the cobwebs." He was starting out of the room. "And if I can find the galley in this dump, we'll have it pronto—a good cup o' coffee!"

What a night for a murder

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For hours Tama clung to her, while the storm-waves wrenched at them

Lost Harbors

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

TWELVE years before, in the South Seas, Reed Darrow had murdered his captain and scuttled the derelict *Fairhaven*—to secure a sack of pearls. But the *Fairhaven's* lone survivor escaped Darrow—a ten-year-old cabin boy who leaped into the rolling seas. Hours later that boy was washed up on the island of Niu, where the kindly natives adopted him, and where he was to dwell until manhood as Tamasami, hating the memory of his own race. . . .

In San Francisco the Reed Darrow Steamship Lines prosper exceedingly, founded on a stolen sack of pearls. Reed Darrow sees his final desire soon to be satisfied: he will marry the beautiful Celeste Cameron, in spite of the opposition of her sister Roberta. But then Darrow learns that in a distant South Seas harbor a mast-tip still marks the wreck of the pearler *Fairhaven;* that the lost ship's cabin boy lives with the natives on Niu. Immediately Darrow sails for the island on his yacht, determined to wipe out these dangerous clues to his past. And, unknowing, he is accompanied by Roberta Cameron, who has heard rumors of the *Fairhaven* crime and has stowed away on Darrow's yacht in order to discover the truth and expose the shipping magnate to her sister.

BUT Roberta's crazy loyalty brings her swiftly to disaster. The first night in the harbor of Niu, Tamasami arrives silently on board the yacht, seeking revenge against his childhood enemy. Roberta discovers him, and while the two are talking, Darrow comes upon them. Here, he realizes, is his opportunity to remove the two greatest obstacles to his ambition.

He has Tamasami and Roberta placed aboard a tramp steamer manned by scoundrels in his own pay. His orders about the two prisoners are at once casual and brutally clear: they must not be allowed to testify against him. . . . Days later Tamasami and Roberta are set free on a tiny, deserted island, permitted to live because the

This story began in the Argosy for February 18

tramp's crew could not quite stomach the cold-blooded murder of a girl.

Back in San Francisco, Darrow strikes other and unsuspected obstacles to his plans. Celeste is frantic from worry and will not marry him until her sister is discovered. And one Martin Mason, a man with the capable look of an experienced seaman, comes to Darrow with disturbing questions. Mason is searching for his nephew who served as cabin boy on the *Fairhaven* twelve years before; at Niu he has learned of Tamasami; learned from Vaila, Tamasami's betrothed, that the boy went away on Reed Darrow's yacht with a beautiful white girl. Darrow lies cleverly, but Mason leaves him, dissatisfied. Gradually the double mystery of his nephew and of Roberta fits together in his mind, and he goes to Celeste Cameron. In the days following Darrow notices that his fiancée is increasingly uneasy.

BUT Reed Darrow is haunted by an even greater danger. A former henchman of his, a man who knows the criminal secret of the *Fairhaven*, has disappeared after attempting to blackmail Darrow. Now the shipping magnate must silence him. At length Darrow discovers the man's hiding place, and by means of a cleverly contrived death machine murders him. Darrow's alibi is unshakable; at the hour of death he was dining with Celeste Cameron. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

FOUR HORIZONS

THE report of Ritchie's murder sent Martin Mason quickly to Celeste. "I'm sure of it now," he said.

"Sure of what?" Her face was bloodless. Hideous imaginings had oppressed her these last hours. Suspicions whispered, but she fought them away. She must not let herself be disloyal to Reed Darraw.

"That it all links up," insisted Mason. "A lost boy and a lost girl. An old scandal of the sea—a yacht and a blue swim suit—and now Ritchie's murder."

"But Reed didn't—" She checked herself in shame. The very denial was treason.

"Let's assume he didn't," Mason agreed. "The police say he didn't, and they ought to know. Let's stick only to what we both want. You want to find a lost girl and I want to find a lost boy."

This was sure ground—an interest which bound them both passionately to a common cause.

"Do you remember what I said, Miss Cameron? That we needed two witnesses—Ritchie and Vaila?"

"Yes."

"Well, we've lost one of them. That leaves only Vaila."

"I told Reed what you said about her. He insists it's quite impossible. Captain Walts says the same thing."

"Are you satisfied?" Mason's eyes searched her.

"No-o. I'd like to see this Vaila myself. Reed thinks I should, too. For my own peace of mind, he means. He placed his yacht at my disposal and told me to take a cruise down there, any time I like."

"He offered you his yacht? And did you accept?"

"No I didn't. I mean I couldn't—" Again she checked herself, biting her lip and avoiding Mason's clear penetrating eyes.

"Why can't you accept?" he challenged. "It seems a very convenient way to get down there, doesn't it?"

"But don't you see it's impossible?"

He did see. And it proved to him that, deep in her heart doubts were stirring. Doubts of Reed Darrow. As long as they were there she could not, in conscience, borrow Darrow's yacht to pursue them.

"It's important for you to go down there, though," Mason went on. "After you talk with Vaila, you'll know for certain whether the white girl was your sister. You bear some resemblance to Roberta, I suppose?"

"Yes, and I could show Vaila Roberta's picture."

"It's important that I go down there too," he said. "Because I've just turned up another angle."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"I asked some of the *Flying Fox's* crew if any other boats were in port at Niu. They say only one—a tubby tramp freighter far across the lagoon. They don't know her name. But it's barely possible my nephew shipped out on the tramp instead of the yacht."

"And the white girl could have been on the tramp, too, instead of on the yacht. In that case she wouldn't be Roberta."

"Right. In that case she wouldn't be Roberta. However, Vaila swears she saw the white girl swim from the beach to the yacht."

Celeste brooded for a minute. Then: "How does one get to Niu, Mr. Mason?"

"You can do like I did. Take a cabin on some freighter to Apia. And at Apia charter something to take you over to Niu."

"Why not charter a boat right here and go all the way in it?"

Mason smiled. "It would cost lots of money, Miss Cameron."

"Money's not important. I've got more than I can use."

"The trail," he objected, "might lead further than Niu."

Decision was in Celeste's eyes now. "I'll go anywhere—to the end of the world if necessary—to find my sister."

"Exactly the way I feel about Jimmie," echoed Mason.

"You know ships, don't you? Could you find one for me?" She laid an appealing hand on his arm.

"Aye," Mason smiled, "and a crew. And I know a skipper who won't cost you a cent, Miss Cameron."

"You?"

"Myself," he said.

MARTIN MASON spent three busy days on the waterfront. His report to Celeste was exultant: "I've found her, just what we need. A converted tuna boat called the *Marigold*. Converted to a pleasure craft ten years ago, with sail and diesels. Getting a little old now. But shipshape."

"A crew?"

"She's easily handled. Seven stout hands, with myself, could run her to any port of the sea. Besides that, all you'd need is a cook and stewardess."

She thought quickly. "I can take along my housekeeper for stewardess. Then there's William, my butler. He'd never let me go without him. I can take him as cook."

"Hold on," cautioned Mason. "There're items like fuel. And every month you use this boat will cost you—"

"Never mind that," Celeste broke in. "When do we start for Niu?"

"Soon as we can overhaul her," said Mason.

They went into an eager huddle over details. Celeste took pencil and paper. As he dictated she wrote down a long list of provisions and equipment for the cruise.

Then she saw that his eyes were fixed upon the bareness of her third left finger. A ring which had been there yesterday was now gone.

Celeste flushed slightly but made no explanation, and he understood.

Reed Darrow, at this same moment, was scowling at a ring which lay before him on his desk. Again he read the note which had brought it to him from Celeste.

Until I find Roberta, was all it said.

But it might mean much more. Had Mason, Darrow wondered, poisoned her against him? Vigorously he damned Mason.

He reached for the telephone and called Celeste. She was out, William said.

A score of times during the next week he called Celeste. "Miss Cameron's not in," William answered persistently.

Then the blow fell. In the arrivals and departures column of the shipping page, Darrow read an item which took his breath. A ship called the *Marigold* had left that morning for Niu, in the far South Seas. The *Marigold* had been chartered by Miss Celeste Cameron for a cruise of undetermined length, and was being skippered by Martin Mason.

Darrow crumpled the paper fiercely. Then he poured himself a tall brandy. Again he damned Mason for an upstart meddler. Everything had been all right until Mason had come along.

Darrow consumed three brandies and a glow came to his face. After all, what would they find down there? There was the word of Captain Walts against the weird tale of an island girl. Certainly they'd find neither Roberta nor Tamasami.

It meant, he decided, that Celeste would be coming back one of these days, defeated and repentant. She'd see in time how silly it all was; she would return and give him the opportunity to forgive her.

THE sea was chest deep on Tamasami. His hands held a length of bamboo pointed at one end to the sharpness of a spear. He peered vigilantly downward and all about him, sometimes stooping under the surface, sometimes wading to another vantage, sometimes spearing futilely at fish life in the water about him.

It was an awkward tool—this bamboo spear. Yet with it, and with a copra knife whose blade was wearing thin from use, he had already done many things. Was there not a shallow well at the roots of a *papaya?* Was there not a bambo and grass roof on the stone walls of his house? It wasn't a beautiful house, like the fine oval *fale* he had built for Vaila at Niu. But it was the best he could do here. And were there not logs of pandanus drying in the sun, to make stringers for a raft some day?

A striped shape weaved lazily by. Tama stabbed with swift and clever accuracy and his spear came up with a pinioned fish. He looked ashore. Smoke drifted hazily above the palms there. That pandanus tree he was burning down for lack of an axe, would soon fall.

Tamasami waded to the beach. His tapa-cloth *lava-lava* was gone now, replaced by a crude grass kilt reaching from his waist to his knees. Rocks and bark and thorn had been no kinder to Roberta. When he came to her now, seated cross-legged like a native and at work stripping fiber from the hulls of ripe coconuts to make sinnet string, he found her like himself reduced to a grass singlet. Her sports suit had long since been cut to shreds. Her legs were bare and scarcely less brown than Tamasami's.

"Berta!" Tama shouted. He waved his speared fish proudly.

"Fish, fish!" she said rebelliously. I'm sick of fish!"

He looked hurt. "But such a fine fish, Berta! You can even put it on the fire, if you must."

"I must" she said severely. "You're such a savage, Tama. Nice people don't eat raw fish. How many times must I tell you?"

He tossed the fish at her feet and turned away. She'd clean it, of course. She was a woman. Men speared fish and women cleaned them.

A crash in the distance told him that his pandanus tree had fallen by its fire. He went there on the run, so that it would not burn longer. The tree had an eight-inch bole and would make the fourth of his four raft-stringers.

He dragged it to three others that were drying in the sun. Green logs did not float well, he knew. The moon must change many times before these were cured.

He put out the fire. Easy enough to make another, when he wished, by friction of sticks and stones. Off then to the bamboo patch where he set to work breaking down long light poles. These would make a floor for the raft. Three of them he would erect upright, and between them stretch grass mats for sails. Not forever could they stay on this islet. There'd be hurricanes, and seasons of drought when the shallow well might lose its water.

