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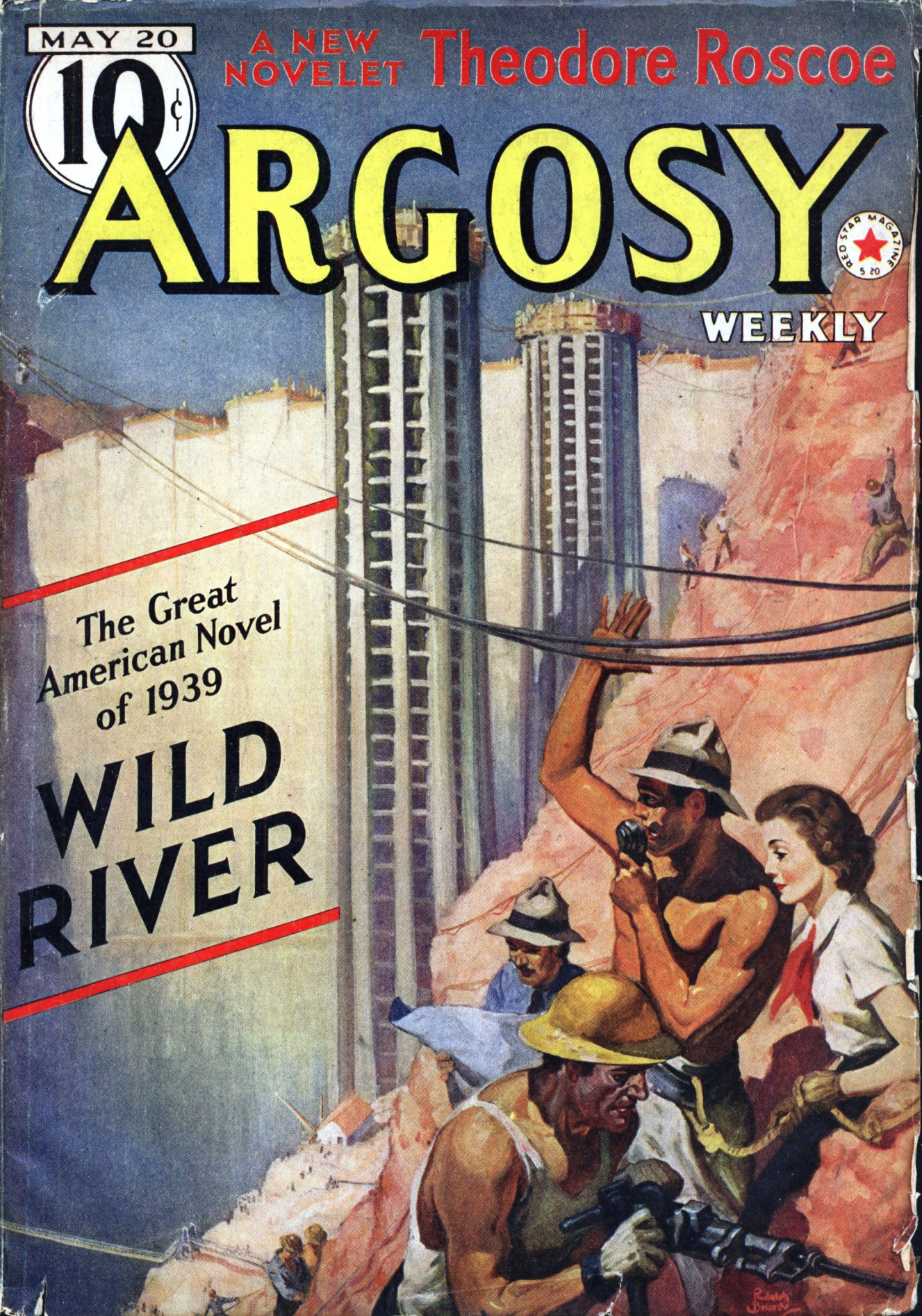
WEEKLY

The Great American Novel of 1939

WILD RIVER



ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Combined with All-American Fiction

Volume 290 CONTENTS FOR MAY 20, 1939 Number 4

Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating Wild River

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD.
3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C., 4

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE
111 Rue Réaumur

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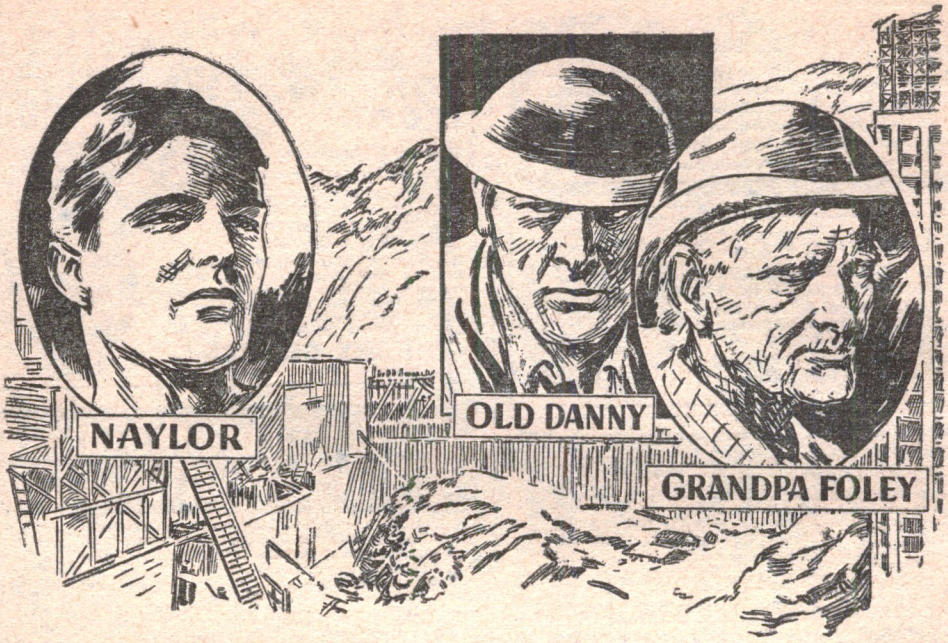


Wild River

Men said the Colorado could never be tamed—not with thousands of men nor millions of dollars. Its channel lay one mile deep in solid rock; and it lashed along like a hurricane of water; it was unconquerable. Here is the great story of the fight to build Boulder Dam, of the men who bled and sweated and died in that fight, and of one man who found his life in the midst of bedlam and peril. The Blue Ribbon American Novel of 1939. . . .

By JOHN STROMBERG

CHAPTER I

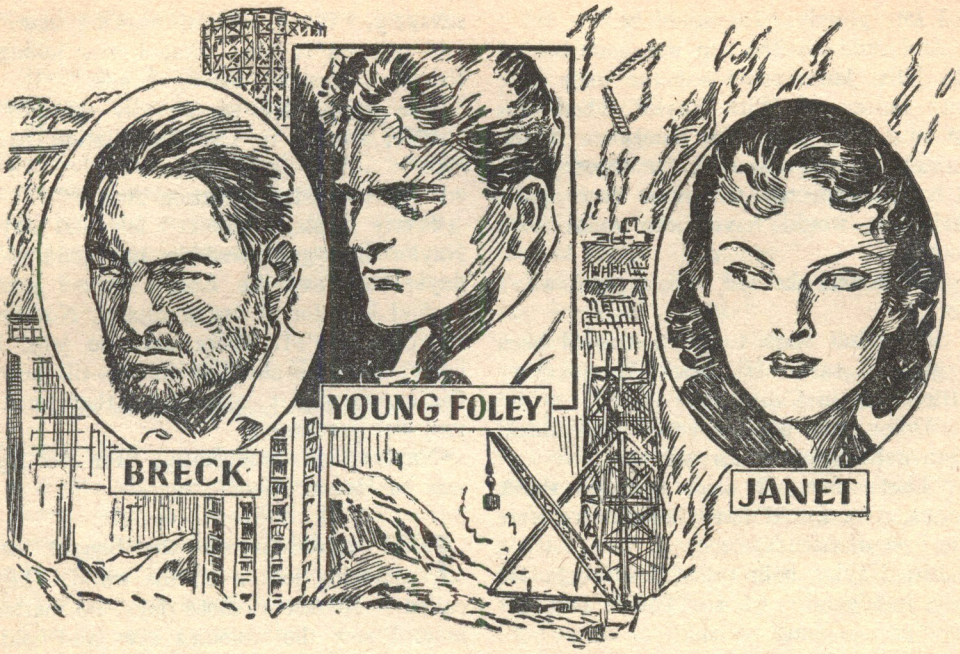
KID STUFF

IN THOSE days I had no more idea than a goat; I did a thing and figured out the reasons afterward, if any. I was hot that day. You know? Your muscles quick and limber, and the old fight in you, and the May sun pouring down out of that gay, sweet, crystal Colorado sky.

Four hits in five times up. The Flatirons big and sharp behind you, playing third; the Rockies there behind you, man-size. Well, not man-size. Big. And Janet in the stands there, comradely, familiar, pulling for you in the last game you would ever play for Colorado U.

I didn't even know Buck Naylor was in town. He must have drifted in after the seventh inning, and I had no time to look. The D. U. bats began to find the range. They cut our four-run lead to one. They drove two first-string pitchers to the showers.

In the ninth, with only one man down, Coach Carlson had to rush a freshman to the mound. This was in 1931, before the freshman rule applied to baseball.



That was a tough spot for a freshman, you'll admit—the bases loaded and the grandstand roaring and those Denver huskies yelling bloody murder.

Crack! You couldn't hear it, but you saw a white streak angle off the freshman's shin. It trickled toward the third base line; I thought I never would get to it. Runners were spinning round the bases, and the kid was down. The man on third had started with the pitch; he had about four jumps to go with the tying run. Maybe I could have got him, but there wasn't time to think. I whirled and whipped to second.

And Chip Wagner sprouted wings and took the throw and whipped to first, and plunk! the game was over.

I WAS sitting on the world. I sailed my glove over the grandstand, and the fellows grinned and whacked my shoulders, and Coach Carlson told me, "Nice work, Speed. That's big-league stuff." He knew that I'd had offers. If you played ball for a living, though, what would you do for fun?

I grinned and looked for Janet in the grandstand.

She was gone. The stands were emptying; I couldn't see her in the crowd. Mr. Poss Parsons, the sports writer, up from Denver, joshed me: "Pretty lucky, Speed!"

If Chip and Frankie hadn't been there like a million dollars, two or three runs might have scored on that wild double-or-nothing play. But what the hell? The freshman never could have stopped that rally.

Sure, I had my reasons—afterward.

I trotted out the players' gate and saw Professor Collins waiting by his car. A nice old fellow—fifty, maybe, but he still liked baseball. He was beaming, and he shook my dirty hand. "Congratulations, Alfred."

I said, "Thanks." I didn't like to be called Alfred; fellows called me Speed, and Janet called me Al. I asked, "Where's Janet?"

"She's with Carlton Naylor."

"Huh?" I said. "He here?"

"Decidedly," said Janet's father, smiling. "I believe he's holding a reception."

I said glumly, "He would be."

And suddenly the sun was gone behind the hills. Janet came out the main gate with the crowd. With Naylor. There was no mistaking that big, handsome figure, though I hadn't seen it for three years. I hadn't expected to see it ever again, and that would have been quite soon enough.

The woman shouted, "Hi, Al, look who's here!"

She didn't seem to know there'd been a game. I said, "Hi, Buck. How's every little thing in California?"

"Doing the best it can," said Buck. "I'm working out of Denver now."

"That's fine," I said, and we shook hands. You would have thought we were the best of friends.

But Naylor hadn't lost his touch. He said indulgently, "I see you're still depending on your speed."

As if I had no brains. I snorted, "Anyway, it stuck."

"This time," said Buck.

"Well, there won't be another time. I'm graduating."

"So you are!" said Buck, surprised.

Cutting you down to freshman size again; he'd been a senior when I knew him, and a big man on the campus, and the gal was flattered, and you couldn't blame her much. The man had everything—good looks and popularity and speed and brains and beef. He'd been a famous running guard—all-conference, and mentioned for all-American. I'd made all-conference myself, at tail-back, but I'd never got to run behind Buck Naylor. Freshmen only practiced against the varsity, and all Buck Naylor did was smack me down.

And she was flattered yet. Clutching the fellow's arm and glowing up at him; the woman's face was positively beautiful.

"You'll stay for Senior Week?"

"I'd love to, child, but I'm a working man."

Patting her hand. Caressing her with those brown eyes of his. Calling her child—and Janet positively liked it. I said savagely, "What kind of working man?" and grinned to show that I was joking, though I wasn't. "Selling bonds?"

The woman told me proudly—proudly!—"No, Buck's in the Reclamation Service."

"Oh," I said, "Salvation Army?"

Pretty feeble, I admit. I felt that way. Naylor had graduated in the good old days; they say the Engine School used to find jobs for all its graduates. Not for the class of '31. There were no jobs. I hadn't thought about it much—till now. Quite suddenly it came to me that Janet, too, was graduating.

Naylor said indulgently, "I'm on my way to Hoover Dam."

JUST tossed it off—the biggest engineering job in all the world. They called it Hoover in those days; no matter now. I saw the woman's eyes and said, "That's fine. So'm I."

Professor Collins beamed, exclaiming, "Splendid, Alfred! I'd have been glad to recommend you, but I thought you decided not to go in for the Civil Service."

I'd forgotten that Janet's father was among those present. He had urged me to take the Civil Service examinations, but they came in February, at the height of the basketball season.

Buck demanded, "You've already been assigned?"

He didn't believe it. So I nodded lightly—just the way I would have nodded if I'd been brown-eyed and handsome. Why are dark men so well poised? I'm blond and freckled, or I was in those days. I was rattled, I admit.

The gal was glowing, scolding, "Al! Why didn't you tell me?"

I said lightly, "Well, so long, Buck. See you later?"

Naylor, the important engineer, explained, "Afraid not, Foley. Got to get back to Denver; leaving tomorrow for Nevada." Still incredulous, he prodded, "When are you?"

"Oh, after commencement."

"Carlton's coming with us to dinner,"

said Janet's father. "You come, too, Alfred."

Too? And be Buck Naylor's stooge? I muttered, "Thanks, but I've got to study."

That was another lie. I hadn't made Tau Bete, the way Naylor did, but all my grades were good enough to let me out of finals; my degree was in the bag. And the fellows around the chapter house kept talking about baseball. Schoolboy stuff.

CHAPTER II

THE BIGGEST THING ON EARTH

THE night was blue, one of those silver nights you get in Colorado, and the campus was so beautiful it hurt—the silvered, silent buildings in the moonlight, and the trees knee-deep in pools of purple shadow, and my schooldays gone.

The sky was greater than the campus. You could see the Flatirons, dim and big on the dark mountains, like the things men thought they'd do after their schooldays. But when you came up against them, they were blank.

I'd talk to Professor Collins. Not tonight, though. I had sense enough to keep away from Janet's house tonight.

I wasn't going anywhere. Just tramping in the moonlight, thinking. With my legs. In those days, I did all my thinking with my legs. I went by strolling couples in the moonlight, and strode faster. I went by an automobile parked in a shadowed street, heard voices murmuring, and turned my face away.

My legs were tramping up the lawn before I knew it, and I couldn't turn back then, like a scared freshman. I went in. But Janet wasn't there. She'd gone out coking with Buck Naylor. The professor said they'd promised to be gone only a minute, but I knew those minutes.

I said grimly, "Dr. Collins, I was lying about that job. I haven't got it."

He was a nice old fellow. He just laughed.

"I'll get it, though, or bust. How do I go about it?"

He was sober then. He sighed, "There are so many of you, Alfred."

"You're connected with the dam, sir, aren't you?"

He shrugged and said, "Who isn't? Mathematicians, laboratory men, technicians of all sorts, all over the country. If the project fails, it certainly won't be for lack of brains. Or money."

I can see it now. My interest quickened, and I echoed, "Fails?"

He told me, "The *Titanic* failed."

"I know," I said, but that was ancient history. A dam was not a ship. A concrete dam, even the biggest one men ever tried to build, was strong, was planned by engineers. I asked him, "What's the danger?"

And he told me. Classroom words—physics and mathematics, geodetics and geology; but this was different. I listened. This was real. The biggest thing men ever tried to do—so big that it could press the earth-crust down and make the mountains move. And it might fail. I hadn't thought of that. My interest quickened, and I asked him, "Who's the man to see?"

He sighed, "I wish I could advise you, Alfred. Even if you were on the Civil Service, it would be a gamble; and the jobs that aren't under Civil Service—"

"What are those?"

"Oh, rodman, flagman, chainman—minor jobs."

"That'd do me to start with."

"It would do a lot of men, these days. That's just the trouble; those are the jobs the Civil Service can't protect. The Reclamation Bureau is as free of politics as any bureau can be, but it works with public money, and it has to keep its peace with the politicians—let 'em use the little jobs for plums. Could you get a letter from your county chairman?"

"Sir?" I said. You won't believe it, but I didn't know my county had a chairman.

"Or do you know anybody with a pull in Washington?"

I told him, "No, sir," and I didn't know how true it was. I'd never noticed; I'd been pretty busy playing games.

"Or Denver?"

"No, sir. I'm from the Western slope."

He nodded. Then he said, "By jove!" and rummaged in his desk. He found a pile of printed stuff and said, "Are you related to John Patrick Foley?"

Well, I had to grin. I said, "Only by marriage. He's my father."

"And you want a job on the Colorado River Project?"

"Yes, sir."

He leaned back and stared. He said, "And Peter Foley, of Arizona, is your uncle or something? That would make it perfect."

"My grandfather. Why?"

"And you don't know that they're both fighting the Project?"

"No," I said. "Why should they fight it?"

MAYBE you won't understand. Pete Foley was a real old-timer, and Pat Foley was a busy man; they never bothered me about their troubles. In those days—remember?—people often talked about other things than politics.

Professor Collins sighed, "Well, one of 'em lives on the Western Slope and one in Arizona. There are seven States in the Compact, Alfred, and only about six of 'em are dissatisfied."

"But why?"

He shrugged and tossed me some of the printed sheets—reports of the Colorado River Commission, some of them dated as far back as 1922. All of them long and dry and legal. I had never studied law. I wasn't interested in economics; all I wanted was a job. Millions of acre-feet was a lot of water, and my male ancestors, appearing before the Commission, argued about things a hundred years from now.

I listened for a woman's footsteps on the porch. They didn't come.

Leaving the house, I stood a moment on the moonlit porch and saw nobody coming up the street. But there was magic in the moonlight. Boulder, Colorado, slept between the mountains and the plain. I saw the world spread out beyond the University—the power of the mountains and the mystery of distance. What the hell? Janet was just a kid, and flattered by Buck Naylor, but I'd made her understand. I'd get my job. I'd get my woman.

Suddenly I heard her voice. Behind me, on the porch, in the deep shadows. It was not a kid's voice, but a woman's, lovely, stirring, stirred. It said, "Oh, Buck! I never thought you would remember."

And the man's voice answered, shaking, "Did you think I could forget?"

And I remembered how it felt to be smacked down.

You hardly felt the shock; you only knew that Buck had spilled you, that the runner had got past you and was going for a touchdown; and you started rolling as you hit the ground. You rolled up on your feet and ran your heart out. And sometimes you got him, and the coach said, "Good Lord, Naylor, can't you take that freshman down?"

I said as brightly as I could, "Oh, there you are! Your father said you were over at the Sink."

"We were," said Janet, and she was confused.

Buck Naylor wasn't. They were sitting in the swing, in the purple shadows, and Buck Naylor was annoyed. He snorted, "Thought you had to study."

"Hell," I said, "you know what time it is? I thought you had to go to Denver."

"Huh?" said Buck, and disengaged himself and struck a match. "Good Lord! That's right. I've got to go."

I said, "Too bad," and grinned.

"Goodnight," said Buck.

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere."

They came into the moonlight, and the woman's face was flushed and lovely, and the corkscrew turned a little deeper in my heart. I said, "By the way, Naylor. I was kidding about that job."

"Not kidding anybody but yourself," growled Buck.

"I'll get it, though," I said, and I was grinning at the man, but talking to the woman.

"Yeah?" said Naylor, smiling.

"Yeah."

"You think it's easy?"

"It must be. You did it."

Grinning like a pair of tomcats in the moonlight, on the steps of a respected member of the faculty. The gal said, "Good night, both of you!" Janet was in a spot; I didn't know what to do.

Buck Naylor did. He smiled, remorseful, handsome, saying, "Sorry, sweet."

"It's not your fault," said Janet.

"You're sure coming out this summer?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there," said Buck Naylor, and he took her in his arms and kissed her. And she let him. More than let him; and I had to stand and take it. Naylor laughed and said, "Well, bye-bye, Speedy," and drove off in his good, sporty car. My car was just a flivver.

Janet stamped a furious young foot and said, "You've got a lot to do!"

I sighed, "I'll say I have."

CHAPTER III

NIGHT OVER HAGTOWN

I WIRED my father, "Who is our county chairman?" He wired back with some asperity, "I am and have been fifteen years thanks for congratulations."

So I gave that up. I tried in Denver. That was where the Reclamation Bureau was—headquarters for a dozen tremendous projects; I asked only about the biggest one. There was a mighty stir about it in those days—so big that six great companies had joined to take the contract. Even so, they couldn't get the bond at first. Who would bet fifty million dollars that the thing was possible?

I had a note from Professor Collins, and it got me into the offices, the many offices; I hadn't dreamed how many there would be. Hundreds of men just doing the paper work. Models and maps and exciting airplane pictures of topography. A laboratory where they made great cylinders of concrete, cured them under absolute conditions and then burst them in slow, powerful machines—three million pounds, while men sat watching dials.

I went back five times before I got a minute with the chief engineer, but everybody was polite. I thanked them and they grinned, a little wearily.

They said, "Your father probably pays taxes."

Well, I knew my father didn't pay much taxes, and I didn't press the point. The men in the employment office didn't ask me who my father was; they took my application blank and laid it on a stack as high as a cat's back.

Finally I reached the chief, and he said kindly, "Sure, we're going to need a lot of junior engineers. But we have to pick 'em from the Civil Service list." A little wearily, he said, "Sometimes we actually get the ones we pick."

"I know," I said. "I'll rod or flag or drag a chain—just anything to start with."

"Oh," he said, "in that case, you need only register in the employment office."

"I've done that," I said, and grinned; I hadn't learned to be afraid of great men yet. "So have a million other men. What would you do, sir, in my place?"

He was kind. He said, "I'd go there." In those days—remember?—even the great men thought the way to get a job was to go and hunt it.

Janet was already gone. Her father was a physicist, and in those days the Bureau had a laboratory in Nevada; Dr. Collins was a wizard in a laboratory. But he couldn't run an automobile; Janet did all the driving. Boulder, Colorado—not Nevada; better get that straight—was empty. There were citizens and tourists and three thousand summer students, yes, but I was through with school.

I could have gone by way of the Western Slope, to talk it over with my father, but I thought it might be better not to start an argument. I could have gone by way of Arizona, but I knew my grandpa. Old Pete Foley—older than most grandpas; ninety or a hundred, maybe; he would never tell you—was a tartar.

He remembered when this country had no railroads, and he had no use for progress. If you tried to argue with him, he

might clout you with a stick of stovewood. That was why Pat Foley had left home.

The elder Foleys were a little stubborn. So I took my flivver and hit out for Hoover Dam.

ONLY a thousand miles from Boulder, Colorado, even the way a flivver goes through the Rocky Mountains. North to Laramie, Wyoming; and I didn't know that a man called Fingers, of St. Louis, had already passed there.

West along the bottom of Wyoming, and then down through Utah; and my flivver wasn't fast, but it kept going. I went through Salt Lake at midnight. Many a car went by me, but I passed them when they stopped. My flivver would burn any kind of gas. I ate hot dogs.

When I got sleepy, I pulled out of the road and slept a little, and kept going. I was used to distances.

The little Mormon villages, old-fashioned, prim and prosperous, fell back; the fertile valleys fell behind. The dawn blazed hot on a weird and lonely land. Water had cut enormous gullies where cathedrals could have been hidden, but there was no water. Miles the road went galloping across those vast, dry washes, and the pavement was a thread on which the lonely beads of motor cars were strung. Many a flivver, in those days, was limping south on its last legs.

But Sam Breck's flivver had already passed away. I didn't know there was a man called Danny Henderson. I'd heard of Brigham Young, and knew that toiling ox teams once had passed this way, dragging the thirsty fringes of an empire, but I had a can of water in the flivver. I was used to deserts; I had spent a good many summers on my grandpa's ranch.

I only knew that Janet was at Hoover Dam. With Buck.

It was night again when I made Las Vegas. Not New Mexico; Nevada. States are wide, and places must have names. A *vega* is a place of free horizons. Even in 1931, Las Vegas was wide open—gambling houses and saloons wide open, blazing along the main street, jammed with men. The women two blocks off. Stopping for gas and hot dogs, I could feel the fever of a modern gold rush.

Jobs!