And this woman, he knew, had no strength for such a life. She had no cunning or spirit. Days at a time she'd lain listlessly, face down on the sand. Sometimes in bitter tears, more often only with a despairing ache in her eyes. She didn't laugh or sing, like Vaila. She couldn't even climb a coco palm. Her bare feet limped on the rocks. She was afraid to pick up a crab.

She had nice hair, though. A glossy gold in the sun. Not long like Vaila's, but getting a little longer each day.

TAMA filled his arms with bamboo poles and carried them to his raft logs. They must be trimmed. "Bring the knife, Berta," he shouted.

She came obediently to him, limping. He took the knife with which she had been stripping sinnet fibers.

Now she stood watching him trim the poles. "Don't you ever rest, Tama?"

"There is much to do," he said. "For you, too," he added a little brusquely. "Go back and hang the sinnet to dry."

The girl turned and went back toward the house, shoulders drooping.

Tamasami looked after her and his face relaxed. Perhaps he was unkind. Maybe she wasn't used to taking orders from her men. He remembered, then, the courage with which she had faced Darrow. Nor had her lip even quivered before Cuttle.

A strange woman—brave before men who would take her life, weak before one who would save it!

When he went to the house she had just finished hanging brown fibers on a limb to cure. "Why must we have so much string, Tama?" she asked him.

"For the raft," he explained.

"I see. We use string instead of nails. But strings break!"

"One string breaks, Berta. But many strings hold fast."

The fish, impaled on a pointed stick, was cooking on a fire. Already it was done enough to suit Tamasami. He broke off the tail of it and, squatting there, ate ravenously without waiting.

Roberta raked half a dozen turtle eggs from the coals. She put these on a stone before him and he wolfed them. It did not occur to Tamasami to ask her to eat with him. The women of Niu always waited until their men had finished.

"Bring me water, Berta."

She took a coconut half-shell and went to the well. Filling it, she returned to him and he drank. There was a sip left. She drank from the same cup. Not with relish, for the water was faintly briny.

"Salt is good," he had told her.

"On food," she had agreed with a grimace. "But positively vile in water."

"Soon we shall have birds," he said now. He was looking off toward the cliff with its still deserted rookery.

"Gull eggs!" she suggested with a frozen smile. "I suppose you adore them!"

"All that makes life is good, Berta. Is it not so?"

Her face relaxed. "I'm sorry, Tama. I've been such a beastly sport all along!"

HER contrition made him want to say something kind. "You have already learned many things, Berta. Some day maybe you have much sense, like Vaila."

"Don't turn my head, Tama." She managed the first smile he had seen in days. "What, for instance, have I learned?"

"To put the oil from coconuts on your face, Berta. At first it is like the peeling onion."

She laughed outright. "You're so extravagant with your compliments, Tama!"

"But it is true," he assured her seriously. "Some day maybe you are beautiful, like Vaila."

"Really? Well, your Vaila's a better liar than I can ever hope to be, anyway. She told me you didn't live on Niu."

Tamasami swallowed another turtle egg. "She is like all the other women," he said complaisantly. "She is jealous. If she could only see us here, she is still more jealous."

"She'd be tearing her hair, I suppose!" Roberta tried to laugh, but the effort brought more bitterness than mirth. "Well, next time you see her, please disillusion her, Tama."

Tama helped himself to another chunk of fish. "She will think we are married, *faa-Samoa*," he said bluntly.

"Faa-Samoa?"

He explained that *faa-Samoa* meant "according to Samoan customs." "When a boy and girl run away into the bush all night, or to another island, then they are married *faa-Samoa.*"

"How quaint!" exclaimed Roberta. Then quickly: "Don't you think I've made enough of those greasy strings?"

"We need many more," Tama said. "But they can wait. Tomorrow you shall bring much grass here and we shall weave more mats."

"What for?" The house was already floored with grass mats.

"For sails," he said, "when we go on the raft."

"Which way is the nearest other land, Tama?"

He looked out to four horizons of the sea. "I do not know, Berta." That was the irony of it. Land might be fairly close in one direction, and hopelessly far in another.

"If people only knew we were here!" Roberta sighed. "If we could only broadcast!"

Broadcast was a new word for him. 'What does it mean, Berta?"

"You send out messages on the air, Tama."

He considered this. It seemed unreasonable; and yet he remembered having heard clicking sounds on ships. It was all vague to him, though.

"What catches these messages, Berta?"

"An aerial catches them, Tama."

"What is an aerial?"

"It's something that sticks up into the air, like a mast."

Tamasami puzzled for a moment. "Why does this mast catch the messages, Berta?" He looked at her with a childlike confidence. After all this woman of the cloud-bursters had a wisdom of her own.

But her response disappointed him. "You'll have to ask Marconi. To me it's always been a mystery, Tama."

CHAPTER XVII

LONG VOYAGE FOR VAILA

SOMETHING sticking up, a tip of mast, lay a thousand miles up the warm seas. For nearly twelve years it had been rotting there. The *Marigold* cruised cautiously by it, with Martin Mason and Celeste Cameron at the rail.

"There it is," Mason said, pointing. "We start from here."

"And go where?"

"First, a few leagues on to Niu."

The two, Mason clean and solid in his whites, Celeste trim and delicate at his elbow, gazed with a degree of awe at the spike of timber showing above the sea. A gull wheeled by, fluttered a moment, then alighted on the mast.

"I can't figure out how Jimmie ever got ashore from this wreck. But he did."

"What a graceful bird!" exclaimed Celeste. As she spoke, the gull spread its wings and flew away.

The *Marigold* went gliding on, sails reefed and with Diesels purring. Weather had been favorable from the start and they had made record time from San Francisco.

"It agrees with you, Miss Cameron." Mason smiled. He looked at her tanned face with more approval in his eyes than he knew.

"I'd love it," Celeste admitted, "if I weren't on the rack all the time about Roberta."

In a little while they sighted Niu. When they eased through the reef channel and dropped anchor, Celeste came on deck again ready to go ashore.

"We may not have to, though," Mason said. "Here comes half the island right now."

Canoes and *paopaos* were soon swarming about them. "Look, there she is," cried Mason. "I mean Vaila." He pointed to a girl in a canoe.

"She's lovely," exclaimed Celeste. "Can you bring her aboard?"

"Bet we couldn't keep her off. Chances are she's met every ship since I saw her, asking about Tamasami."

Mason waved. Vaila recognized him and waved back. "Did you bring Tama?" she cried out eagerly.

He waited until the prow of her canoe bumped against the ship's side. Then, reaching down to catch her upstretched hand, he lifted her over the rail. "No, Vaila," he said gravely. "But I've brought someone else."

The Niu girl found herself face to face with Celeste. Celeste held out her hand with a smile. "May I be your friend, Vaila?"

"We've all a common interest," Mason interposed. "We all want to find Tamasami."

Vaila's red lips parted in surprise. "You

too know my Tama?" she asked of Celeste.

"No, my dear," Celeste answered. "But it may be that I know the girl you think he went away with. Tell me about that, won't you?"

She slipped an arm about Vaila and led her to the cabin. Her graciousness quickly won the island girl.

IN A moment Vaila was telling all about her encounter with Roberta on the beach. "I have lie to her," she confessed. "But to you I say the truth."

"Why did you lie to her, child?"

"So she will not take away Tamasami."

"You say she had a picture of Tamasami in her hands? Where did she get it?"

Vaila did not know. "But the picture is Tama," she insisted. "He is sitting on a mast in the sea."

"I," Celeste announced quietly, "shall show you other pictures."

With Mason standing by, she spread out ten photographs before Vaila. Nine were of bathing beauties chosen at random, except that each was of Roberta's age and wore a one-piece swim suit. The tenth was of Roberta herself.

"Is any of these the girl you saw here, Vaila?"

Vaila's decision was prompt. "This is the one." Her finger touched the likeness of Roberta.

Celeste met Mason's eyes, an absolute conviction there reflecting her own. There could be no doubt now. Roberta had been at Niu.

"But are you sure she came on the yacht, Vaila?" Mason questioned. "I've been told about another ship here at the same time."

"I see her swim to the fine white ship," persisted Vaila.

"It stands to reason she came on the yacht," Mason argued. "The yacht came from San Francisco, and so did Roberta. The trip took nine days. No tub of a tramp could have made it in twice that time. So—"

Celeste made a gesture.

"But we have the word of the crew that she didn't come on the yacht!" Celeste protested.

"The yacht's entire round-trip cruise," Mason pointed out, "before returning home via Suva and Honolulu was twenty-five days. Let's admit your sister couldn't have hidden aboard that long without being discovered. But for nine days she might have managed it."

"She's always been venturesome," Celeste conceded.

"Don't forget about the guest cabin, either. And a key for it which disappeared with Roberta."

Mason turned gravely back to Vaila. "I'm taking it for granted, Vaila, that this white girl came on the yacht. But maybe she left on the other ship, the tramp!"

Vaila shook her head. "I see her swim to the yacht."

"And from the yacht, perhaps she swam to the tramp?"

"But why," Celeste wondered, "would she do that?"

"To engage passage home," Mason suggested. "She knew she'd be discovered on the yacht, sooner or later. It would humiliate her, wouldn't it?"

Celeste could understand that much readily enough. Vaila's testimony, to Roberta, must have seemed to deny Ritchie's. The whole thing seemed to be a wild-goose chase. Therefore, rather than face Darrow, Roberta would have been in the mood to change ships at any price. She could have offered handsome payment if the freighter would only take her to the nearest port where passage north could be engaged on a Matson liner.

"But why didn't she cable me?" worried Celeste. "And why didn't she come home?"

Mason inquired keenly, "What was the name of that tramp freighter, Vaila?"

"I do not know," the island girl said. "It is anchor far out and its men are not come trading ashore."

"They didn't, eh?" This information impressed and disturbed Mason. Further questions increased his apprehensions. The tramp had arrived a day before the yacht, Vaila said, and had appeared to wait here

without purpose. No trading. No filling of water kegs. No intercourse whatever with the people of Niu.

"I'm going ashore to see the chiefs," Mason announced.

HE WAS gone all the rest of the day and came back baffled. The islanders, he reported, could not add to Vaila's information. Nobody knew the tramp's name. She had seemed to have no errand whatever at Niu.

"It mayn't mean anything, at that," brooded Mason. "She might've dropped anchor here couple of days just to repair rigging or overhaul the engines. Still, things look queer. Damned queer, if you'll excuse me, Miss Cameron."

He urged Vaila to describe the tramp in every detail. How many funnels? How many masts? How many life boats? Was it a three-island type of ship? What color? What flag did it fly?

"It is not a pretty ship," Vaila said. "It needs much paint and I think she is very old."

"How big?"

"About so long like this one."

"Did you go close alongside?"

When the ship had first dropped anchor, she said, she had canoed out with other islanders with the usual greeting. But the crew had not been cordial. Only two of them had come to the rail. "They are not pretty sailor men," she said.

"Would you know them again? And the ship?"

Vaila considered for a moment, then nodded. She believed she would know that ship if she saw it again, and the two men.

Mason drew Celeste aside for a long, subdued conference.

"We've got to find that tramp, Miss Cameron. It's our only lead."

"You think my sister went away on it?"

"How else could she have gone?"

"And the boy—your nephew?"

"How else could he have gone? I found out something else ashore just now. Only one of Jimmie's possessions is missing from his *fale*. I went over everything carefully with Faipule. And Faipule's interpreter bowled me over by saying that when Jimmie went away that night, he took with him an axe. And nothing but an axe is missing from his *fale*."

"An axe?"

"Yes. If he signed on as a deckhand with either one of two ships here, why should he take an axe? I asked Faipule about that, and he tells me where the axe came from. It's a tool Jimmie salvaged from the wreck of the *Fairhaven*."

Celeste was more confused than ever.

"I don't know what it means," Mason went on. "But it's a link. A tied thread between what happened that night and what happened eleven years ago. Roberta came down, we assume, to check up on what happened eleven years ago. Then, with a prop of that old event in his hand, Jimmie disappears with Roberta."

Celeste was impressed. "Yes," she agreed, "it does seem like a link. You're right—we *must* find that tramp ship."

"It won't be easy," he reminded her, "since we've only a vague description and don't even know its name." Then his eyes fell upon Vaila by the rail and an idea struck him. "Look here, Miss Cameron; Vaila says she'd know the ship on sight; and two of her crew. So why not take Vaila along?"

"Vaila? Where?"

"To any and all ports of the seas. She'll go like a shot, I imagine. She's just as anxious to find Tamasami as we are."

"I'll ask her," agreed Celeste.

She went back to Vaila. Would Vaila go with them to find Tama?

Vaila did not hesitate. "Yes, I go," she said quickly. "You help me find Tama and I go to all places."

The sun had set and a moon was topping the palm trees. Martin Mason rowed ashore with Celeste and Vaila. "Faipule mayn't let her go," Mason whispered to Celeste. "After all a *taupo* isn't supposed to go running around the seas."

It took long hours of earnest persuasion. There were tears and pleading from Vaila. Ponderous arguments in rebuttal by the

talking chiefs. The candlenuts had to be relighted more than once before Vaila won permission.

"She shall be my personal companion," Celeste promised Faipule. "We'll take good care of her and some day bring her safely home."

"And Tamasami," Vaila supplied with eyes shining, "will come with me."

IN THE morning they were off amidst chanting from a hundred canoes. Vaila stood at the *Marigold's* rail in the first European dress she had ever worn. Celeste had given it to her, and the silken softness of it delighted the Niu girl. Over it, and draped about Vaila's neck, hung a mass of resplendent *leis*.

Celeste stood smiling on one side of her, Martin Mason on the other. *"Tofa!"* Vaila cried as she waved back. It was her first journey from this land and the excitement of it made her tremble. Other girls, waving from the canoes, envied her. Vaila, their *taupo,* was off on a pilgrimage of love to find Tamasami.

The land faded from sight. Vaila, according to island custom, threw her *leis* into the sea.

Three days later she looked out over the bay as Suva. A score of ships were there. At each of them Vaila stared for a moment, then shook her head.

"It is not here," she said.

Mason went ashore and made futile inquiries. No agency on the waterfront could give him any clew to the identity of the tramp freighter.

It was the same at Apia, the next port of call. Again the errand failed at Pago Pago, at Papeete and at Rarotonga. From island to island the *Marigold* sailed, constantly inquiring without result.

Each day Celeste grew fonder of Vaila. Vaila in turn came to adore the fair, gentle lady who was helping her find Tama. No less she came to trust Martin Mason. Was not he her Tama's kinsman? He would be her own kinsman, too, wouldn't he, when she married Tamasami?

One day she asked Mason about this. He nodded cheerfully. "Yes, Vaila, if you find Jimmie and marry him, it will make you my niece."

Celeste was reading on the foredeck, under the awning there. Martin Mason's eyes were on her with a look which Vaila did not find difficult to define.

"I be *her* niece, too, maybe, some day?" Vaila asked.

Mason flushed to his sandy hair. The sharpness of his retort was not like him. "Don't be silly, Vaila. Whatever put such foolishness into your head?"

Vaila dimpled and her eyebrows arched wisely. "At Niu we do not call it foolishness. You are love this lady, yes? She is nice for you, I think. I think maybe she—"

"She hired me to run a boat for her, that's all. Stop chattering, Vaila," Mason rebuked roughly. He went stamping up to the bridge and left her there in confusion.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOLLOW THE BAT

TAMASAMI sat by a pile of coconuts and held one in his hand, gouging the meat out through a hole in one end. The nuts in the pile had already been so treated, and were now light, hollow shells.

"We shall cast them on the water, Berta," he said.

Roberta, lying face down near him, was busily preparing fillers for the hollow nuts. Scratching on bark with the point of a copra knife, she wrote messages of distress.

"I don't see much use in it, Tama," she complained.

"One is no use," Tamasami agreed. "Nor two nor ten. But we shall send ten times ten and many more to sea."

"Ouch!" cried Roberta, sucking a scratched finger. "Wish I hadn't said anything about this broadcasting, Tama."

"It is a smart idea, Berta."

For days he had driven both himself and the girl to the task of setting distress signals adrift. When a message was inserted in a hollow coconut, the hole was plugged

to make the container quite water-tight.

"They'll be needles in haystacks," Roberta argued. "Because the sea is so big."

"The sea also has many ships, Berta."

"Who wouldn't know where we are, even if on one chance in a million they picked up a nut." She made a face at her last message which, like all the others, read:

Roberta Cameron and James (Tamasami) Mason alive on small island. Lat and Long unknown, but about five days by steam from Niu.

"We shall wait until the wind blows high offshore," Tama said. Otherwise he knew that the first incoming tide would only wash the shells back to this same beach.

A few days later the wind came up high, whipping across the islet like a gale. The palm trees swayed and waves came with a succession of smashing booms against the cliff.

Tamasami and Roberta carried the hollowed nuts to the leeward beach. Tama preceded, as usual, and the girl followed. Looking back he noted with approval that she did not limp. She was toughened now. Bruises on her small bare feet had become callouses. Each day she had grown browner and more primitive. Her hair, bleached almost silver by the sun, reached to her shoulders. She was much more like Vaila now thought Tamasami.

Still, even now she couldn't spear a fish or climb a coco palm.

They reached a beach where the tide was ebbing before the gale. One by one the nuts were tossed into the sea. "They shall be leagues away by morning," said Tama.

"A coast-to-coast hookup," Roberta murmured without even a faint hope. These shells, she was sure, were doomed to rot in the doldrums somewhere; or at best to drift unnoticed, like themselves, into some other lost harbor of the seas.

"Go bring more coconuts, Berta."

"Shall I put a *billet-doux* in one of them, for Vaila?" she chided.

Tama looked at her blankly. Coast-to-coast hookups and *billet-doux* were terms beyond him. This white girl, a weakling in so many ways, was constantly confounding him with her wisdom in others.

SHE went skipping inland toward the store of nuts and he looked after her with a smile, again noting that she was behaving more and more like Vaila. And more like himself. She was teaching him things, too. Her culture was shaping itself toward his own, while his was reaching upward toward Roberta's.

It was a strange blending of tastes and characters. Raw fish seemed no longer palatable to Tamasami. Grass kilties seemed no longer shameful to Roberta. This small island was a melting pot, a crucible into which fate had tossed two life-loving humans and which now warped each in a common mold.

Roberta returned with an armful of nuts and Tama set them adrift. They watched the brown balls bob on the rollers until the last was out of sight.

Tropic dusk came rushing in as they turned toward the house.

Then a sound from the cliffs made Tama stop. He listened a moment. "Do you hear, Berta? The birds have come."

He took her hand and ran toward the cliff. A few gulls had settled in the fissures there, early arrivals at this seasonal rookery.

"How do you like your eggs, Tama?" laughed Roberta.

But Tama was not thinking of eggs just now. "What is it you say while ago?" he asked. "Beach to shore hook, yes?"

"A coast-to-coast hookup, Tama. Why? Don't tell me we have to make another broadcast!"

"When more birds come, yes," he announced.

In a week the rookery became a squawking bedlam. Soon Tama was pilfering eggs from nests there. One night he climbed the cliff with some of the coconut-fiber cord and messages on bark inscribed by Roberta.

Roberta, waiting below in the darkness, heard a mighty turmoil of protest from the roosting sea fowl. Tama was snatching at legs, she knew, fighting off battering wings while he attached messages there.

"Birds fly far," he told the girl when he came down.

"Only to some other barren beach, though," she sighed.

"No. Sometimes they light on an aerial. Is it not so?"

"An aerial, Tama?"

"A mast that sticks up. Like on a ship, Berta."

She looked at him, with the starlight on the strong lines of his face, and her own face softened. "You make me ashamed. I wish I had your faith, Tama."

Each night for weeks he raided the roosting birds. Before the nesting season was over nearly every adult fowl there became a carrier for the castaways. Nor did Tamasami stop throwing hollowed coconuts into the gales.

Moons waxed and waned. Roberta's hair reached past her shoulders now. A day came when silence from the cliffs told them that the birds were gone.

"The *popos* are gone too, Berta." The ripe coconuts, he meant. There were still plenty of *nius,* or green ones, to supply milk and meat.

Roberta affected to pout. "And just when I was learning to climb trees!"

Tama gave her a queer look. "You are changing, Berta."

"Am I?"

"One time you always cry, now you always laugh like Vaila."

"Say it this way, Tama," she admonished severely. "Say, 'Once you were a cry-baby, Berta; but now you're getting to be a good sport about it.' "

Tama repeated the phrasing, faithfully and patiently. Each day he learned something new from Roberta.

FAR to sea coconuts were drifting, unguided, unseen by any human eye. Tides washed some of them to forgotten shores. Storms crashed some of them against uncharted rocks. Others scattered, some to sink in the end, water-logged, and some to rot in a stagnant sea.

Ships, upon rare occasions, passed them by as they would have passed strands of floating weed.

. . . And still the search went on.

In the harbor at Aitukaki, in the Cooks, the *Marigold* rode at anchor with Celeste and Vaila at the rail. Three small copra traders rode the lagoon nearby, but Vaila had already looked them over.

"The ship we seek is not here," she said.

"If we could only find it!" sighed Celeste.

Now they saw Martin Mason rowing back from the shore. He had gone to make the usual inquiry there. Mason, coming alongside, shook his head. Celeste knew his errand had once more been fruitless.

"Anything from home?" she asked. Always she kept her San Francisco attorneys apprized of her whereabouts, on the slim chance that they themselves might receive news about Roberta.

"Only a cablegram from Darrow," Mason reported.

It was like all the others, she found. At almost every port she had received a cable from Reed Darrow. Constantly he assured her of his devotion and sympathy; continually he was urging her to come home.

Partly for that very reason Celeste had elected to keep cruising on. She wasn't ready yet to face Darrow. Dark shadows in her mind were not yet clear, although the outlines of Darrow's guilt seemed to grow dimmer all the while. Even dimmer grew hope of finding Roberta.