A stream of flivvers panted across the desert, and I saw machines that loomed in the hot darkness, waiting to make a road. I came to the hill-rimmed furnace that would be called Boulder City, not a city then; saw lights, heard shouting, felt the fevered stir of building, even in the night. In Washington, in air-cooled offices, men had been hot to start the work and give employment while men needed jobs.

Well, it was hot, all right, in Boulder City then. There wasn't even water, and the rangers wouldn't let you stop.

They said, "Drive on to Hagtown. Williamsville."

You asked them for a drink of water and they laughed. The Colorado was eight miles away and a thousand feet below. They asked you if you thought they could suck it up.

You struggled on to Hagtown, Williamsville. Two names, no town. A flat, dry wash led down through the wild rock to the wild river, and the place was jammed with the battered cars of bums—tired, heat-sick, hopeless women, crying children, and men wild for jobs.

They snarled, "Just take it easy, kid."

The heat was frightful in this lower altitude. But there was water in the river, warm and muddy. You could hardly wash in a screw-top can; I asked the man in the next flivver, "How about lending me a bucket?"

WEARY and dimwitted as I was, I didn't notice. I had spoken simply as one flivver to another. But my flivver happened to be yellow, a little gaudy, and its lights were bright. The other simply wasn't an automobile any longer. It was only a place to sit.

The man who sat there, a black-whiskered man in ragged dungarees, turned a slow head and stared. He carefully re-

moved a woman's head from his ragged shoulder and got out.

It wasn't far to step; the flivver had no tires, and a desert cloudburst recently had washed its rusty rims into the ground. In a slow, rusty voice the man began to curse me. How was I to know that straw could break a camel's back?

Sam Breck had sold his tools, his razor, even the tires off his ruined car. Why not? There wasn't anywhere to go. There were no jobs. His wife was going to have a baby, any day now, right there in the flivver; there was no hospital for the wives of bums.

And Sam Breck knew he was a bum. He'd taken charity. I guess he hadn't eaten much of it himself, but even a good mechanic would take charity to keep his wife from starving, and her sick. A great, rich Company would feed you if you went and begged them like a bum. They couldn't let the place be littered with dying bums.

And last night Sam Breck's bucket had been stolen.

Oh, I can see it now. But I didn't know, and I lost my temper. I said, "What the hell?"

He told me what the hell. I guess he was in the mood. He couldn't lick the System that destroyed him, but he sure could lick all rich men and their sons. These college fellows romping around the country, thinking it was a picnic, asking you for a bucket just like buckets grew on trees. Sam Breck described the Foleys, male and female, back to Adam, though he'd never seen one; and I hit him.

Hard, and his jaw wide open. He went down. But he wasn't out. Sam Breck was not a boxer; only a fighter. While I waited trustfully for him to rise, my legs went out from under me.

I'd fought with kids that way, but never with a berserk adult male. It wasn't taught in university gymnasiums. Nothing barred!

I had no time to thank my stars for fast reflexes and hard muscles—a hard abdomen, and speed to jerk my knees up, speed and strength to tear those gouging thumbs out of my eyes. They tore into my mouth; I bit them, clamped my teeth down on them, not because I had been taught. I tasted bloody thumbs for days.

But at the time, I only knew that maniac would maim me, kill me if he could.

We staggered to our feet and plunged to the ground again, banging against cars, knocking down men who crowded up to watch in the choking dark. In queer, grim silence. Nobody whooped or yelled, the way men do when they watch a dogfight. I could hear a woman crying somewhere, but it wasn't real. I was just out of college. I played games.

I didn't know what hunger was. Not then. I felt the blackbeard weaken, but I didn't know I had him by the throat, pounding his head on his own rusty car. I heard the woman screaming, but I didn't see the rangers come. I thought the flashlights were the pain of blinding thumbs.

THEY pulled me off and said, "Well, what's it all about?"

"Search me," I said, bewildered, sweating.

Sam Breck wheezed, "I never seen the guy before."

And voices volunteered, "That's right. This guy drove up and started cussin' him, and he got out, and this guy knocked him down."

I said, "I only asked him for a bucket."

"Bucket!" said the rangers, and the bums all snickered. You could hear the woman crying, catching her breath with deep, hard, rasping sobs, but that was not a novelty in Hagtown.

Breck had slumped to the rusty running-board of his sunken car, mopping his whiskered face with bloody, trembling hands. The woman tried to caress him, but he growled and thrust her hands away. His face was ghastly in the glow of flashlights.

This was not a court of law. It was a bedlam in the desert, and you couldn't put them all in jail. The rangers told me, "Beat it."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Get going. Move!"

I had already moved a thousand miles without much sleep. Fury had poured adrenalin into my blood, but I was groggy now. I felt the bums that jostled all about me in the dark. I smelled the bums. I clapped a hand to my hip pocket, and the rangers pinned me.

But the hand went flat against my hip. I squawked, "He got my wallet!"

A bum snickered, "Thought you said a bucket."

Sam Breck bellowed, "Me?" and staggered to his feet and tried to assault me, but the rangers pushed him away. He lifted his gaunt arms and panted, "Search me! Search me!"

And they searched him. Afterward, long afterward, I could remember. But the woman started making funny noises. Well, not funny. Queer, long, shivering sounds, her lips rolled queerly back from her clenched teeth. I thought she was half-witted. Epileptic, maybe.

Women elbowed through the crowd. The rangers told me, "Beat it, kid. This is no place for you."

I drove a hundred yards and went to sleep. I woke and clapped a frantic hand to my hip pocket, but the wallet was still gone.

Yonder, against the stars, the cliffs were glowing with an eerie light, and the noise of steel came thin over the noise of water; day and night the job was going on. And Hagtown never seemed to sleep. The children crying, and lights moving, and a woman screaming. Slowly, though, the screams grew less and died; you heard the timeless rumble of the river.

CHAPTER IV

HORSETHIEF, 1931

ALL my life I'd seen this river tentative and small, far up on the Western Slope of Colorado where it rose—or began to fall.

It flowed out of Grand Lake, a placid sea in the mountains, clear and sweet and cold with the melted snows. It wandered in pleasant meadows, and fat cattle drank. It watered the peaches of Grand Valley, a wide, fertile strip of land between the mile-high mesas, and it did no harm.

Yet this grim torrent was the same. It joined with the Gunnison. It swallowed a thousand unconsidered streams. It grew. It swelled. It gathered power, plowing through seven States, ripping through hill and desert to the sea.

In Arizona it had cut the greatest gorge men knew, the one they called Grand Canyon. Here, below Grand Canyon, it had burst a hundred gates through the Rocky Mountains. Even the Indians feared it. White men came and said it was too terrible to be explored.

Well, it had been explored.

I saw it, wide and swift and muddy in the desert dawn, rolling along under the hot mountains, piling up a little as it narrowed into the high canyon where the dam would be. Not Boulder Canyon, no; I knew that much. Men had imagined many schemes against this river. They had thought of shooting the walls of a high canyon down, filling it with the broken rock, a thousand feet. A mile of rock. But engineers had tested the wild power of the river, and they knew that it could sweep the rock away.

They meant to block it now with concrete. Not in Boulder Canyon; they had tested that. The crust of the earth under Boulder Canyon wasn't strong enough to support that giant monolith.

Black Canyon.

Well, it didn't look impossible. The canyon didn't look so big in the scale of mountains.

Men looked small. They hung on the rock like spiders, and they strung like ants on the rocky slopes, building their tiny railroads, automobile roads and bridges, getting ready for the great attempt. You couldn't see much, though, from the place called Hagtown, and the watchmen wouldn't let you get much closer. Men at work couldn't be bothered with gawking bums.

The bums went swarming up to the temporary office of the Company, the six great companies. But engineers, I knew, were hired by the Administration, by the Government—capital A, capital G. I wasn't afraid of capital letters yet. I wasn't hurt much; I had taken many a worse beating on the football field. I wasn't desperate; I had a few stray coins in my pocket, and the flivver still had tires. My grandpa's ranch was only a hundred miles across the river.

If I had to, I could telephone my father and reverse the charge. Pat Foley wasn't rich, but he wasn't Scotch. He'd kid you about it, but he wouldn't let you starve.

I borrowed a bucket from a woman and cleaned up as best I could. I shaved by my rear-view mirror, changed my clothes right there in the flivver, in what privacy I could. Nobody cared. There was no privacy for bums. They jeered a little when they saw my creamy and collegiate flannels thinking I had an unfair chance to get a job; but I was not in competition with these fellows. I was an engineer.

Well, anyway, I'd graduated from an Engineering School.

A ranger told me the Administration still was in Las Vegas. I had come too far. I'd wasted gas, and fought a man, and lost my wallet, all for nothing. I drove back those thirty sweating miles. I wondered where in this hot bedlam Janet was.

THE minute I got out of sight of rangers, bums begans to beg me for a ride. Las Vegas swarmed with bums. I found the office, and it took me an hour to get in. I said to the young man at the desk, "Name's Foley. Engineer. Who can I see?"

"You Civil Service?"

"No."

"Fill out this blank."

I saw a stack of blanks as high as Haman and I grinned. I said, "Hell with it, fellow. Let me see somebody."

"Just fill out the blank."

"I'll do that if it makes you happy, but I want to talk to somebody."

"H'mph!" said the young man. "Who are you? Fill out the blank and like it, if you want a job."

I grinned and said, "I'm Foley," but the terror of impersonality began to get me then. I hadn't meant to do it, but I said, "Where'll I find Dr. Collins?"

"Hospital."

"Huh?" I said. "What's the matter with him?"

"Didn't you ask for a doctor?"

"Hell!" I said. "Not that kind of a doctor. Physicist. Mathematician. He's connected with the dam."

The weary young man said, "Nine thousand, ninety million people here, and most of them claim connection. What do you think I am?"

"A clerk," I said, and instantly regretted it. The young man turned to the next applicant and forgot me.

I filled out the blank. I did it sitting in the flivver, in the hot, jostling street, using my suitcase for a desk and my elbows to push off the bums who plucked my sleeve and whined for the price of a cup of coffee. Never the price of a hot dog. I smelled hot dogs, at gold-rush prices, and could hardly keep my mind on the blank.

One of the questions was, "Address?"

The desert hadn't burned away my sense of humor yet. I wrote, "My flivver."

Nobody would ever read it, anyway. I struggled back to the desk, and the young man didn't recognize me. When men swarmed across your days like ants, I realized, you had to see them blankly.

Men who looked like engineers pushed in and out of the office, and I spoke to some of them, but none of them turned out to be the Chief in Charge of Construction. They were hot and tired, and they had nothing to do with jobs.

I put myself on a diet—one hot dog a day. I slept in my flivver, and the crowd flowed past and washed my personality away.

The hardest thing was killing time without money. Haunting the office till the young man learned to say, "Not yet," the

moment you appeared. Hanging around the gambling houses till the bouncers learned that you never gambled. Standing around on the hot corners, tramping the crowded streets, hoping to see somebody —Janet, anyway.

Morning and afternoon you struggled to the desk and said, "Name's Foley," and the young man said, "Not yet," and that was all for the day.

The last hot dog was a wistful memory. I drove to the dam again—or the site of it. Maybe I could waylay somebody there. I was learning guile. I drove into Boulder City like a tourist, and asked a ranger, "How can I see what's going on?"

He told me. A watchman stopped me. Tourists were not allowed beyond Lookout Point.

THERE wasn't much to see in those days. Only the canyon, a vast crack in the earth, and the Colorado like a brown and lazy creek down there. Men dangling on the rock, so small that you had to look twice before you saw them. Threads of steel that crossed from Nevada to Arizona, and small burdens running out and spinning down on spider-threads into the canyon. Toy trucks crawling on thin, tilted roads in the face of the rock, and tiny barges moored in the river.

Little? The watchman told me, "Fifteen tons, those trucks, and sixteen speeds forward and backward."

The watchman told me, "One of those barges busted loose the other day. She hit a rock and busted like an egg-shell, but it didn't look like much from here."

I asked him, "Anybody killed?"

He shrugged and spat into the canyon.

Slowly, in the glaring afternoon, the thing fell into proportion. Men were not weak and small; Black Canyon was tremendous. Men seemed few, but everywhere you looked, you saw them—the advance guard of an army, fighting the river men had feared since men first saw it; and behind them, all across the land, you felt the men who planned the details of the battle, and the long line of men whose lives had paid for what men knew about this river—learning what must be learned before men tried to tame the wildest river in the world.

Late in the afternoon, a thousand feet of steel drew up a platform out of the canyon's depth, and the watchman said, "That's him. He's comin' by."

"Who is?"

The watchman said, "Big Chief."

Well, not exactly that; the language of construction stiffs is hardly delicate. The name they called him meant that he was male, was powerful, a man—the quiet engineer who presently came up that mighty, tilted road out in the rock, and met my eyes and nodded with absent courtesy.

I'd heard of him; I'd studied engineering. He had fought the Colorado eleven years already, living in desert heat, risking his life in the wild waters, planning the attack; his brain directed the vast battle now. This was the man I wanted to see, hadn't dared hoped to see. He passed within ten feet, and nodded, and I said, "Good afternoon, sir."

Not a word about a job. Why not? I didn't know. I saw those quiet, tired blue eyes, and couldn't bother the man—a kid just out of school. I stood there like a dumb-bell and said, "Sir."

What was the matter with me? Had I lost my nerve? I kicked myself all the way back to Boulder City—kicked the accelerator, skidding around the up-hill turns cut in the rock, risking collision with the savage rock. I slowed as I drove through Boulder City, though. I was a sap, hungry and hopeless, but I wasn't hungry enough to want to be fed in jail. I drove through the stir of building, and heard music, and saw people on the porch of a new house.

And I had to laugh. I saw Buck Naylor lounging on the steps, in crisp white linen, nursing a cup of tea.

I TRAMPED on the brake and shouted. Naylor didn't recognize me for a minute; then he laughed. He said, "Why, hello, Speedy! Got that job yet?"

And I realized that my white flannels were no longer fresh. I knew it, but I hadn't realized that they were filthy till I saw his handsome, mild amusement.

"No," I said, "but I can see the country is still safe. Can I buy you an ice cream soda?"

That was a wisecrack. Naylor spiked it neatly, saying, "Thanks, but I'm expecting Janet. Like to come in?"

It wasn't an invitation; it was a taunt. I muttered, "Thanks, I'll be around," and drove on hastily. Janet could recognize this flivver as far as she could see it. She had helped me paint it—silver and gold, the C.U. colors. Schoolboy stuff.

I left it in the desert and walked back. I watched the tea from a distance; and the lights were on—electric lights, bright, powerful. It took a lot of power to build the highest dam in the world, and electric power was the only kind you could bring two hundred miles into the desert over nothing more than wires.

I thought that. The power of many rivers had been harnessed for the job, but this one river presently could sent the power back a hundredfold—if men could tame it, stop it from the savage things it had been doing for a million years.

I tried to think of that; but I was pretty hungry, and I saw them nibbling sandwiches. I saw the woman, little and sweet in the light of the biggest job men ever dreamed of doing, and I couldn't take it. She was laughing with Buck Naylor, and I couldn't take it. I went home.

And even my address was gone.

My flivver. Gone. It simply wasn't there. This was where I'd left it, and it wasn't there. I tried to tell myself I was mistaken, but I knew I wasn't.

I was used to deserts. I could see the tracks where I had turned out of the road. I saw the gleam of broken glass under the stars. Oh, sure. I knew it could be done. You could break a window, short the lock with a piece of wire—if you knew enough, and were rat enough to do it.

For a moment I was Peter Foley's grandson, and Pete Foley thought a horse-thief was the worst of human rats—a man who stole your legs and left you stranded in the desert.

I walked back and told a ranger, but I couldn't tell him much. A yellow flivver; it could easily be painted. I had no insurance, and the registration card was in my vanished wallet, and I didn't know the engine number. The description sounded pretty gaudy, and my flannels still looked decent in the dark.

The ranger snorted, "You ice cream kids make me sick. You blow in here and expect us to wipe your noses."

I said stiffly, "Let it go."

I could have telephoned my father, but I knew what he would say. The Foleys were all stubborn now; that night I walked to Hagtown; the next day I joined the bums.

We stood in a long line before the office of the Company. It didn't matter if your clothes were dirty there; all kinds of men were in that line. I saw the tattered blackbeard, the wild-whiskered scarecrow who had tried to kill me, but he didn't notice me.

CHAPTER V

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

SOME of the bums gave up at noon and went to the soup line, but I wasn't hungry now. The sun was merciless; there was no shade but under the eaves of the office, not enough for a thousand bums. Once in a while the window opened and a man said, "So many men for such and such a job." No matter what; you tried to reach the window, but the rangers wouldn't let you fight.

A man fell down in front of me. I dragged him into the narrow shade and shouted, "Water!" but I marked our place in the line.

The man revived and began to laugh, not pleasantly. He shouted, "I'm a Ph.D."

"I know," I said, though I was only a B.S. It didn't matter what was in your head if there was nothing in your stomach. We got back in line. We got within ten feet of the window, but it closed and there were no more jobs that day.

The man who said he was a Ph.D. made speeches in the night, and the bums listened. We had nothing else to do. I didn't get much out of it; I'd always done my thinking with my legs, and they were pretty wabbly.

Sure, you wanted to kill somebody. But who? The Company? They'd feed you if you asked them. The Administration? They were out here in the desert, trying to do a job in chaos, bedlam—trying to make jobs.

That eloquent, hysterical, thin fellow seemed to think that everything would be all right if everything belonged to the Government. But this belonged to the Government. In Washington, in air-cooled offices, men did the best they knew, but all they ever saw was papers; they were not to blame. Who, then? Big Chief had suffered in the desert longer than any of these bums. The rangers only tried to keep you civilized. The Government was not your father, and you couldn't even live on your own father all your life.

The second night, I started for the soup line, but my legs walked past and kept on walking. There were telephones in Boulder City, but I didn't feel like talking to my father, and they had no use for bums in Boulder City. Surely I could make it to Las Vegas, get some kind of job to earn a meal.

Many a bum was on that choking road, and many a thumb was lifted in the glare of headlights. It was queer. Those fellows hated the System, but they'd ride on anybody's wheels.

Because they had to, I suppose.

The System? I had always lived in a little town. I knew some men had money and some men had jobs, but the men I knew had a little of both. I thought you took a job to get the money; but these fellows seemed to think there were two different kinds of men. The System? Desert stars wheeled slowly, and my head was empty and my legs were numb. I knew I couldn't walk out of the desert, but I'd make it to Las Vegas, anyway. I saw the lights on the horizon.

BUT the sun came up and the lights vanished. Cars began to pass again. A car stopped, but it came from the wrong direction—from Las Vegas. I said, "Thanks," and stumbled on.

The car backed rapidly and overtook me. Janet wailed, "Oh, Al, Al, what's the matter with you?"

"Huh?" I said. I saw her, cool and sweet in the choking desert, there beyond her father, and I was ashamed. I croaked, "Why, nothing. I'm all right."

Professor Collins said, "No luck?"

I tried to grin, but my lips were cracked and my throat was cotton, croaking, "No, sir."

"Well, hop in. We'll see what we can do about it. Mind you, I can't promise anything."

Las Vegas wasn't anywhere. The sun was up; I'd never make it now. I said as best I could, "What can I lose?"

I had no legs to hop, but I climbed in. I knew that I was riding on the System. Janet's father rummaged in a big lunch-basket and dug up a thermos of hot coffee and a sandwich; and I gulped the coffee, but I couldn't eat. I asked, "What are you doing here this time of day?"

Her father said, "It's half-past seven."

"Jan, I mean . . . Didn't I see you last night in Boulder City?"

"No," said Janet, driving fast, hurling the car toward Boulder City.

I was pretty dumb. It wasn't last night, wasn't even the night before. I struggled with the thing called time. I saw the back of the woman's neck, and it was browner than I remembered, even in these few—weeks. The desert was no place for a woman. I asked dimly, "How long will you have to be here?"

Dr. Collins answered absently, "Depends."

But Janet turned her head. The road was wide and straight in the glaring desert; and her cool gray eyes were misty, and her warm, sweet, woman's mouth was smiling fiercely. Not with pity. Fiercely.

Janet said, "Depends!"

Maybe the coffee was beginning to take

effect. My strength came back a little, and I laughed, "Snap out of it, wild woman. I'm all right," and went to sleep.

Her father took me past the watchman, but no woman was allowed inside Black Canyon in those days. A skip, a wooden platform at the end of a long cable, dropped you a thousand feet, into such heat and noise as you had never imagined —the vast river roaring, air-drills thundering, rock-trains shrieking, air-compressors panting on the talus of loose rock where the barges swung.

The black cliffs burned and narrowed in the sky. You landed on a trembling barge in the rushing tide, and couldn't be quite sure it wasn't the rock that swirled.

The quiet engineer they called Big Chief said dimly, "Sorry, Collins. Every politician in the country is on my neck to hire his friends."

I croaked, "I'll rod or flag or drag a chain. Just anything."

"I'm sorry."

Janet's father said with too much sympathy, "Well, Alfred, you see how it is. Can I—er—stake you?"

I said dimly, "No, sir, thanks." I wished Big Chief wouldn't keep staring at me with those tired blue eyes.

He shouted suddenly, "Oh, Frank!"

ON THE flattened talus where a hundred men were working, drilling, laying rails, two men had come out of a tunnel—a big, fattish man who seemed to think it was all a joke, and a short, bandy-legged man with gimlet eyes in a face like a shriveled walnut. Big Chief told me, "That's the Big Boss of the Company."

Which one? The sawed-off man looked grim and sharp enough, but he was definitely shabby, and the big one had no air of responsibility. They came aboard the barge—the big one grinning.

Big Chief asked him, "Can you use a punk?"

The little, bright blue eyes in the big man's face were merry, and he asked me, "Well, son, what's your specialty?"

I grinned, admitting, "Baseball, I'm afraid, sir. I'm just out of engineering school. I've had a little field work, but I—"

"Baseball?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wha'd'ye play?"

"Third base," I said, confused.

It wasn't the sort of thing you expected a Big Boss to ask. I tried to explain about my education, but a steel train emptied a roar of rock into the roaring river, and a mass of rail came swooping down out of the sky. The Big Boss casually plucked me out from under it.

"Third base? How good are you?"

I told him helplessly, "The Denver papers seemed to think I was all right."

"Huh?" said the big man. "Denver?"

"Boulder. State University."

"Are you Speed Foley?"

"Sir?" I said, bewildered, grateful. "Yes, sir."

"Stick around. I can use you in a couple of months."

I said forlornly, "That'd be just fine, sir, if I didn't have to eat."

The little man said suddenly, "I'll take him."

"Green?" said the big one.

"Won't be," snapped the short one, "long. I'll knock some sense into his damn head."

"Don't kill him. I might need him. . . . Foley, this is Danny Henderson."

"How do, sir?"

"Nix on that. Name's Danny."

I said dazedly, "Mine's Al." On an empty stomach, at the bottom of a roaring furnace, it was hard to know where the kidding stopped. That hard-jawed, disagreeable old fellow didn't look as if he invited familiarity.

The big man said, "Okay. You're Danny's helper."

"Thanks," I said. "What do we do?"

"You," said the short one, "do what I tell you, and don't you forget it. Get you a pair of rubber boots and a hard hat." He snapped over his shoulder, "Graveyard shift," and ambled ashore on his bandy legs.

The big man grinned, "That sour-faced monkey is the best damn driller in the world. He'll run you ragged, though. I know; I rassled steel for him when I was your age."

It seemed fine to be on such informal terms with a Big Boss. I ventured, "Will the commissary trust me for a pair of rubber boots and a hard hat?"

He was already turning away. He stopped, and I perceived that I was small potatoes. But his eyes relented, and he said, "Oh, sure, kid. Mess hall too. You're on the pay roll now."

I STOOD there trying to believe it. The vast river boiled and swirled through the deep canyon, and I felt like a chip in the torrent.

And a great iron hook slid past my face. I saw it dimly, saw the man who rode it, dimly; and I had the dazed impression that the man's free foot kicked at me as I dodged. The man's foot knocked my hat off—something did. I fought for balance; the wild water snatched my dizzy eyes, and the cliffs rushed backward, and I saw how fast my hat receded, saw how savagely the water sucked it under.

Had that fellow tried to kick me off the barge?

Of course not. I'd been careless, that was all; you had to watch your step around so much machinery. No man would do a thing like that. A hundred men were working in plain sight; they hadn't noticed anything. A black speck dwindled in the sky. My hat was gone, but I was on the pay roll now.

Professor Collins beamed and asked, "All right?"

"You bet," I said, and never knew that I had left my high, cool youth behind.

A strange world opened suddenly and took me in. I ate with a herd of strange and silent men. Their eating wasn't silent, but their eyes were dumb. They ate prodigiously and swiftly. If they couldn't reach what they wanted, if they had to speak, they were embarrassed; and their speech was hard American, but most of them were somehow foreign-looking. If they happened to brush against you, it was not a negligible contact, but a bump. You felt their muscles and you knew why they were called construction stiffs.

Across the table sat a man who stared with black, still eyes in a strangely piebald face. But everything was strange; I didn't recognize the man. I didn't wonder what a married man was doing here. I didn't know this was a mess for single men. Sam Breck had shaved.