Her eyes fixed dismally on a coconut floating near the ship. A gull skimmed the bay to alight on a barge just beyond. A native stevedore loading copra raked the coconut to him, found it to be hollow and rotting; he threw it at the bird and the bird flew away.

"Where to now, Martin?" Celeste asked listlessly.

"I think to the Tongas next," he said.

TAMASAMI and Roberta had been marooned nearly a year before the raft logs were sufficiently cured. Felled green, they would quickly have become sodden if launched immediately. So Tama had let them lie in the sun through a long season, until now all the sap was baked from them.

The raft was completed, an awkward platform of bamboo over pandanus stringers. Across a bamboo mast was spread a sail of woven matting. Tama had even arranged a system of pivots by which the sail could be turned at all angles.

Connections had been effected with sinnet cord, all made laboriously by Roberta. Her fingers, for a long time now, had been as hard as any sailor's.

Her spirit was steeled, too, by this greatest venture of all—setting forth into the unknown with Tamasami.

"If we only knew which direction!"

Which way to go? It was all a guess, Tama conceded. Thousands of atolls and islands lay out there, beyond four horizons, if they only knew on just what course lay the nearest. A lucky guess, and fair weather, might mean a speedy landfall. A wrong guess of initial direction would certainly mean disaster.

"The raft is still heavy," Tama said. "It will not go fast like a canoe."

The prevailing wind was a trade, blowing from the northeast. Therefore the course most easily maintained would be southwest. Roberta had a vague preference for the opposite direction, because her home lay that way. Tama was inclined to try due west toward the setting sun.

Final decision was to leave it to chance. In three days they would start. In whichever direction the wind blew that day they would go.

They began at once to provision the raft. *Papayas* and coconuts were stored aboard. Tama had made two sharkskin bags and these he filled with fresh water. He had fashioned a low railing of bamboo about the raft, so that supplies would not be washed into the sea.

Mats were shipped to sleep on.

On the third night Tamasami sat up late, keeping anxious note of the wind. It was a balmy trade, blowing due southwest. He considered waiting a month until the trades were over and the rains set in. But rains were likely to mean storms. On the other hand they meant less hazard from thirst at sea.

Tama was thoughtfully weighing all these values when a strange sound made him suddenly alert. Something like a squeak came from the *papaya* thicket upslope. More squeaks and squeals followed, then an ill-tempered snarling. Querulous voices, almost human.

TAMA was startled for a moment; then he stood up with a glad cry. He ran to the rock house and awakened Roberta.

"We have visitors," he shouted. "Listen! The *O le pe'a.*"

Roberta came out, rubbing sleepy eyes. "The what?" she asked.

"The fruit bats have come, Berta."

"Bats?" Roberta made a face. "Must we have bats? Why can't we have pigeons, or something good to eat?"

"But the bats have just come. See, Berta?"

He pointed. She saw a winged creature, huge and hideous, wheel against the moon and then dart toward the *papaya* trees.

"Ugh!" the girl exclaimed.

But Tama, she could see, was elated. "It means," he cried, "that we shall know which direction is the next land!"

He ran toward the *papayas* and Roberta followed. Two bats were there, quarrelsome creatures clinging like monster rats to the trees and fighting over the fruit.

"I remember now," Roberta said. "I looked them up once in a book. They're called flying foxes."

Tama nodded. "Sometimes they fly from island to island, Berta."

"Like birds?"

"Only they cannot fly so far as birds. The old men of Niu have told me that no *O le pe'a* can ever fly more than thirty leagues."

"How much is that? Ninety miles?"

"So we know the next land is not more than ninety miles, Berta."

Instantly she was excited. Ninety miles would be just over the horizon. "But we still don't know which direction, Tama!"

"We will know," he said with conviction, "when the bats go away. They will go back to the place they came from—soon."

"How do you know they will?"

"Because they like best the mangos and bananas." These were on a forage for new feeding grounds, Tama explained. The few stunted *papayas* here would not suit them, so they were sure to return whence they came.

"Then we mustn't lose sight of them for an instant!" urged Roberta.

"Go back to sleep," Tama said. "I will watch."

He watched the flying foxes through the rest of the night. When day came they went to roost hanging from a limb. With great webbed black wings wrapped about them, mousey heads hidden from the sun, they more nearly resembled grotesque o'possums than foxes.

Tamasami cut two sharp bamboo poles. These he kept at hand constantly now, for a purpose. When Roberta appeared he assured her the bats would not fly in the daytime. So a watch need be kept only at night.

They took turns at watching. For three nights the bats aroused themselves only to quarrel, to flutter about the island and to feed upon *papayas*.

But on the fourth nightfall, after circling the islet twice, they struck straight out to sea. Off they went, black shadows under the stars, due north from the islet and on a course as unswerving as the flight of a crow.

Tama was ready with his bamboo sticks. He stuck them in the sand upright and about a hundred feet apart, sighting along them to mark the exact course taken by the retreating bats.

"We too," he announced to Roberta, "shall go that way."

It was almost into the teeth of the trades. Tama worried about that handicap, then decided to wait for a shift in the wind. When a wind came from the south they would launch forth on the raft.

WAITING, he made a crude compass from the half shell of a coconut. Notches cut on opposite rims of this cup made a line for sighting. He sighted this line of collimation along his bamboo poles, which must be the true course of his voyage.

"Just over the horizon," he kept assuring Roberta.

With the cup compass trued to the bamboo poles, Tama cut twelve other notches around its perimeter. One for the sun's position at each succeeding hour of daylight. At night he picked a northerly star and cut a groove on the shell to mark it.

When Roberta marveled, he explained to her that the men of Niu had from olden times been wizards at navigation. The chiefs had often told him about it: that the first cloudburster, Captain Cook, had been astonished to encounter islanders in canoes hundreds of miles from land. "What navigators!" this explorer had exclaimed in admiration; and so even today the maps chart Samoa as "The Navigator Islands."

The trades died out and a week of warm rains came. When the rain slackened, a slow fresh breeze blew from the south.

At high tide Tamasami floated his raft into the water. Roberta waded out and came aboard. A half ton of green coconuts was heaped there, by a skin of fresh water. Tama picked up one of two stout paddles and pushed off.

Expertly he set the sail and the breeze carried them to sea. It pitched them through curling white surf, drenching them many times before the last shoal was cleared. Roberta looked at Tama's surf-spattered face and laughed. "I'll bet Vaila won't know you, Tama."

The change in him was mainly that his hair was longer and not red any more. It hadn't been limed for a year and so had grown out soft and brown, like the slight beard on his chin.

Tama did not answer, but concentrated on the hazards of the shoals. Of one thing he was certain: although they might never reach land, this raft would not sink. He had cured his logs well.

The wind stiffened and the sail of woven mats bellied out. Tama looked back to shore, where he could still dimly see his two bamboo poles. He shifted the sail through a slight angle to align his course with them. He was now definitely on the course of flying bats.

But when he next looked back the bamboos ashore could no longer be seen.

Seas still rolled over the rail and splashed on Roberta's bare legs. She was not afraid, though. Instead, a tremendous exhilaration thrilled through her. She looked at Tamasami, a strong brown Viking shooting the sun with a coconut shell, and the iron of his courage came sustainingly into her own heart.

Progress was steady but pitifully slow. As the light faded Roberta could still see, dimly in their wake, the outline of the land left behind them.

Darkness and a star took shape ahead. Tama sighted the groove of his cup on it and kept on. But the breeze died and soon the raft was barely moving. Sluggish, keelless and cumbersome it floated there, with the silent sea all around. Then rain fell through sultry hours and clouds hid the star.

Tama took mats and made a tent for Roberta. All through the night he stood by his sail, peering ahead into the starless, dripping void.

Morning and Tamasami looked back dismally to see that their deserted islet still topped the horizon. Would they never get away from it? But the rain had stopped and a breeze blew again from the south. Once more the sail bellied and Tama, with a shot at the rising sun, readjusted his course to the flight of flying foxes.

By noon the sun was like a furnace. The *nius* were still sweet and constantly refreshed them. Tama hung the sharkskin of water on the mast, to let it sweat there.

He threw a chip into the sea to measure speed. In an hour it was still only a score of lengths aft of them. Roberta watched it gloomily. The pace was like a snail's.

Yet by sundown the land back of them had disappeared. Their faces turned forward now, tense and hopeful. A bat's flight! Only thirty leagues or less. Yet an appalling abyss of distance for this raft!

By midnight the wind came higher, but swerved toward the west. Tama had to swing his sail through nearly a right angle. His star gleamed ahead, a trifle to starboard of his proper course. He began paddling on the port side of his raft.

The wind was even higher by morning. Seas began rolling over, tipping the deck to reckless angles. Each sea more devastating than the last. Day came with no sun. A giant roller dashed the paddle from Tama's hand.

In a few hours the storm struck them full blast. The raft pitched crazily. Roberta and Tama could only cower in middeck, clinging desperately to the mast.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAGNATE MEETS THE MAIDEN

WITH the next sea the mast snapped like a pipestem. Tamasami snatched at Roberta as she rolled toward the rail. A briny mountain crashed over and he tightened his clutch on her hair. In the roar of wind and sea his shout was like a whisper. The deck pitched dizzily, swamped by wave after wave.

"But we can't sink, Berta!" Tama shouted.

He sprawled flat with desperate holds on a bamboo flooring pole and upon Roberta. The pace was swift enough now, but in a wrong direction, as the raft drove in wild lists and gyrations down the wind. The lesser masts went next, then the railing. Tama from a corner of his eye saw coconuts rolling into the sea.

As nearly as he could tell, this gale blew due from the north. In minutes he was losing all the hard-fought headway of hours. There was no sun. Only black, low-

heaving clouds which rumbled echoes to the fury of the sea.

The bulges bucked them, alternately, to sickening heights, dropping them in turn to deep troughs. Tama lay flat, clinging to the slippery deck and to a bedraggled, half-strangled girl. It seemed that each new wave would sweep them into the sea. The squeeze of the floor crack bruised Tama's knuckles as he clung there, pounding them with each new jar of the sea.

Roberta lay in a lethargy, her eyes closed. A hundred times only the grip of a hand in her hair kept her from being dashed from the raft. Hours they lay there, slipping first to port, then to starboard, skewing about with the spinning deck. They were hours of torture for Tamasami who became only dully aware that night had fallen. And still the storm swept them on down the run of the sea.

No lull came with the night. Through all its ruthless batterings Tamasami clung stubbornly on. To the deck and to Roberta. Lightning ripped through the clouds. Then, toward dawn, rain came obliquely before the wind.

The wind abated slightly and Tama got to his knees. He looked about him. Not a shred of rigging was left on the raft. They were rising, sinking, on swells still high and into troughs still deep. The deck was still tilting with each dive. Roberta seemed to be unconscious. He turned her head so that rain struck her face.

"We can't sink, Berta," he repeated.

She opened her eyes, tried to smile. He saw her tongue lick thirstily at the rain. Then again she began sliding as the deck tilted and again his hand gripped her arm. "Give me a *niu,* Tama," she begged. He told her they were gone and she closed her eyes.