THE graveyard shift went on at eleven o'clock. Ponderous motor transports, trundling out on the Nevada cliffs, diminished, and the heavy-footed men grew small. The night was bottomless; the unseen fans of electric floodlights painted lonely islands in the void.

Suddenly, though, Black Canyon bellowed with cheerful thunder, a sustained and rolling cannonade of dynamite, more powerful than timeless water; smoke rolled up those raking cones of light and gave them a third dimension; skips ran briskly out on the long cables, over a thousand feet of darkness, letting down fresh men to the battle against the river and the rock.

I wasn't afraid of heights; not then.

I wedged myself on a narrow platform with a score of men, but those steel ropes could carry as many tons. The platform lifted and slid out, faster and faster; the wind was cool on your sweating torso, and the wheels of the carriage sang. The Arizona cliffs came swiftly.

Fireflies crawling there became the headlights of great trucks on the tilted roads. The carriage stopped on the cable, and the platform swung with its own momentum, seemed about to strike the cliff; but the carriage dashed and overtook the pendulum and dropped it straight into the canyon. I had no idea of the swift decision, the audacity, the skill it took. Not then. I was exhilarated.

On a shelf by the foaming river, in the glow of a distant floodlight, men were waiting to go up—muddy, half-naked men

in rubber boots and flat steel helmets; in those days, hard hats were steel. But one man wore a shirt. The shirt was sopping, and his leather boots made squashing noises when he moved.

I grinned. Buck Naylor was trying to light a cigarette, but his matches were wet. I said, "Here, try a dry one."

"As I live and breathe," said Buck. "It's little Speedy!"

"Him," I said, adding in headlines: "Boy Makes Good. He Got the Job."

He snorted, "Well, if you call that making good," and shouldered past and boarded the waiting skip.

"So far, so good," I said complacently. A naked torso was a good deal neater than a wet shirt. Buck's helmet bore a scum of half-dried mud, but mine was glossy yet; I cocked it at a jaunty angle. Feeling the smooth metal, I was moved to take it off, admiring it.

And Danny Henderson booted me in the rump and squalled, "You damn fool, put that hat on!"

Not in fun. Outrageously and hard, the way you'd kick a mule. A flare of rage flew up my spine; I whirled on Danny Henderson. I saw Buck Naylor grinning as the skip went up and vanished. Engineers were never kicked around.

But the cliffs of earth hung menacing against the stars, realer than class distinction. Even a pebble, falling from that height, could burst an unprotected skull.

I said, "Thanks, Danny. I didn't think."

The old man said ungraciously, "I'll do the thinkin' around here. Come on!"

There was no pleasing that grim, bandy-legged runt. Especially at the beginning of a shift, I learned, Danny was hard to get along with. He was old, and rheumatism stiffened his knobby joints. You had to admit it, though—he was always right.

He tramped into a lighted adit in the rock, away from the river, and its floor was barely above the water. The little headings crossed it at right angles, leading along the river, and already they reached far in both directions, dwindling into the rock.

Tracks ran along them, and electric wires and ventilating pipes and lines of hose. Louder and louder swelled the thunder of the drills.

Columns of steel were jacked from floor to roof, and the air-drills, mounted on them, thundered at the rock, bouncing long bars of steel into the rock. You started with a short one. Danny fed it forward till it touched the rock, and pulled the trigger; and the steel blurred, roaring, eating into the rock. Then Danny pulled it back and nodded, and you flushed the hole with a vicious stream of air and water —dodging the back-kick of the slashing slime; old Danny didn't tell you what would happen, but you learned. You snatched a longer bar and slammed it into the hole and jammed it back into the chuck. Longer and longer. Fifteen feet of steel was no light thing to snatch, but you learned to do it swiftly, instantly. Those gimlet eyes saw everything you did, and most of it was wrong.

The best old Danny ever said was, "Kid, if you live long enough, you'll be a hard-rock man."

I HAD no time to worry about living long. Eight hours a day and seven days a week old Danny kept me on the jump. At first I had to worry about lasting out the shift. The heat, the noise, the dazing smallness of a man, made you forget the danger.

Men did die. Steel helmets couldn't stop a ton of rock. A bit of the roof fell out—maybe a dozen tons. It caught two men. One of them never knew what hit him, but it only smashed the other's legs; you heard him scream as the siren started screaming for the first-aid outfit.

Danny said, "Come on, kid. Jump. A minute means a lot to fellers in that fix."

It was pretty awful. But old Danny said, "Forget it, kid. A flivver'll get you just as easy."

And my hands shook only a little while. Old Danny Henderson had seen a lot of fellows in that fix, and he was still alive. You could get killed crossing a city street.

I didn't know my ears grew a little deaf; I never knew just when I learned to read old Danny's lips. I only knew the Big Boss of the Company was right: That sour-faced monkey was the best damn driller in the world.

Four air-drills worked in each of the little headings. After a round of shots, after the muck was cleared away, they all burst into thunder almost at the same moment; but old Danny always nodded first—seconds before on the short drills, added seconds on each added length, minutes before on the last and longest.

Often I moved and set the machine again before the last man finished the first hole. The same rock, the same steel, the same air-pressure, yet old Danny always finished out in front. He sensed the rock as if he probed it with his finger-tips instead of the roaring steel.

He wasn't human; he was only part of the machine that drove into the rock. He never noticed you off the job. But on the job, you jumped when Danny nodded.

Speed, speed, speed!

I wrote my father about the job I had. I wasn't proud of being a construction stiff, but I was a little proud of being old Danny's helper. I was hurt, indignant when Pat Foley wrote, "Come home, you big gazelle. What do you think I gave you an education for? If that's the kind of job you want, I'll get you one on the county roads."

CHAPTER VI

ONE YEAR DOWN

GAZELLE! In the Foley family, such cryptic words were current, and made sense:

I never nursed a fond gazelle
To glad me with its dappled hide,
But when it came to know me well,
It fell upon the buttered side.

The trouble was, I didn't know my father well. I hadn't been around him much, the last few years. The university, only a mountain range away from the Western Slope, was another world, another generation; and Pat Foley was a busy man—making a living as a small-town lawyer, putting an expensive son through school, giving a lot of time to politics. Fighting, year after year, for what he considered justice to his region. Water rights. I'd never been excited about water rights. There was plenty of water on the Western Slope.

I thought he was embarrassed as a politician—fighting the Project, and his own son working on it. I wrote stiffly, "Don't blame me for building Hoover Dam. They'd build it just the same if I walked out and left 'em flat; and a job's a job. Not much of a job, I know, but I've been living on you long enough. I'll get along."

Pat Foley's silence said, "You'd better."

That was the way the Foleys were. Old Peter Foley, in his time, had been that way when Pat decided to be a lawyer. Old Pete Foley, who remembered when men toted guns and minded their own business, had no high opinion of the law, and said so. Not with silence. With a stick of stove-wood. So Pat ran away from the ranch and worked his way through school and became a lawyer.

Seven days a week, eight hours a day, I drove with Danny Henderson into the rock; but I was lonely, I admit. I wrote to Janet sometimes, and she answered, but there wasn't much that you could say to a woman on four dollars and eighty cents a day.

BUCK NAYLOR didn't kid me now; a junior engineer couldn't afford to be familiar with a stiff. Buck said with kindness when we met, "Good morning, Foley."

Or good afternoon. Good night! I grinned and said, "So good of you to say so, Carlton dear."

But I was lonely. Stiffs were queer. They never had any fun. They took their pleasures grimly; heavily. Their idea of a high good time was to smuggle bootleg and get roaring drunk. I'd never acquired

the taste; a tour-sport man is in training most of the time.

They played a little baseball in the blazing hours off shift, in the burning sand-flats, heavily. I played third base, but it wasn't fun.

A man named Breck crashed into me. I knew his name; I'd seen him around the mess hall, and I thought the man had an ugly temper. He was on the day shift, a hook-tender; all day long, up to three o'clock, he rode a great iron hook in the sun-glare, in the heat that blazed from the canyon walls, and his swarthy skin had burned so black that I suspected him of Negro blood.

I didn't know Sam Breck had once had whiskers and a wife.

The man was heavy, and he wasn't weak with hunger now. He knocked me sprawling.

"Safe!" said the umpire.

Breck said grimly, "That's a sample."

I had dropped the ball. I picked it up and pulled the oldest gag in baseball—made a lazy throwing motion toward the pitcher, whirled back to the bag and tagged the man as he stepped off it.

"Out," said the umpire.

"Think you're smart!" snarled Breck, and tried to slug me in the stomach.

He was slow. But he was strong; I had to dance backward, spearing his face with lefts to keep him off me, and the stiffs all jeered me—thinking I was yellow. He kept chasing me until the stiffs got tired of it. They thought Sam Breck had all the best of it. They liked a slugger.

Fighting was pretty common in those days. I did my share, but got no credit for it. They resented speed and deftness.

They resented nearly everything, it seemed. They argued bitterly about the System—how some men had money and some men had jobs. I thought you took a job to get the money, and I tried to argue with them. But I learned. The difference was numbers—how a lot of men took orders from a few.

I'd always thought the difference was brains. But many of these men had brains. Joe Mendel was a Ph.D.—the one who had collapsed that day in Hagtown. He was not a stiff exactly; he had got a job in the timekeeper's office; but a lot of stiffs, these days, were college graduates, and pretty bitter about it—working with their hands.

I thought it was just temporary, and I argued, "What the hell? We're making a living, and that's something."

Mendel retorted thinly, "We?"

"Maybe you're not. I am."

"Not all of us are grandsons of Peter Foley."

"Huh?" I said. "Do you know Pete Foley?"

Glancing with some significance around the table, Mendel said, "I've heard of him."

"Heard what?"

"That he owns land."

"Why not?"

"More land than he can use."

Well, that was true. Pete Foley owned a lot of land, and most of it was desert, but it gave the old man room. I said, "So what?"

"So he hires men."

"How much land do you think a man can work, all by himself?"

"Precisely," said Joe Mendel, glancing around the table, gathering up the eyes of stiffs. I knew I was defeated, though I didn't know just how; I had no gift for argument. I only knew that they were hostile to Pete Foley, and the mess hall wasn't air-cooled then.

I snapped, "So what?"

"So you consider Labor a commodity."

Capital L; that was the high tone Mendel always took, and I was getting tired of capital letters even then. I didn't know it was a fighting word—"commodity." I thought it meant just anything whose price depended on supply and demand. Men worked for any price when jobs were scarce, but they sure got high wages when they could. I snapped, "What is it, then?"

"The toil of men," said Mendel.

"Toil!" I said. "What do you know

about it? Come and rassle steel for Danny Henderson, and you'll find out."

SAM BRECK said grimly, "Talk to me, smart boy, if you're huntin' trouble."

"Huh?" I said.

"The difference," said Mendel, "is that I must work or starve."

"Why shouldn't you work or starve?"

"You heard me," said Sam Breck.

"I heard you," I admitted, "but you didn't say anything. What's eatin' you, fellow?"

Sam Breck had no words to say what ate him. He got up and lunged around the table, and we both paid fines for fighting in the mess hall.

No, I wasn't popular. I didn't know that I was getting a little deaf, but I found that I could have a little peace at the table if I kept my mouth shut and my eyes fixed on my plate.

I learned about class distinction. Naylor lived in a cool, stuccoed Government Dormitory—capital E for Engineer—on the landscaped hill that presently was crowned by the stately Administration Building; I lived in an eight-man shack at first, down in the sand-flats. Married stiffs were housed in dingbats, room-and-a-half shacks, built swiftly—over two hundred of them once in forty-eight hours. Bedlam in the desert became a city. Presently the Company built dormitories too; I had a room of my own, ten feet by seven, in a scientific barn with a hundred and seventy single stiffs, and ate in a mess hall that could serve six thousand meals a day.

The difference was numbers; I was near the bottom of a rapidly solidifying pyramid. I thought it was just temporary. The Big Boss himself, when young, had rassled steel for Danny Henderson.

"And Henderson is still a stiff," said Mendel.

"A damn good one, too," I said, and let it go at that.

Old Danny never argued about anything; he nodded and you jumped. He had no patience with your ignorance; he taught you by expecting you to know.

My world contracted to a roaring bore inside the rock. The summer passed and the winter came, but it made little difference; inside the rock it was always hot. I worked on day shift, swing shift, graveyard shift again, but it made little difference; inside the rock it was always night.

The little headings—only twelve by twelve, but they seemed big at first—broke through four thousand feet of rock; old Danny only nodded, saying, "Daylight, kid."