The light came dimly. Tama could see only billows ahead. How far they had come he did not know, and he could only guess at the direction. Rain still dashed aslant on the deck, drumming incessantly as the raft drove on down the sea.

When the roaring merged into a more booming fury he did not at first sense breakers ahead. Even when he glimpsed, through rain and spray, a silhouette of palms he did not know to which shore he drifted. A rock loomed in the dimness. Then the sea was a mountain and the rock was gone. He clung to Roberta as the mountain became a pit, with swirling green water walling it.

Crash! The raft smashed tumultuously against the rock, battering itself to kindling there. And Tama was in the sea with Roberta.

THE waves bulged again and they shot over the rock. On the down-heave Tama saw the outline of palms again. He rode toward it like a chip and in the next pit his feet touched bottom. Another sea swamped him but he held to Roberta. The impetus battered him forward and again his body bruised against the rocks.

Then he was wading, staggering ashore dragging a limp, unconscious companion by her arm.

He dropped her on the beach and collapsed beside her, numbed, all but paralyzed himself. Rain still fell. The rain, he knew, had saved them by breaking the fury of the gale.

His head cleared and he stood up—only to gape at two upright bamboo poles. The irony mocked him. This was the same old refuge—the same little lost harbor. They'd been swept back to it, beaten.

Tama cupped his hands and caught rain. He held it to Roberta's lips, dashed more of it in her face. But only when he lifted her in his arms did her eyes open.

"Where are we, Tama?"

"Home again," he said.

She smiled. Her arms went wearily about his neck. "It's good to be here, Tama."

The softness of her arms soothed him. Her bruised cheek lay on his shoulder and the dripping tangle of her hair brushed at his eyes. Tama staggered up the slope, stumbling with the weight of her. A strange elation thrilled him when he came to the rock hut. He laid her on the matting there, then dropped beside her to sleep like a child.

Light filled the hut when he wakened. In one corner he saw a few *nius*. Tama lopped an end from one of them and sucked greedily. Roberta was still sleeping. He opened another *niu* and set it by her hand.

Then he went out under cloudy skies from which rain had stopped falling. On the beach he saw the two bamboo poles which marked a course from which his cruise had been cheated.

Tama stared at the markers and his lips took a stubborn set. Next time such evil luck might not overtake them. Even this time, given one more day of fair weather, they surely would have made that land beyond the horizon where bats thrived on bananas and mangos.

An island of people and *paopaos*, no doubt. *Paopaos* which could take him to still more distant islands, and to Niu.

Vaila, he knew, was waiting for him at Niu. Tama turned and looked again in at a sleeping white girl. She was beautiful, he admitted, but not so beautiful as Vaila. Vaila still sat enthroned in the rosy dimness of dreams, lovelier than all other women.

Storms would not cheat him forever, vowed Tamasami. The stubbornness tightened on his lips and he went striding toward the thicket of pandanus.

An hour later Roberta awoke to smell smoke. She went out. Off on the higher ground she saw Tamasami burning down a tree.

Roberta went to him. "What are you doing, Tama?"

"I shall make another raft," he said.

THE *Marigold* cruised in through the Golden Gate. A year of futile search had passed and Celeste Cameron, at bitter last, was giving up. Dismally she was returning home without Roberta.

On the foredeck, Vaila looked down at the first pair of silk stockings she had ever worn. Celeste had dressed her with taste for this visit to a grand house in a city of white men. Even from here Vaila could see its tall, skyscraping *fales*.

She looked down at her stockings again, then twisted to see the hang of her beautiful print dress. Men of the crew were admiring her, she knew. She pretended not to notice them. Even William, the cook, had been courting her without encouragement for months. It was nice to be looked at. It was pleasant to be admired. But when it came to loving, Vaila yearned only for the arms of Tamasami.

However it wasn't in her nature to be forever glooming. So Vaila often had danced and sung before the others, bringing cheer to her discouraged patrons. Celeste had become her model of womanhood. And Martin Mason, among men, stood second only to Tamasami.

She looked up, now, to Mason at his post on the bridge. The glumness of him annoyed Vaila. Yet she knew quite well the reason for it. He wasn't glum because he'd failed to find Tamasami. For that she could have forgiven him. He was sad, she knew, because in a few hours he must part with Celeste.

Stupid of him, thought Vaila. Why did he stand moping up there when he should be down on deck making love?

Celeste's voice called from a cabin. "Come in and get ready for shore, Vaila."

Vaila went in to get ready.

When she came out the ship was swinging in to a dock. The noise and bustle confused Vaila. Ships everywhere in the bay. Trucks rattling past dizzily tall houses and a thousand men shouting from the docks.

One of the men was big and florid and dressed in fine whites. He was cupping his hands and waving, calling out to Celeste Cameron.

Celeste appeared on deck, pale and nervous. She caught the man's eye and waved uncertainly. There was fear in her smile, Vaila thought. Then Reed Darrow came rushing aboard with his face glowing. "Celeste!"

Vaila wondered why Celeste stood close by with an arm around her. She wondered why Celeste seemed so frightened. "It's good to see you, Reed," Celeste greeted.

Then she went on quickly: "I want you to meet my guest, Reed. Her name is Vaila, and she's the sweetheart of Mr. Mason's nephew. Martin, can you come a minute? Here's Mr. Darrow."

IN THAT way Celeste checked Darrow. Vaila, a buffer without knowing it, met Darrow's eyes and smiled shyly. And Darrow, face to face with his victim's sweetheart, could hardly dare take Celeste in his arms.

A whole year since he'd seen her, and his arms ached. He'd counted with assurance on her surrender. Hadn't her cruise turned out to be pure folly? Hadn't everything dissolved like a myth, leaving them just where they started?

Mason came up. "How are you, Mr. Darrow?" His greeting was stiff and he did not offer to shake hands.

Darrow ignored the rebuff. "Thanks, Mason, for taking such good care of Celeste. She's got a fine tan. Cruise did her good, anyway, even if it did turn out to be sheer foolishness."

"I'm awfully tired, Reed," Celeste said. "I think I'll go straight home. Vaila's coming with me, of course."

"My car's at the dock," Darrow said smoothly. "I'll take you."

She would have preferred a taxi. Celeste groped for an excuse. But how could she be rude to Reed Darrow? After all there was no real proof against him. Nothing but guesses which had all come to a blind end. She wanted to be fair. Had she really been fair to Darrow?

Slowly and reluctantly Celeste turned to Martin Mason. "Goodbye, Martin."

Mason held her hand tightly for a moment. "Goodbye," he said.

"You'll turn the ship back to its owners, please?"

"I'll attend to everything," he promised.

Vaila looked on. Mason was a fool, she thought, to let this other man take her away.

Darrow turned to beckon his chauffeur from the dock. The man came aboard. "Get Miss Cameron's baggage," Darrow said.

Vaila, with an islander's courtesy, made a circle of the decks to say goodbye to the crew. When she returned to the gangplank Darrow was waiting impatiently. "Here she is," he said. "Well, let's be going, Celeste." The chauffeur was already on the dock with the baggage.

Celeste got halfway down the plank, then turned to wave at Mason. Mason stood with his face set in lines of grim stoicism. He was gloomily certain that Celeste was leaving his life forever.

It was then that Vaila caught up with her hostess. The girl was excited. She whispered in Celeste's ear. Celeste's pallor brightened to a flush. Immediately her excitement matched Vaila's. "Where?" she asked breathlessly.

"At the next pier," Vaila whispered. "I am sure it is the same ship."

"Are you coming, dear?" urged Darrow.

Celeste faced him with a look of decision. "No, Reed," she answered, "I'm not coming."

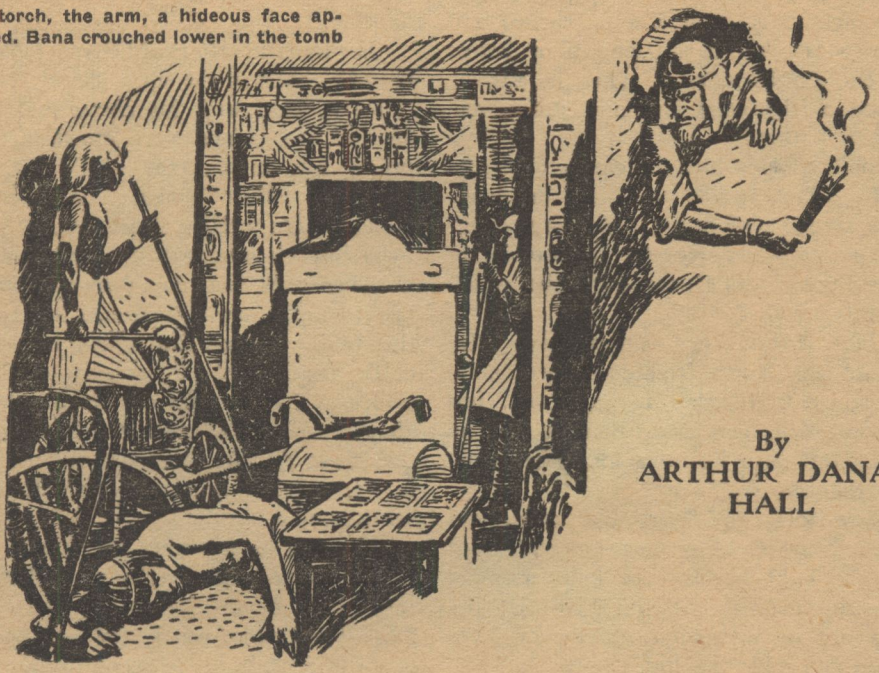
He stared at her. "Not going home?"

"Not just now, Reed. Thank you just the same. Will you send my baggage aboard, please?"

Darrow stood dumbfounded as she walked back to the deck and entered her cabin. Vaila, now, was explaining to Martin Mason. For Mason it was a happy miracle.

"Well, blow me down!" he exclaimed, when Vaila led him to the offshore rail to point out a tramp steamer tied up at the next pier.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



The torch, the arm, a hideous face appeared. Bana crouched lower in the tomb

By
ARTHUR DANA
HALL

Another God Is Born

Who defiles the resting place of the Golden Prince may himself find the Everlasting Peace of Dis. An unusual story of Ancient Thebes

THE child Bana sat so still that the stranger, who was named Pakht, leaned at last and whispered, "Is he like that always, friend?"

Khefti yawned and nodded. "Always."

"He never smiles?" Pakht insisted, looking again, nervously, at the boy Bana, who was like some carven image.

"Not in three years."

"Why does he stare so fixedly?"

Khefti spoke deliberately. "He sees the souls of Egypt's dead."

His tone was careless, and Pakht stared in his turn, licked his thin lips and fumbled for the charm that hung at his neck by a dirty cord. The small wine-shop, comfortably filled with stone-cutters and masons from the nearby Village of the Laborers, hummed with their voices, reeked with the stench of beer and of cheap wine. Through the curtained doorway came a vagrant wisp of fog from the great crawling Nile. Work for the day was done; the workers of Old Egypt relaxed.

Pakht shivered and drew the rags closer about his thin shoulders. "I am new to these parts," he said. "It is toward the west that he stares? Toward the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings?"

Again Khefti nodded. "There is a tale. But first, wine."

He leaned toward the child and spoke in a sharp tone that rose above the sounds in the room.

"Bana." And more loudly: "Bana."

The boy did not move. His wide eyes, fixed, expressionless, were strained after

some scene invisible to the sight of ordinary man. Not until Khefti reached and struck the child a stinging blow across the ear did Bana wake. Then he gasped, turned a frightened face and stammered, "Y-yes, Father."

Khefti handed him the empty cups and Pakht shrank inside, clutching the charm at his throat more firmly. "His very voice," he whispered hoarsely. "It is the voice of a dead one." And he made the sign which averts all evil.

Khefti frowned contemptuously. "Are men of the North frightened by a child that stares? He may be possessed, but he's not evil, nor mad. Beatings do no good. He's been like this for three years, since he was six."

They took the brimming cups and watched the child resume his seat. And saw the light in his eyes fade and die.

Pakht nodded wisely. "He is bewitched," he whispered; "a demon lives within and sucks his life."

Khefti tasted the wine and shrugged. "Perhaps," he said, "for he has never been like other boys. My woman—not Bana's mother; she is dead—Tefnet says he is accursed. She will hardly let him in the house.

IT began three years ago, at the Festival of the Laying of the Corner-stone of the great Temple here on the west bank. That was a day! Nobles—great, sleek, solemn men, heavy with fat living; their women, gaudy with rich jewels and trappings; soldiers; priests; slaves; the rabble . . . Man, until you've seen a festival at Thebes, you've seen nothing. Even the king's son—no bigger than Bana—had a suit of golden armor and a small silver chariot drawn by milk-white ponies. For which we, the workers of Egypt, pay—and starve.

"Bana worshiped the king's son as one worships a god. His eyes were alive, then; dancing with light and fire, they were. We thought that he would burst. He screamed and leaped and pointed; and when the procession passed us, the king's son waved to him and laughed at his dancing.

"For months afterward Bana talked of the prince and of the silver chariot. Nearly drove us mad with his chattering. When he and the prince were grown and the prince was king, Bana would be High Priest, or Prime Minister, or general of all Pharaoh's armies. Together they would fight Egypt's enemies; sail great ships.

"Then came that day (you will remember it—in the sowing season, it was) when the wailing women throughout Egypt told of the death of the king's son—of Bana's prince. A dark day for all, but for Bana—almost the end. Something died in him that day; all life and light drained from his eyes, and he became, overnight, as you see him now.

"Thus he looked when the funeral procession wound across the plain here, to the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings. The silver chariot was in the fore, and the two white ponies. The scene must live in his eyes still, for he never laughs, never plays. And he always faces the west, where his prince lives with Osiris in some hastily constructed tomb."

There was silence between them as Khefti ended his tale.

Then Pakht sighed gustily and wagged his head. "It is grief," he decided; "grief that is slowly eating his heart. You should be gentle with him. In time the gods may salve the wound."

"Bah," said Khefti. And then, "This talking is dry business. Bana—more wine."

"I saw a funeral procession today," said Pakht presently. "Are commoners also buried in the great Valley?"

"Favorites of the king, yes. Sometimes as a sign of royal favor nobles are allotted tombs there. I worked on one such, four or five High Niles ago. For Aahmose, chief butler."

Pakht rubbed his hands. "This today was a rich burial. I should like to know how to get my hands into some of those chests and boxes. Jewels can do the dead no good, but—ho—we could use a few. Eh, friend?"

Khefti glanced at him sharply, and said, "Hm-m-m."

Pakht dreamed aloud: "A villa by the Inland Lake . . . slaves, women, wine . . . ease, luxury . . . Sweet Bast! All from a handful of shining gems."

Khefti frowned in thought.

Pakht leaned forward. "What would you do with riches, Khefti?"

But Khefti muttered to himself. "Aahmose, the chief butler, is long dead; his tomb forgotten in a lonely corner of the Valley. That, too, was a rich burial. If I could find it, in the dark . . ."

He glanced to right and to left and placed his lips to the other's ear: "No word of this. Come here each night at this hour and I'll bring news." Then he roused the child Bana from his staring and slipped away.

SIX nights Pakht kept watch at the inn. Each day he saw Khefti and the boy at their work in the Great Temple, where Khefti shaped and smoothed and polished the fine stone and Bana, beside him, kept the tools bright and sharp. But after the day's work they hurried to the Village of the Laborers and were not seen until the morning. Then on the seventh night, Bana came to the doorway of the inn and signed secretly for Pakht to join him. Through the darkness and the mist they stumbled until, near the river, they found Khefti.

He led in silence to a high ruined wall by the Nile's edge and there gripped the other's arm. "I found it," he whispered.

"Found what?"

"The tomb. The tomb of Aahmose, once chief butler to the king. They had hidden the entrance beneath a slide of rock, but I found it. It is near this end of the Valley, where the path leads over the cliff."

"But—what about it?" Pakht began to wonder at this strange family. A son who stared at souls of the dead; a father who whispered of tombs.

Khefti shook him savagely. "Stupid. Thick-head. It is our chance. What about that villa by the lake? The slaves and women—horses, cattle, lands? They are yours—yours. Plunge your arms to the shoulders into boxes of jewels. Wrap your dirty hide in linens and foreign silks. Treasure, man—treasure beyond your wildest dream."

"But—but how? It must be dangerous?"

"Bah! I offer Paradise and he talks of danger." He drew Pakht deeper into the shadow. "Listen; it is simple. There must be three of us. The child, here, to dig; he is small, thin. A smaller hole, see, and faster time. You and I to watch by turn at the entrance. We work at the temple by day as usual; at night, turn and turn about, one sleeps while the other stands guard.

"I know how this tomb is fashioned. I helped to dig it. A long straight corridor cut into the solid rock with chambers at the end. Inside the chambers the funerary furniture; beds, chests, boxes, jars. The mummy, sheathed in beaten gold, in a gem-encrusted casket.

"This corridor which leads to the chambers is now filled with cemented rubble. Bana's work, to drive a hole from the outside. I know just how it must be done.

"There is no danger if we take precautions. We work only on the darkest nights. The Valley police are lazy, unsuspicious. The wild beasts that roam the Valley—the jackals"—Khefti shrugged in the darkness—"I have a charm that should quiet them."

"A charm? What is it?"

"Here." Khefti pressed a rough object into Pakht's hand.

"It is metal," said Pakht doubtfully.

"From the holy image of the Jackal God himself, at Tanis," Khefti explained.

"Ah-h-h," said Pakht, satisfied. "But—what of the boy?" he continued. "He will not talk?"

"He will not talk," said Khefti. "You have seen him, how he stares. He is like that all the time. He does as he is bid, but he does not talk."

"The tools, then? If the cemented rubble is hard . . ."

"We take our tools with us at night from the temple. We tell the overseer that we wish to sharpen them at home to save time against the morrow's labor. That will please his fat stupidity and we shall be listed as good, conscientious workmen."

"You think of everything, Khefti."

"Everything," agreed Khefti. "Even of this: I shall not talk, neither will the boy. If word leaks out, it will be you who have babbled. And in such case . . ." He made a swift movement in the dark and Pakht gasped as a sharp point pierced a little way into his throat.

"Holy Bast"—terror shook his voice—"what—what is that?"

"A warning," said Khefti, quietly.

A NEW life began then for the child Bana. By day he no longer worked at the temple, but dreamed instead in some hidden nook; or curled in the warm sand and slept. Quiet, carefree days in which he tried to forget the blackness and the hardships of the nights. For his nights now were packed with terror and with suffering.

The tunnel grew but slowly. The cemented rubble was hard, the tools clumsy, and Bana's arms were young and weak. Khefti fretted at all delay; measured their progress each night by the number of bags of chips removed and cursed the boy; stormed at Bana, at Pakht, the police, and the world in general.

Weeks grew into months. The moonlit nights, when Khonsu rode his silver barque across the heavens and flooded Egypt with a ghostly radiance, Khefti dared not venture into the forbidden Valley. These nights of inactivity tortured his restless soul, yet would he take no needless risk.

So far there had been no hint of danger, though the ever-present threat of discovery took savage toll of their nerves. Occasionally the yelling of a pack of jackals reached their ears, but always from afar. Then one night came a scare that steadied even the restlessness of Khefti.

As they three stopped for a moment for breath on the steep slope of the cliff from the village, there came the rattle of a loosened stone above them. All three flattened in the shadows beside the path and watched a dim form hurry downward past them.

Pakht grasped at Khefti: "Police?"

"Shh, fool. No; the police never travel alone."

"Who, then?"

"I do not know. Come, he is gone."

"No—no. There may be others."

Khefti cursed softly and sighed. "Well . . ." There was no digging in the tunnel that night.

The next morning Khefti spoke to Bana: "Go to the cliff top each day at the hour of noon and watch until Pakht and I come. If there is anything suspicious, come down at once."

So noontime found the child high above the village on the crumbling cliffs that separated the world of the living from the world of the dead. Before him spread the fertile valley of the Nile, maplike in its vivid plotted colors; behind him sank to blue-gray desolation the Valley of the Tombs.

It was a spot he loved. Often had he come there, to dream the silent hours away and to envy the fortunate dead. These, in the sacred sun-boat, could sail the heavens with Ra and look down upon the whole of Egypt, even as he, on the cliff, overlooked the Theban plain. He wondered if they, too, saw the river that twisted like a serpent; the white city that sprawled along the opposite bank; the golden haze of dust stirred by the feet of many workers. Could they, the holy dead, see him?

It must be beautiful, he thought, in heaven. For no one ever came back from there. In all his life he had never heard of one who had died returning to Egypt. His mother, when he was young and before she had died, had told him a little. A Nile, just like the Nile below; fields, canals, rich harvests; meat for everyone, every day; no blows, no cursing. It must be beautiful.

A movement, caught by the corner of

his eye, startled, then gripped him in a breathless ecstasy. It was just a bird, a golden mite that preened its feathers and cocked its eye from a nearby rock. But to Bana it was living proof of the nearness of the city of the dead. For all the world knew that birds were the souls of the departed. And this one, so small, so golden, might well be the soul of his prince.

And when at last it whirled away and shot like an arrow of light straight down into the grayness of the Valley of the Tombs, then did Bana release a trembling sigh. And whisper brokenly: "It—it is a sign!"

THE shadows lengthened; the haze of dust purpled and thinned. The sun-boat approached the horizon, touched it, entered the underworld of night. And instantly a chill wind stirred on the heights and picked at the brown flesh of Bana. Lights dotted the Village at the foot of the cliff and reflections of lights danced on the uneasy waters from the city across the river. Night drew her cloak over the land of Egypt.

Presently from the dark came the rasp of a panting cough, the careless scrape of a heavy foot. And as Bana waited, a soft whistle, thrice repeated. At the top of the path he met Khefti and Pakht.

"Lights? . . Sounds? . ." Khefti fought to control his breathing.

"Nothing, Father."

"Quiet, then. And wait here with Pakht."