It wasn't even daylight. Roads were down the cliff, and men were working from the outer ends. Most of the work, in those days, was preliminary. But the Big Boss hadn't summoned Danny Henderson from Guatemala for preliminaries. Other men could build the roads, the cableways, the bridges and the shops, a city in the desert; but a dam was built from the bottom up. The spear-point of the battle was the drills.

The little headings broke; the drills attacked the benches—fifty-six feet, but it made little difference. The job expanded, that was all. The noise was more—the sliding roar of the concrete guns, noise of the giant trucks that shuttled in and out, clangor of an electric shovel dumping rock into the steel trucks, twenty-two air-drills thundering instead of four. A jumbo, a great truck with a tower of steel platforms, backed against the rock, and a score of air-drills drove a hundred and fifteen holes to every round. But Danny Henderson still set the pace.

You worked below the river now. Only the arch-dams at the mouths of the great tunnels kept the river off you; and a flash flood came. Only a flash flood. Only three men killed.

Rain in the desert. People thought it never rained in the desert; but they didn't know what a desert was. The heavens split and the water fell. But it didn't stay. No soil to hold it. Sand and

gravel, and the rock of earth below. The water sank to the rock, flowed swiftly into gullies, into creek-beds, into the wildest river in the world. A flash flood —fifty thousand cubic feet a second, over into the tunnels.

But the telephones and telegraphs were working; men were on guard. The siren screamed, not for the first-aid outfit, and old Danny told you, "Git." You got. You didn't run; old Danny couldn't run. He labored on his short, rheumatic, bandy legs, knee-deep in the rush of water, and he didn't waste a single breath in mock heroics, telling you to run.

You heard about the bridge. Twenty-five thousand dollars, it had cost, but that was nothing in the scale of things. Men fought all night to save it, but when morning came, the Big Boss only told Big Chief, "She went."

And Big Chief only said, "Did you wish her well?"

You couldn't argue with the Colorado. Men just pumped the mud out of the tunnels and went on.

You couldn't realize that it had been a year. One day in June, the same as any other day, I rode to camp in a giant transport jammed with muddy stiffs, and clambered down as heavily as any of them. I came face to face with Janet Collins, and in that moment she didn't recognize me.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

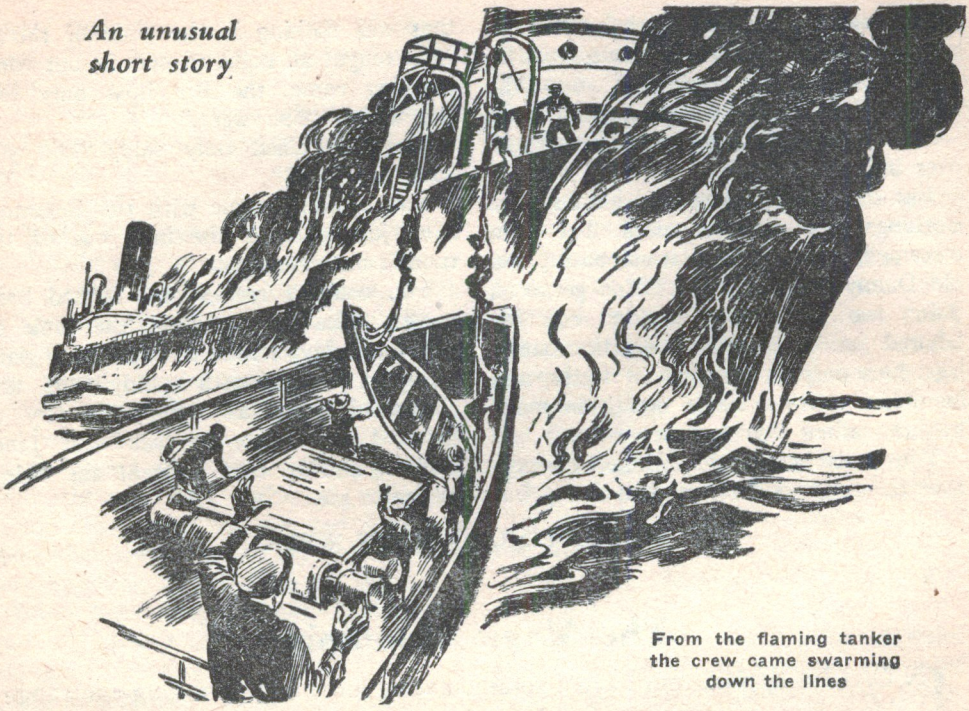
The Magic Mountain

IN CALIFORNIA they have a perambulating mountain. Not long ago range riders were seriously confused to discover a sizable hill where previously there had been pasture land. The mountain, literally was out for a walk, and it was preceding with determination. Since it is about a quarter of a mile wide and a hundred and twenty-five feet deep, nobody questioned its right of way. A foot an hour isn't a bad speed—for a mountain.

Scientists explained that recent tremors and a huge landslide started the mountain moving; but one wonders whether the cause was not a psychological one. This is an age of such great unrest that perhaps even the earth cannot remain content. Perhaps this mountain, wandering so unhappily across the fields, is a portent of what is to come—of strolling trees and boulders that walk in the night, all searching for a lost assurance. Rest in peace, O Earth.

—*Andrew McCobb*

An unusual short story



From the flaming tanker the crew came swarming down the lines

Simple Seaman

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Sailing Bum," "Off Soundings," etc.

Mister Second was sure he was smart; but when he set out to knife the first mate in the back, he forgot that the sea was watching

THE shudder of the reversed engine shook the old *Turrentine* like a self-induced earthquake. She humped her back in straining anguish and clashed her rusty plates.

Young Mr. Harley, who had stood the gravy-eye watch, shot out of his bunk. He was half way up the bridge ladder before his conscious self took command.

The engine stopped. The crash for which Harley set himself did not come. The old hooker was safe. Harley stuck his red eyes above the level of the navigation bridge. The tropic day had broken.

Across the engineroom telegraph the Old Man, his fat stomach swelling out in ponderous indignation, was confronting the gaunt, hungry looking chief mate. Thunder was in the air.

"Right! Mr. Bronson!" Captain Hyde's anger overcame his habitual breathlessness; his voice crackled like paper. "Right! was the command I gave. And if the helmsman is so stupid as to think I said 'port' then I am capable of correcting him myself."

"I thought you said 'port' myself, sir," John Bronson said.

Mr. Harley blinked at this asinine sticking out of the neck. Bronson should have

covered up. A child would have known that.

Captain Hyde wrenched over the telegraph handle.

"If you ever dare to open your mouth again when I'm maneuvering my ship I'll—" The Old Man gave out; then tried once more: "You'll never succeed me in command of her. Damn me, you'll need a mate's berth."

"But, sir, we'd have cut that spigotty schooner in—"

At the incoherent bellow that blasted Mr. Bronson's voice young Mr. Harley sped down the ladder.

"Sap!" Harley muttered, referring to Mr. Bronson. "And that's the dumb egg I'll be serving under when the Old Man swallows the anchor!"

He leaned against the rail of the lower bridge. Retired Captain Hyde, who had returned to the sea to save expenses on this rusty little tropic tramper of which he was part owner, belonged to the era when the wheel and the ship's head moved in opposite directions and the wheel commands were "port" and "starboard." Maybe he had scrambled 'em up in a moment of excitement. But . . .

Young Mr. Harley's cogitations were interrupted by realization that a distant voice, a voice aquiver with primeval passion, was assailing his ears.

He looked to port at a small native sailing craft. On her deck pranced a squat little man with upraised fists swirling in violent circles. He gave insistent, angry tongue to his opinion of the ship responsible for that near collision.

Mr. Harley thumbed his nose. A man must stand up for his ship. Sleepily he bumbled toward his room as the *Turrentine* proceeded on her quest for cargo. But at the door he stopped, turned and stared unseeingly at the plaited mountains of Puerto Rico.

It seemed a pity to Mr. Harley that he, a confident and intelligent young man, one of the youngest men ever to acquire a master's ticket, should be facing a future as mate to a witless fool like John Bronson, a fellow who didn't even know when to duck.

Some might call the *Turrentine* a leaky old basket, but to young Paul Harley she was a ship. He had high standards concerning what constituted capacity to command a vessel. Very high. Bronson didn't fulfil them. Neither did that unobtrusive nonentity, the Cuban third mate.

Captain Hyde was now exceedingly displeased with Bronson. The Old Man was as mean as a coral snake and as unforgiving as an elephant.

Mr. Harley entered his room and thoughtfully thumped down on his bunk. After a moment he shot out his lower jaw and clamped his jaws shut. A young man like himself, who made his own steam, couldn't be expected to stand aside for a mug like Mr. Bronson.

"I've got to fight," he decided.

IT IS difficult for a youthful second mate, even one with a master's ticket in steam, to become a Machiavelli overnight.

But Bronson helped. On the run to the port of Miami, where the *Turrentine* discharged her Puerto Rico and Cuban produce, Mr. Bronson stuck his chin out most invitingly. It was after dinner, that meager meal mournfully served by 'Enry Blackwall. Mr. Harley, slowly tramping the bridge, caught the roar of Captain Hyde's voice rising from the Old Man's office.

'Enry Blackwall, the steward, was flitting apprehensively in and out of the saloon. Atop the steward's broom-handle figure his hair, carefully parted in the middle and slicked down like a barkeep's, sported undisturbed a little blond curl above each temple, like a varnished, cresting wave. But the rest of him, from his narrow feet to his washboard brow, was agitated in the extreme. He was a man distraught.

"Captain on to you, steward?" Mr. Harley inquired as 'Enry paused like a bird on a twig at the foot of the bridge ladder. "I told you you'd been skimming too much cream lately."

'Enry became sadder than usual. "Most of the cream is skimmed off the steward's job in this 'ooker by Captain 'Yde 'imself, sir."

"Yes?" Mr. Harley didn't doubt it but his voice did. "Kingfish and bananas. Bananas and kingfish! You pinch the bananas out of the deck cargo and what does the kingfish cost you? Three cents a pound?"

'Enry nearly sobbed. "What I get wouldn't sugar your tea. If I tried for more the crew would 'ang me, sir."

"Or eat you. And stringy they'd find you."

"It eyn't fair!" 'Enry as'erted. "I get all the kicks an' none of the 'alfpence. The Old Man goes over the bills like looking for cooties in your shirt. "An' now the mate's in there grousing about the grub."

"He is?" Mr. Harley's interest ceased to be casual.

Captain Hyde came to the door. 'Enry shot out of sight. The Old Man hailed the bridge.

"Mr. Harley! Come down here!"

"Aye, sir!" responded the second very smartly. He stuck his head in the wheelhouse and scowled at the quartermaster. "Keep an eye out," he said and slid swiftly down the bridge ladder.

Mr. Bronson had never looked hungrier —or dumber—as he stood with his back to the bulkhead in the Old Man's minute office. Mr. Harley made sure in one glance that the Old Man's ire was directed at Bronson.

"Mr. Harley, have you any complaint to make about the food on this ship?" demanded the Old Man.

Mr. Harley contrived to open his eyes widely.

"Complaint about the food, sir?" he repeated. "Fresh fruit, fresh fish—there's phosphorous in fish—and plenty of it. No, sir! I'm not complaining."

Mr. Bronson's bleak visage remained unchanged.

Captain Hyde whirled triumphantly on the mate. "You see!" he rasped. "You've got an abnormal appetite yourself, mister. You're babying this crew. You're job's to stand up to the men, not flatten out like a carpet."

"The food's terrible, sir," said Mr. Bronson in a level voice. "We'd get more work out of the crew—"

"That will be all, mister!" bawled the Old Man banging open the door. "Get back to the bridge, Mr. Harley."

"Back to the bridge, sir," repeated Mr. Harley cheerily.

He followed the mate out of the room. Outside 'Enry Blackwall was precipitately departing in the direction of the pantry. He had been very close to the door.

Mr. Harley plunged at the bridge ladder. Mr. Bronson hooked him with a long arm, halting his progress. The mate's blue eyes were peering.

"Well?" demanded Harley.

Mr. Bronson spoke at last. "You can't soap the sea, kid."

"And you couldn't command a gravy boat!" snapped Mr. Harley. He wrenched his arm away and hustled up the ladder. What did the big clown mean? Nothing worth his consideration, Harley decided.

NOT until they had crawled through Government Cut into Biscayne Bay and were alongside a Miami dock, with a gang of longshoremen passing the stems of bananas from hand to hand did 'Enry Blackwall come gliding up to the second mate.

"It's come to my ears, sir, that you weren't 'ard on me to Captain 'Yde. I can 'ardly believe that when the old—the captain retires next month 'e'll 'and over 'is ship to a man like Mr. Bronson. 'E's gullible, sir."

"You think so, steward?"