Pakht was in sorry plight. He spluttered and moaned; and when he found a bit of breath, he threw it away in feeble curses. At length he wheezed: "That climb will . . . kill me . . . yet. Khefti is strong and younger than I."

Bana interrupted excitedly: "Today I saw the soul of my prince."

Pakht continued, unheeding: "Khefti is a fool. He thinks to gain treasure. Huh. We stand a better chance of . . . gaining the inside of a jackal's stomach . . . or a length of spear through our own middles. I am stick of this business. Sick. I shall tell Khefti, and—"

Bana left him to his grumbling and crossed to where his father knelt—to where the trail dropped into the Valley of the Tombs. Together they strained against the wall of night.

Bana, trembling with eagerness, waited a little while. Then: "Father." Khefti made no sign. "Father, today I saw . . ." And Khefti, without turning, struck him back-handed in the face. Bana slipped away, sobbing quietly; but not from the hurt of the blow.

Presently his father appeared. "Come now; the way is clear. Bring the chisels, you two. And be quiet." Khefti led; and, each bearing a heavy bundle muffled in rags, they stumbled down the steep trail into the Valley.

Often they stopped to listen. The voice of the night wind moaned in their ears, but no other sound reached them. Then a confused distant yelling as of a thousand demons in agony turned their blood to water; it swelled and echoed, trembled in the air, died. Khefti managed a brave sneer: "Our brothers, the jackals, greet us with song."

Nothing further hindered their going. Along the floor of the Valley, deep between the ragged peaks, they threaded their way in blackness and in silence. Until at last the tomb was reached. There, while Pakht and Khefti struggled with the stone which hid the opening, Bana removed his rags and waited, shivering.

Khefti spoke: "Work fast. We are listening, you know. Fifteen bags tonight, or I will strip the skin from your shoulders. You should be near the end if my reckoning is correct. Remember—one whistle, stop digging; two, come quickly."

All the tools were placed in a leather sack and lifted into the tunnel. Bana followed. Slowly, laboriously, he pushed the sack ahead until the end was reached. There he counted the tools carefully and began his work.

It was warmer here, away from the wind. But the pebbles and jagged bits of

flint of which the cemented rubble was composed tore his flesh cruelly; the dust from his digging blinded and choked him; the cramped position wearied his frail body. And often he wept silently, his face buried in the crook of an arm, while with the other he pecked blindly at the unseen barrier.

WHEN enough chips had accumulated, he scraped them into the sack and wiggled backward through the tunnel, pushing the sack with his feet. At the entrance one of the watchers gave him an empty bag and hid the dust and chips cunningly in crevices and beneath stones that their presence might not tell a tale.

Hour after hour. Pound—pound—pound. Bana's eyes smarted; blood oozed from a score of cuts and scratches; his throat ached. Pound—pound—pound. Surely he had been doing this for a thousand years. Would he never reach the end—the plaster wall that closed the corridor? Pound—pound. His arms ached so he could scarcely lift the heavy chisel, but—his father was listening. Pound—pound—pound. He was so tired . . .

What was that? The tool had struck a softer substance—gave forth a duller sound. He struck again. Could it be . . .

Weariness forgotten, he attacked the wall like a fury. The stifling dust made him choke and cough. It was finer . . . this must be the plaster. Then the tool broke through the barrier.

Outside the tunnel there was no one to meet him. Frightened, whimpering, he cried aloud: "Father." A hiss guided him to where the two men crouched behind a boulder, watching a pin-point of light that hung in the blackness. Light where no light should be.

Terror sounded in Pakht's voice. "Here's the boy now. Hurry—hurry. You know it is the police. Oh, why can't you hurry?"

"It may not be the police. The light has not moved since we first saw it."

"A trick. They are cunning, the police. They leave a fire to hold the eye and then scout in darkness."

"It may not be the police," Khefti insisted doggedly. "Besides, it is far; an hour—two hours away."

"You cannot tell. Come; there are other nights."

"Bah! You are a woman," growled Khefti. "Well, get the tools, Bana."

Then Bana remembered. "I've broken through, Father."

"What?" A cruel grip caught the child's arm. "You hear, Pakht? He's through!"

"For love of Ptah—not so loud."

Khefti whispered eagerly: "Sure you're through? Plaster? How big a hole did you make?"

"I just put my arm inside."

"Hurry, Khefti." Pakht pleaded desperately. "We will close the tunnel . . . return when it is safe, with ropes and torches."

"What—leave just as the goal is reached? We have time for just a peek. Listen, Bana . . ."

"You are mad! You will get us all killed. I will not stay—I will not stay!"

Khefti swore savagely. "Now may Set blind me if I care whether you go or stay, you Northern dog. The boy and I remain. Quick, Bana. Break the wall down and bring out some small object that we can carry. And the chisels—bring the chisels."

Bana tore furiously at the plaster. Warm air, heavily scented, came through the opening—a fragrance new to the child; heaven would smell like that, was his thought. When the hole was large enough to admit his body, he dropped a bit of plaster into the dark and heard it strike below. It could not be far to the floor—and Father had said to hurry. He reached on all sides, but found nothing. Gathering courage, he wiggled forward, stretched out his arms and plunger downward.

DAZED but unhurt, he was roused by two faint whistles from above. Two whistles—the signal to come quickly. He scrambled erect. Some small object he must find. Groping hands touched boxes,

a chest, tall jars. The two whistles were repeated, insistent. But at the wall he could not reach the hole.

He remembered the chest; tugged and strained until his small strength had inched it to the wall. From the top he could barely reach the opening, far to the right. He moved the chest and finally scrambled into the tunnel. Frantically he searched for the chisels, buried amidst the débris. One eluded him and he combed the dust three times with hands that shook and fumbled before it was found. When it was inside the sack with the others, he pushed the heavy load ahead of him toward the entrance.

There he stopped. Sounds came from without—sounds of men running—of shouted orders—and of a sharp, shrill scream of agony. It was the voice of Pakht that screamed.

Bana listened from the tunnel, terrified. The running ceased and voices strange to his ear called to one another. As the voices neared the tunnel, a flickering light appeared and Bana left the sack and wiggled far backward, to lie as one dead.

Then a voice called: "Here is the hole, Captain."

"Here is someone just inside," shouted another. "Bring me a javelin."

"Wait," said a third; "it is a sack. I will drag it out."

And presently: "Tools, eh? With the Holy Temple seal. This hole is too small for neither of the two we caught. Ask the men, Menta, if they saw a third running."

"No one, Captain."

"Then we have the holy thief well caught inside. Anyone in the company thin enough to get in that hole?"

"None, Captain. Old Pepi might make it. Shall I send a runner to the station?"

"No hurry, Menta. Post a good guard and we will finish the job by daylight."

Voices and light faded and Bana, trembling, lowered himself noiselessly into the chamber. His mind was a confused jumble, but out of the chaos three facts repeated themselves over and over: Father and Pakht were prisoners; in the morning the police would return; when they came they would find him.

He tried to remember everything his father had said about tombs. Would there be another entrance—another way out? There were other chambers, he knew. Perhaps if he hid in one of them the police would overlook him; then when they were gone he could steal away.

He began a careful search for a doorway, feeling every bit of wall space that he could reach. Almost at the start he knocked against a tall jar that toppled with an echoing crash and jerked his heart into his throat. It held wine—sweet, delicious wine, and he drank thirstily and breathed a prayer of thanks. Boxes he found, and more jars and chests; in one corner a tangle of wheels and bits of leather; in another a bed piled high with boxes and with packages stowed neatly beneath it. Statues, vases. Could all these belong to one man?

He was back by the broken wine-jar. There was no doorway. Neither had he found the mummy of the dead one for whom all this was intended. The other chambers must be hidden behind walls of plaster like the one he had pierced.

A moment of terror seized him. The police could not fail to find him in this small chamber. Maybe if he hid himself well . . . He remembered the bed; found it again and burrowed behind the many bundles stowed beneath it.

For awhile he lay rigid, straining at the darkness and silence, hardly daring to breathe.

GRADUALLY his muscles relaxed. The police would not come until morning; the captain had said it. He thought of the chest, close under the hole. If he moved it, then anyone trying to enter the chamber must fall, as he had fallen. He crawled out and tugged it to the middle of the room; drank deeply again from the broken jar; scurried back to the hiding-place.

What would they do to his father; to Pakht? Pakht might be injured; he re-

called the horrid scream. And what would they do to him when they found him? What was the penalty for stealing in the Valley of the Tombs? Death? Death to Bana meant seeing his prince again. His heart leaped as this thought came to him; and he smiled in the darkness.

What was death, anyway? The priests came and took the dead one away and, by magic, fashioned him into a mummy. Then there was a funeral procession; wailing women; feasting and drinking. That was all he knew about it, except that the soul took the form of a bird. The little soul of his prince had seemed happy enough there on the clifftop. He wished he had dared to speak to it; it could have told him if it hurt to die.

Many problems weighted the child's mind through the night, so that time sped. Once, in spite of the danger, he drowsed; and awoke screaming from a dream that the police already had him. Shaking, bathed in sweat, he listened.

There had been some sound. Faint, and far. Like the rustle of reeds in the wind by the Nile bank. There it was again—a murmur of distant voices; a scraping sound—that grew until it seemed to fill the little room. Then Bana knew; and he shrank closer into his hiding-place and stared wild-eyed into the blackness. It was morning. And the police were coming to take him away.

A thin light began to crowd the darkness from the room. Through a crack between two boxes, Bana watched the brightening hole high on the opposite wall. A smoking torch appeared—a claw-like hand—a naked, scrawny arm—and then a face. Bana nearly cried aloud at the leering horror of that face. Red-rimmed, glaring eyes; a skin like wrinkled, cracked old leather; thin lips that mumbled toothless jaws.

The torch moved up and down and back and forth and filled the chamber with its acrid smoking. And the restless eyes peered searchingly into every shadow. And the lips writhed their awful secret menace. Bana saw the eyes study the broken jar upon the floor; saw the understanding grin tighten the corners of the mouth. The eyes began a piercing survey of the entire room; reached the spot where Bana hid—and stopped. Then the dead silence of the tomb was broken by a croaking voice:

"Come out of there. I can see your foot!"

It was over. The police had found him

BANA choked back a sob and gathered himself to crawl forth. But at that instant the eyes wavered; turned and fastened upon another part of the room. And again the voice spoke:

"Come out, or it will be the worse for you."

The man in the hole had tried to trick him; had not seen his foot at all, but had thought to startle him into betraying his presence. A surge of joy swept over the child and for the first time he noticed that the chamber was packed with gleaming beauty. Cautiously he peered through the crack; and fear gave way to wonder.

Near him in a corner was the chariot he had stumbled over. It was small—a miniature—and wrought in shining silver. He recognized it—the chariot in which his prince had ridden on that day so long ago. The very chariot which later had led the funeral procession into the Valley of the Tombs. How had it come here in this strange tomb?

The low-burning torch still swung up and down, back and forth, and by its fitful light Bana saw in the far corner that which made him want to shout aloud. A statue—two statues—in gold and precious gems; statues so lifelike that Bana thought they nodded and smiled to him across the room; statues of his prince, just as Bana had last seen him on the plains of Thebes.