"Gullible," 'Enry repeated solemnly. "The idea of listening to complaints against my catering."

He shook his head. Then he leaned forward. "You 'ave my backing, sir," he whispered.

He departed hastily before Mr. Harley could decide to apply his foot to the steward's backing.

Next morning Mr. Harley was down in the steaming afterhold, assiduously overseeing the cleaning up of crushed green bananas and broken stems when Captain Hyde came puffing aboard. Mr. Bronson was caught flat-footed on the wharf returning from the purchase of pipe tobacco.

"I suppose it would pay this line," the Old Man wheezed, "to hire a boy to run your errands, Mr. Bronson."

In the next tense weeks Mr. Harley awaited his chance to get in a crushing blow and meanwhile applied contrasts. Immaculate in white ducks for which he paid the laundry bill, he shone brightly compared to Mr. Bronson in his undramatic khaki pants.

Mr. Harley overworked his sextant taking sights while Mr. Bronson patently regarded the short runs across the Gulf Stream as demanding little celestial navigation.

"You'll wear out that thing," the taciturn mate said mildly, glancing at the second's sextant.

"Better that than the seat of my pants," Harley retorted, in not too soft a voice. And in the wing of the bridge Captain Hyde panted sour approval.

The lean mate seemed so surprised that Harley had sternly to suppress a tinge of conscience. "Damn him!" he muttered. "Why don't he fight back?"

But Mr. Bronson didn't seem to grasp what was going on. Or did he have an ace in the hole? What was that crack he'd made—something about soaping the sea?

In spite of his whites, Mr. Harley came close to doing a seaman's job on the paintwork and rust of the *Turrentine* in addition to his bridge watch. Mr. Bronson confined himself stubbornly to his own job. Mr. Harley leaped like one electrified at the Old Man's first word. Mr. Bronson was no more agile than usual. Captain Hyde ran them both ragged when he could. All hands knew the hooker was barely earning her keep and running down hill fast. But she was still a ship.

Plunging her bow deeply into deep blue water, she set to flight many a school of agitated flying fish. Prosaically she coasted along Cuban shores to Santa Cruz del Sur, picking up coffee, honey and bananas. She returned to Miami as quickly as her clanking triple expansion mill would kick her along, for bananas ripen fast in unrefrigerated holds. And at Miami things broke.

Before she was fully discharged the Old Man was on their necks, squalling for haste. Through deck and black gang flew the real McCoy—the lowest lowdown.

The *Turrentine* was going up the line to Jacksonville; there was New Money in the firm and the New Money had fixed her up with a cargo of flour, almost a full cargo for Cuban ports. The New Money might replace her with a refrigerator ship now laid up at Charleston. This might be her last run—and Captain Hyde's. Mr. Harley sweated blood.

AT HER best eleven knots, with a three-knot lift from the warm moving water of the Stream, the *Turrentine* slid northward toward Jax. Captain Hyde ruthlessly assembled a work gang consisting of all three mates and every available man, watch below or no watch below. He set them to scraping and chipping rust and slapping a coat of red lead on the iron foredeck.

"I'll take the bridge this afternoon; you gentlemen get her looking a little like a ship," he said.

He took his post in a wicker chair on the starboard wing of the bridge under the awning and glowered down at them at intervals.

Hot salt sweat mingled with the red paint as the men plied brushes on the red hot deck. The Florida sun of Maytime did a paint job of its own on Harley's brown shoulders.

Up on the bridge, in spite of the cool easterly breeze, the heat got to the Old Man, too. His vigilance relaxed and finally his head dropped on his chest. The *Turrentine* went snoring on, tearing the blue seas apart with her blunt bow and leaving them laced with foam. The sun crept westward

Mr. Bronson, due on the bridge watch, contented himself with an occasional glance ahead after the Old Man nodded. A white Diesel yacht showed up, bucking the axis of the northbound stream with casual disregard for waste fuel. When she loomed large ahead Mr. Bronson laid his brush across his paint can and ascended to the bridge.

There was no need of passing whistle signals but the crowd on the bridge of the yacht thought otherwise. Somebody playfully gave the little freighter a blast.

When Mr. Bronson gravely pulled down the whistle lanyard in reply Captain Hyde's curved bulk shot nearly a foot out of his chair. He jerked his head this way and that and then fixed his eyes on Mr. Bronson.

"Get down on the foredeck!" the Old Man snapped. "I'm standing this watch! Get back to your job!"

"You were asleep, sir, and that yacht—"

Mr. Harley gasped. The fool!

The full red flush induced on the Old Man's face by sleep turned a quick purple.

"Asleep! By— You accuse me of being asleep?" Captain Hyde swelled to perilous dimensions. "Mr. Harley!"

Hastily Mr. Harley headed for the ladder. On the lower bridge 'Enry Blackwall was lingering.

" 'Ere's your chance to sink 'im deep," the steward murmured.

The Old Man's eyes were gleaming hardly at the mate out the depths of their sockets.

"Mr. Harley," the Old Man said, "were you under the impression that I was asleep just now?"

Young Mr. Harley took a deep breath. He assured himself rapidly that the end justified the means; that he was doing a public service in keeping such a simple-minded lug as Bronson from command of a ship. Besides, the Old Man might merely have been dozing. Bronson had said "asleep." And the skipper was asking him, "Asleep?"

"You asleep, sir?" he said. "No, sir. I wouldn't say you were asleep."

"That will do, Mr. Harley." The captain turned coldly to the mate. "Now, mister, if you have any idea in your skull of bringing me into disrepute . . . Go back to your job, mister!"

Harley dived for the bridge ladder. Bronson followed him down to the foredeck. Bending over his paint pot, Harley did not pick it up. He might need his hands. But Mr. Bronson, pausing in front of him, only jerked an arm in the direction of the side of the ship.

"You can't soap the sea, Harley," he said. "You—you can't soap the sea."

Mr. Harley stared warily at him. But that was all Bronson did about it; he picked up his brush and began painting the iron plates.

When they ran out of paint Harley headed wearily toward his room. 'Enry intercepted him briefly at the pantry door.

"That's the way to fix 'im, sir," he applauded and started to pop out of sight again. Mr. Harley raised his burning foot. The steward shot into the pantry even faster than he had planned. Dishes crashed, a satisfying sound. Mr. Harley passed on.

"What the hell does that big square-head mean—you can't soap the sea?" the second mate asked himself. He got no answer, not even during the long graveyard watch.

THE flour was waiting for them at Jax. In big drafts they slung it aboard, working all night. The New Money came stepping up the gangplank past Mr. Harley. The Old Man was panting at his heels. The New Money was a Mr. Kennett, ex-traffic manager for a big shipping firm. Harley studied the spare, knife-featured man of middle age, severe-lipped and sharply tailored in gray tropical cloth.

A little later he caught Captain Hyde pointing him out to Kennett. The Old Man's misanthropic eye was almost approving. Mr. Harley tingled. Command! Perhaps even command of the new ship the firm was getting. Hyde had never looked at anyone like that before.

"I've earned it," Harley told himself.

Harley's back was stiff and his shoulders square as the shuddering *Turrentine* wormed down the St. Johns. She was bound for Miami again to pick up a bit more late general cargo for Cuba.

Mr. Bronson was not disturbed. He lit his pipe and stuck his head in the saloon. In the very hearing of the Old Man he asked the flustered 'Enry what he was putting out for dinner.

"Too dumb to live, not to mention command," Harley assured himself.

Clinging to shoal water along the beach to avoid the adverse current of the stream, the *Turrentine* clanked southward past Jupiter light and the summer-deserted palaces of Palm Beach.

Mr. Harley killed his afternoon watch while most of the ship rested in sun-drugged somnolence. The nearness of his triumph and John Bronson's calmness set him to worrying. Did the mate have an ace in the hole? What did he mean—you can't soap the sea? It sounded good but it didn't mean anything. Mr. Harley leaned on the rail.

The ship was engaged in a languid race with a half laden little tanker, a craft with a high bridge structure, a long row of tanks that filled her midship sections and a stubby funnel far aft. Poor sport, that race, for Mr. Harley had no authority to open her up and burn fuel.

Off the Hillsborough Light Mr. Bronson came up to take over and eight bells was made. The tanker, Mr. Harley observed with disgust was definitely crawling ahead of them.

As the *Turrentine* approached the sea buoy marking the entrance to Port Everglades Captain Hyde dispatched the mate aft to replace a doubtful block on a cargo boom. Taking over the watch, the Old Man trundled his stomach to and fro on the bridge and cursed the fleet of small fishing boats heading for the Everglades entrance.

Harley, on the lower bridge, yawned. With sleepy eyes he regarded the sandy shore and the small craft almost across their bow. The tanker was out of his view.

Faintly he heard the engineroom telegraph and the captain above him panting a profane protest over having to reduce speed for a lousy fishkiller. Then came the Old Man's order to the helmsman:

"Port!"

"Port, sir?"

Harley jerked up his head. Every seamanly instinct in him screamed a warning. The helmsman's reply was no mumbled repetition of a command; it was an excited question.

"Port, you fool!" bellowed the Old Man. "Port your whee— No! Starboard! Right! Right!"

Harley shot up the ladder. His mind whirred. He knew what it was—what it had been off the Puerto Rican coast. Hyde was giving the old wheel commands. And the tanker—somewhere outside them!

IT WAS the tanker. She had reduced speed and drawn further to seaward for room to round the buoy and enter the Everglades channel under the stern of the *Turrentine*. But the Old Man's scrambled command had sent his ship lunging toward her.

"You've done for her!" Harley shouted at the Old Man in agony. He consigned policy to the devil; his feeling was all for the ship.

There was a quick brain on the bridge of the tanker. The oil ship, rung up to full ahead, almost got past the rusty tramper that had suddenly gone wild and swung on her.

But the *Turrentine* had too much headway to be dodged. Her bow blundered into the tanker. She struck well aft, just forward of the tanker's funnel.

The impact sent Mr. Harley staggering against the rail of the bridge. The Old Man, at the engineroom telegraph, was shot into the brass standard stomach-first. He turned pea green and slumped to the deck. He was completely out, with his mouth still open.

Mr. Harley stepped over the Old Man's paunch to the telegraph. Miserably he jerked the handle to slow ahead, to hold

her bow in the gash in the tanker's quarter.

He had acted far less tactfully than Bronson had acted off the Rican coast but he cared nothing for that. The old girl was through. They'd never repair that bow.

From the wound in the tanker's side gushed steam in clouds and oil in a shining flood. It must be the tanker's bunker oil, the stuff that kept her engines turning, stored in a tank just forward of her boiler room. And that escaping steam and the black smoke that now was coming with it . . .

Mr. Bronson came bounding up the ladder. He looked first at the engineroom telegraph. He nodded, glanced at the prostrate Old Man and then let his eyes travel along the low deck of the tanker to the high bridgehouse far forward. He moved to the voice tube and curtly told the engineer below what was up. Then he came out on the bridge again.

Of a sudden a rush of men from the tanker's engineroom came swirling onto her afterdeck. It was no panic; a grizzled little engineer officer waved them on and counted them as he waved.

"He's got 'Abandon ship!'" Bronson said through his teeth. "She's worse off than she looks."

The tanker's black gang swarmed across onto the blunted bow of the *Turrentine.*

"Shall I see if the collision bulkhead—" Harley began.

"No need!" Bronson cut in. His eye was hard. "Stand by!"

Harley stared sharply at him. Bronson wasn't excited. Inaction was painful but necessary then. They had to keep her bow in that gash in the tanker's side.

From the tank ship the chunky little engineer reluctantly followed his men across to the *Turrentine's* bow.

Most unexpectedly the afterdeck of the tanker lifted. A muffled thud hit their ears. The deck sagged and split, smothered in spurting smoke.

Bronson jerked his head. "We hit them in the boiler room. That black-gang officer saw this coming."

From the cut in the tanker's flank fire gushed and wavered on top of the oil. The red glare of that fire pierced ever more vividly through black smoke and white steam. Flames leaped up, high over the *Turrentine's* forecastle. The tongued fire divided the tanker in half, cutting off the men forward in the tanker's bridgehouse.

"She's sinking fast!" Harley muttered. But his eyes slid from the ominous slant of the tanker's deck to the ever more ominous blaze that roared over her midship section.

"Soap this one, kid," said Bronson suddenly. He spoke through gritted teeth. His eyes studied the flaming oil ship.

Mr. Harley stared at that hard, set face. Soap this one?

"What d'you mean?" he demanded.

All Bronson's conscious attention was on the tanker but he spoke aloud, more to himself than to Harley. "Can you yes a hurricane or kid a current in thick weather?"

From the *Turrentine's* forecastle head the tanker officer caught their eyes. He gestured to his men. His lips framed words:

"All out aft!"