There could be no doubt. The statues were of painted wood, life size; with gilded armor, jeweled belts and swords. From a distance, memory recalled that his father had once mentioned the two portrait statues that usually guarded the

tombs of royalty. His prince, then, lay in another room behind that wall.

A soft sigh slipped his lips, and tears filled his eyes. His search was ended; he had found his prince at last.

Then, for a moment, Bana knew happiness. But for a moment only. If the police found him now—if they took him from this hiding-place—reclosed and sealed the tomb—he would never be able to reach the prince again, unaided. He closed his eyes and prayed with all the fervor of his simple being that the gods would help him.

And the room was plunged suddenly into utter darkness.

Bana gasped. The gods had heard his prayer. They had extinguished the torch. A sign—a sign! And presently he heard the departing movements of the old man as they died away in the long tunnel.

Bana tried to think. He remembered Khefti saying that sometimes tombs were appropriated in emergencies. That must have happened here. The son of the king had died suddenly and had been laid in the tomb prepared for Aahmose, chief butler. Another tomb had been fashioned elsewhere for Aahmose.

What would be the next move? Would the old one return with a rope and search the room? Would the captain leave guards again outside the tunnel, to capture any who tried to enter or leave? Or—his breath caught—suppose they closed the entrance and sealed him inside, alone with his prince! He had no food—but there was the wine; he had glimpsed several other tall jars in the chamber. Could he live on wine alone? Probably if he could get no food he would die—as he had wanted to die ever since the prince had left him.

If, now, he crept out to the broken jar, he could get wine and the fire in his throat would be quenched. But the old one might return at any moment. No—he would wait awhile.

If he *should* get out—some way—what would become of him? Would he have to go back to the house of his father, to be beaten as before by Tefnet, his father's wife? Would he grow up to be a stonecutter at the temple, as his father before him? And like him, would he become as an animal that toiled and ate and drank and slept? Would he fight and curse and hate? That was "life" for those who dwelt in the Village of the Laborers; the only life they ever knew. No—no; rather many deaths that hurt a little than life as his father had lived it.

Then, because his mouth was so dry and his throat so parched, must he picture in his mind the broken wine jar near him on the floor of the tomb. So near. And also came pictures of brimming water jars; of deep silent pools. And because of the gnawings in his stomach, came images of sweet cakes, of crisp young onions and of broad green fields of corn.

This last scene, so sharp before his tired eyes, carried his mind to the clifftop where, the day before, he had waited, bathing in the good sun's warm rays. He thought of the little bird, the soul of his prince. Would it wonder what had become of him; or, being not of the earth, did it already know and was it glad with him that he had at last found the body of his prince?

He was so weary, so tired. He must not sleep—but his head nodded in the darkness. And presently a vision passed before the closed eyes of Bana.

IT seemed that all about spread rich fields and broad canals. Above him the good god Ra swept across the heavens in his glorious sun-barque. And there in the distance flowed a majestic river, very like the Nile. On every side men and women worked in the fields.

Bana wondered that he felt so strong. The fire was gone from his throat; no longer did the pain gnaw at his belly. He skipped along a road and answered gaily the calls of the workers in the fields. They seemed so friendly and so happy that he took courage and asked of one of the women:

"What is the name of this place?"

She cuddled his thin body in her arms and kissed his cheek and told him the name of the place. Then he stared about him in wonder and asked a second question. And when she pointed with her arm, he thanked her shyly and sped in the direction of her pointing. The way led past children splashing in the tepid water of the canals; children who called for him to join them. But he merely waved and hurried past along the road.

Soon he overtook a jolly fat man leading an ass; and the man also pointed and offered to let him ride atop the bulging sacks on the ass's back.

And when at last they came to a gate set in a high white wall, the man lifted him down and led him by the hand through the gate into a garden. There were flowers; and pools and fountains and cool arbors. Soon they reached a large lotus pool, where children sailed toy boats and laughed and shouted merrily.

Then the fat man pointed to the children; touched him lightly upon the cheek; left him there alone. Bana faltered in the path and searched the faces of the children eagerly. And one of them saw him and came running.

Bana sobbed aloud as he recognized the approaching form, and fell upon his knees. But the other lifted him gently and spoke:

"Oh Bana—do not kneel. I am no longer heir to the throne of Egypt, nor are you the son of a stonecutter. This is Heaven, Bana, and we are brothers in Osiris now. I had hoped that you would come, for there are a thousand thousand wonders to show you. Will you follow me, Bana?"

And Bana laughed as a child laughs, merrily; and he answered his prince:

"Yes, Lord—through eternity!"

AGAIN sounds broke his dreams. He awoke with a start, his heart pounding and his body bathed in the sweat of fear. His mind blurred in terror, and he whimpered: "It—it was a dream. They are coming. The old one. With a rope, perhaps—to search the room and to take me away from my prince."

But this time the sounds were different and no light accompanied them. Nearer they came and Bana's puzzlement grew. These were not the sounds of a creeping man, but rather those of some hard object being slowly forced between the narrow walls of the tunnel. When the sounds were overhead and seemed to fill the little room with their hollow echoings, they ceased suddenly; and Bana heard the whisper of retreating movements.

After a time there came a faint light. But the full light of the torch was refused entrance into the chamber; for some large object obstructed the tunnel and allowed the light to peep only through chinks between the object and the tunnel walls. Bana wondered. For a time, only the subdued sounds of leisured movement came to him from above, with the occasional clink of metal on stone.

And presently a crack was closed, cutting off an arrow of light; and another; and another . . .

Then Bana knew; and a strangling sob tore his throat. He scrambled from the hiding-place, heedless of the noise he made; and staggered beneath the hole.

They were sealing the entrance of the tomb!

Sealing the entrance! The old one knew that he was inside, but he was sealing the entrance! Sentencing him to die. He had but to pound here on the wall of the chamber—to utter one cry, and they would take him out . . . to what?

And while he hesitated, the last chink was closed—the last gleam of light failed and was swallowed by the blackness.

Then the cry rang from his lips—but it was a cry of joy. No one could ever take him from his prince, now. Now he was safe with his prince, forever. He fell at the feet of one of the gilded statues; kissed the small sandal reverently; sighed; and lay still.

And silence filled the little chamber in the heart of the mountain.

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WHEN you start a snowball rolling, you never know what bits of pine-cone, snowstorm-slush and last Autumn's leaves it may pick up. So, it appears, with this magazine. Nobody could know less about practical gadgets—like planes, clawhammers, and bus transfers—than we do. The thought that some unhappy reader could take the fruit of our blissful labor and translate it into terms of stapling machines, looseleaf files, and the like, fills us with apprehensive and unhappy thoughts. Yet that is what the first gentleman on the platform this evening seems to have done. So while we, shrinkingly, drink a toast to those blessed mortals who are endowed with the Practical Mind, give an ear to:

ARTHUR SALTER

It occurred to me one stilly night, whilst doing guard duty o'er our two children, what a shame it is to throw away a story that you enjoyed. So, with ingenuity and due application two wire pins were removed from ARGOSY's binding, a story or two dissected, holes punched, added—one manila folder, somewhat used, and lo and behold! A neat story file was created, all held together with some brass doo-dads.

To date I've a complete file of Mr. Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar", a host of short stories and am working diligently (the nights that the wife plays bridge) on Mr. Burroughs' "The Synthetic Men of Mars".

My erstwhile dominant better-half dislikes, most heartily, a continued story. Now, she simply reaches for a file, and feline-like, curls up in a deep chair, reads and—purrs!

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

Happy, we always say, lies the head of an editor who has contributed his bit to the purring home . . . even if it has been accomplished with the aid of us and a cold chisel. We turn away, reluctantly, from that picture of somnolent bliss to entertain a gentleman with a mind of his own.

Fearing that there may not be space afterward, we hasten to answer a few of his queries now. 1. We, if possible, would like to see ARGOSY contain three book-length novels, eight novelets, nineteen short stories and a small segment of the Encyclopedia Britannica, published serially. But then, who gets what he would like in this unhappy world? . . . 3. If there weren't some of them (see below) there'd be very little of this department. A tragedy, surely. 4. We think Hornblower was pleasant—but the "change" rankles. 5. You'll be happy to know another Kildare serial ("Calling Doctor Kildare"—plug) is coming up any minute. 10. That one had us going for a moment. There was a conference. We can answer you now, but we haven't got enough space. Text for our next sermon. . . . And now all you dear impatient people can read the letter that started all this.

H. K. GRUND

Having searched high and low in several ARGOSIES for your name (perhaps I didn't search high or low enough) I had to resort to the above "Dear Editor".

But to get down to business, I want to express my opinion of your stories, etc. I've been reading the ARGOSY for about 15 years, and I've been wanting to write this letter for years.

I'll enumerate my opinions:

1. If possible I would like to see ARGOSY contain 3 serials, 3 complete novelets and 7 short stories.

2. I like your "True Stories In Pictures".

3. I dislike those readers who take ARGOSY stories apart down to each letter and then put each letter under the microscope to find defects, and then write caustic remarks about the authors and publisher.

4. Captain Hornblower was a pleasant change.

5. "Young Doctor Kildare" built me up to a big let down.

6. I would like to see the ARGOSY print some more stories about the "Boston Bean" and his pals.

7. I like foreign stories if the adventuring is done by someone who speaks plain English. I don't like to read a story that has too much of foreign accents or foreign language in them.

8. My wife says she like the "Henry" stories and the Max Brand stories, but not the fantastic stories.

9. My opinion is that the ARGOSY has been under-par (compared with the ARGOSY standard —not with other magazines) but I've noticed a steady improvement in it each week.

10. Why is it that I can recall vividly so many good stories printed long ago in the ARGOSY, but not very many in recent years? One exception is "Captain Hornblower". It was very good.

11. Please print more animal stories (birds, reptile, beast, etc.)

As a summary in case my opinions of the ARGOSY seem vague, let me say this:

I think the ARGOSY is tops. Fifteen years of reading proves it.

Each story can't please everyone, but each magazine contains at least one story that would interest everyone. That is something I can't say for any other magazine.

KOKOMO, IND.

Looking Ahead!

YARDMASTER

Stormy Horn hopped a streamlined special for disaster when he tried to stab with light the dark mystery that held one particular yard in terror. Flatcars piled with lumber, boxcars filled with freight vanished as if snatched by a giant hand. Men died, crushed, on tracks where no yard-hog ever passed. And Stormy was the only one who could stop it—if he lived. A great novelet of the men of the railroads, by

HARRY BEDWELL

VANDAL

Dark clouds of rebellion gather around the throne of Norway—but in a slave's hut young Wilton grasps the mystic axe *Bretwalda*, forged in Briton a generation before. So take heart, loyal Norsemen! While *Bretwalda* battles for the king, no kingdom shall be lost. An exciting novelet by

PHILIP KETCHUM

A FAMILY COUNCIL

The intriguing tale of how the Legion's smoothest scamp faced the fairy godmother of his commandant's wrath—and turned himself into a chevalier of honor. By

GEORGES SURDEZ

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