"The bunch forward can't get to us," Harley muttered, with a sidelong glance at the mate.

"Yeah," said Bronson. He jammed the engineroom telegraph over to astern.

BEFORE the *Turrentine* could back clear the flames leaped up with sinister speed. The whole stern of the tanker was enveloped. The fresh easterly wind set the hungry fire to twisting further forward, over the long low deck made up of the expansion trunks of her rows of oil tanks.

The sea was on fire around the gushing hole that the *Turrentine* had cut. The blazing oil was spreading fast over the surface. The tanker was settling visibly.

A twist of the wind enveloped them momentarily in blinding, choking smoke. Mr. Bronson glanced at the sandy shore; then stared at the other ship's bridgehouse far forward.

"These tankers carry gasoline to Everglades," Harley said grimly. "Hot oil—gas! If she lets go—"

Bronson nodded. "Why don't you soap it—or shut up?" he growled. He spoke quietly to the helmsman. "Left a hair, Miller."

His eyes were gauging the slow backward movement of the ship.

"Gas and air, mixed," Bronson said. "Empty tanks! That's what the excitement's about on their bridge. This tanker's going."

"And us with her." Harley's voice was steady enough. "Any second now!"

He could see that on the high bridge structure they were working to clear a lifeboat. He looked apprehensively at the fire leaping on along the water. Long before that boat touched the sea it would be tongued with high flame. Harley tightened his lips.

"Poor devils!" he muttered.

Bronson's fingers shoved the telegraph handle over to slow ahead.

Startled, Harley jerked his eyes from the handle to the tanker right in front of their crumpled bow. Then he glanced at Bronson.

"What—"

"Kill or cure," said the mate coldly. "Those guys on the bridge have one chance—us."

"Us?" Harley was confused. "They'll roast alive before we can pick up that boat."

Bronson nodded. "Get a megaphone. Tell them to be ready to climb aboard."

Harley understood then. "You'd better judge it right," he said and jumped for the megaphone. Bronson had to be just right, to get away with what he planned. Right! The word meant something. You couldn't coax or pander your way out of this jam. You had to be right.

Slowly the *Turrentine* gathered way. She thrust her mangled bow through the flaming water toward the forward end of the tanker.

Harley's voice, bellowing his mightiest, stopped the men working on the tanker's boat. They had already swung it out on the davits. Now, as the *Turrentine* bore down on them through the black smoke, they stared and backed away from the side of their ship.

Bronson's head was tilted anxiously; his eyes estimated her speed solely by watching the water alongside. Suddenly he stopped her engine and waited, blank-faced.

With a crackle and a gentle thud the fruit ship planted her bow against the high bridge structure of the stricken tanker. Bronson's hand on the telegraph instantly rang her to dead slow ahead. The blunted bow ground against the rivet-studded plates.

"Now!" he said to Harley. "Quick!"

"Come on!" roared Harley through his megaphone. "Board us, you sons! On the jump!"

From the bridge of the tanker his command was echoed.

THE excited men on the lifeboat's after davit fall let go the line. The boat dropped stern first, landing her end with a crash on the forecastle of the *Turrentine*. Startled, the men on the other tackle let it go on the run, too. The bow of the lifeboat pounded down on the *Turrentine's* deck. Then the men came swarming down the lines, legs thrashing the air or curling around the parts of the two lifeboat tackles. Flames were already leaping up between the two ships.

It was like living through Inferno—and it was going to get worse. . . .

Bronson swore. "We've punctured another tank!" he said. "Are all the men—" Somebody spoke at the elbow of the two mates.

"Away from that telegraph, mister! Get down on deck, both of you!"

Their gaze turned from the tanker. Still green in the face Captain Hyde was on his feet again. He reached for the handle and signaled the engine astern.

Bronson's hand shot out to the handle. Then he looked forward again and jerked his hand away.

"They're all off, sir," he reported quickly and headed for the bridge ladder. Harley trailed him. The men from the tanker were running toward them, aft across the welldeck, putting distance between them and the oil-laden menace they had left.

'Enry Blackwall, with a bottle of olive oil and a wad of cotton waste, was darting around, dabbing at the blistered tanker men like a slightly demented angel.

"You handled this right, Bronson," Harley admitted.

"I have," said Bronson. "So far."

He looked at Harley. And Harley read with a rush in Bronson's face that somehow he, ambitious young Mr. Harley, and also the captious Old Man were unimportant obstacles on Bronson's road. Mr. Harley felt small. He looked away.

The ship wasn't out of it. Though the *Turrentine's* screw was thrashing hard astern, she did not draw clear of the tanker. Her crumpled bow was down with the weight of water in her forward compartment. Her propeller must be half out of the sea. She still nuzzled close to the hot side of the tanker. In some way she was held there. Held fast.

It was time, high time, to get away from that blazing gas tank and the burning water. The men milling around on deck wore grim white faces—a fatalistic bunch who thought their numbers were up. The ships were locked.

Bronson, at the head of the welldeck ladder, stared forward at the forecastle head. Swirling black smoke and the fallen lifeboat on the *Turrentine's* bow cut his view.

"If one of our anchors has tangled with the tanker we'll be here when she goes." The mate looked more gaunt than ever. "How about it, Harley?"

He jerked a hand forward.

"Okay." Harley spoke fast. "I'll take a look with you."

Behind Bronson's long legs he charged forward. On the welldeck the heat and the smoke weren't bad. But up on the forecastle head it was tough. Harley kept going but quit breathing.

It wasn't the anchor. The thick falls of the lifeboat, scorched but still strong, had dropped in tangled festoons on the anchor windlass and other gear, binding the two ships together. The *Turrentine's* lifted propeller had not enough grip on the water to part them.

THE two mates flung themselves at the job, bending low to gulp a little hot, stinking air now and then. The skin seemed to shrivel on their bodies. Harley's aching eyes now and then peered at the toiling mate. The mate wasn't excited yet; he didn't waste a move.

With the Old Man keeping her going astern they had no slack; they sawed at the stout Manila ropes with their knives and prayed for an axe. As soon as they cut one part of a tackle another took its place. Their ears and bodies were tense for the crash that would rip open the tanker and shower them with flaming gasoline. The waiting got so bad Harley wished she would let go. But he kept working to pass the time.

His throat was seared and he could feel the dried-out skin on his palms and knuckles splitting across. He didn't feel the pain yet, and the interest he took in his body was the impersonal, remote attention you give to the figure of yourself in a nightmare.

They cut clear one tackle. The lifeboat shifted forward under the drag of the other line. Mr. Bronson, down on his chest between the lifeboat's keel and the crumpled bulwark of the ship's bow, tried to scramble from his narrowing prison. It was closing on him too fast.

Harley slashed the taut line and shoved his back under the side of the boat. He wasn't carrying a twentieth of the boat's weight but it seemed as if he supported all hell's fiery coals.

Strangely irrelevant thoughts crowded his brain, which seemed to have given control of his muscles over to some other, instinctive part of himself.

"Hurry!" he gasped.

Bronson wormed free.

They peered around with bloodshot, burning eyes. The job was finished. They tumbled down the ladder to the welldeck. Bronson led to where he could squint forward above the burning water.

"Stay here—see if she comes clear," he croaked.

They dropped to the shuddering deck.

"Listen," said Harley, mumbling. It hurt to talk. "I've been knifing you in the back."

Bronson got up, darted his head out and crouched again. "We're free of her!" he gasped. "The Old Man will beach us."

He looked at Harley's blackened, shamed face and suddenly caught at his arm. He tried hard to speak and his ravaged throat was not what retarded his effort. He was phrasing these thoughts for the first time. And they were his ace in the hole.

"Look, kid," he said, with a quick gesture toward the sea. "It isn't the scramble to get a ship that matters much. Ships will come. It's bigger than that—a bigger wall. You've got to be right against the sea. The sea can't be soaped or kidded. It's got to be—to be met. If I don't meet even the Old Man, how do I feel right to go up against the sea?"

For the first time in his career Mr. Harley got a vision of the sea—the tremendous, many-mooded element that sprawled around the world and played with presumptuous ships and men.

"I—I might make you a fairly decent mate, some day," he said to Bronson.

Uttering cries of sympathetic anguish, 'Enry bore down, waving the olive oil. Harley shoved him aside. He had a beginning to make.

Tight of lip he shouldered his way through the mob and climbed to the bridge. Old Hyde was alone there, looking sick, but standing up straight.

Well astern of the *Turrentine* the oil tanker let go with a blaring explosion that sent steel and flaming oil up into the sky and down on the empty sea around her. Mr. Harley kept going. Straight to the Old Man he marched, right up to the guns.

"Listen," he said hoarsely. "You've got Bronson wrong and I claim that's my fault. He saved a lot of lives today—with his head."

The Old Man who was finished with the sea looked at the young man who was starting. Vaguely Harley realized that the small stuff had been swept out of the suffering shipmaster.

Captain Hyde nodded slowly. "Bronson stands up," he said. "He's a man a shipowner should tie to. But for a cocky young fellow—you weren't bad yourself."

The three of us shinnied over that fence, never dreaming what we were going to find on the other side

Stay as Sweet as You Are

All us kids used to hang around the Angevine's candy store. Miss Belle was so pretty and nice, she would always give us something unless Miss Melina chased us away. We never even guessed about the awful secret between them until one day. somehow, poison got into the chocolates. . . . A complete novelet of Four Corners

By THEODORE ROSCOE
Author of "There Are Smiles," "The Man Who Hated Lincoln," etc.

I

ALTHOUGH it has to do with sugar, this is not the sweetest story ever told. That is in the Bible—the story of Ruth. This is the story of Melina and Belle—the Angevine sisters—who, when I was a boy in Four Corners, ran the candy store at the corner of Maple and Walnut treets.

There was a little thimble-sized bell that tinkled over the door, and the store itself was like a candy box with lacy paper on the shelves, pink walls and blue ceiling; trays of chocolates and marshmallows, bolsters and fondants and caramels and creams under glass, bottles of peppermint drops and licorice sticks and skiddoo balls on the counter, and the window enticing with pans of taffy, peanut brittle and fudge.

Even the window of our firehouse did not hold for me such allure; that tragedy might lurk within that pleasance of minty icings and chewy delights seemed as impossible as those orchids of the Amazon that a Chautauqua lecturer had told us about one summer—the kind which strangle a man with their perfume.

But one of the Angevine sisters was not sweet. Just as there are certain kinds of chocolate which taste bitter. . . .

"Bad boy! Wicked boy! Wait till I tell

your father you're a *thief!* I'll tell him!"

Melina speaking. Catching me with sharp fingers by the ear. Shaking me as if to dislodge stolen goods from my stomach where they might have gone. Pinching so hard I cried out.

"Owww! Eeeee! Honest, Miss Angevine! I didn't take nothin'. I only run my finger on th' edge of th' fudge pan. A couple of crumbs!"

"Well! Then! You just let me catch you reaching over the counter again when my back's turned. Crumbs or not, they didn't belong to you! No matter how little, when you take what isn't yours, it's stealing!"

"Aw, gee, Miss Angevine—!"

"What would your father say? You, the Sheriff's son! A thief!"

I can see her in my mind's eye yet, that tall woman towering stiff and straight above me like a totem pole. Her long, flat-cheeked face. Granite chin. Lips pressed together. Unforgiving eyes under a pompadour of gray-yellow hair, lusterless as wood.

She must have worn dark purple (I can remember her in no other dress), some harsh material that made a scratchy rustle, with a starched white jabot, a gold fleur-de-lys watch on her chest, and paper cuffs attached to her wrists by rubber bands.

Speaking down, she would clasp one hand over the other on her chest like a bird of prey with something clutched in its talons, and glare down over her knuckles. She must have been a severe woman, for I feared her more than any schoolteacher, and I'd have sooner thrown a snowball at her as at Aminidab Coward.

I recall once sending her a comic Valentine.

You're just an Old Maid!
All men are afraid
Of your temper. You never will wed!
No man is your match.
The Lord help the bach
You ever find under your bed!

"So, Bud Whittier! Shall I tell your father you were stealing?"

"Now, Melina, the boy didn't mean to steal. Times when he's came to the kitchen door, I've given him a lick of crumbs off the fudge pan."

BELLE. Looking from the curtained doorway of the back hall. She had come from the kitchen. I had only seen that Eden a couple of times and so it had the double fascination of confectionery and its artful manufacture. The big stove laden with bubbling sauce pans. Shelves crammed with jars of nut-meats, bottles of vanilla, cocoa, lemon, pistachio, wintergreen.

Two long tables covered with sheets of paper on which were ranged row after row of chocolate drops, molasses cubes, fudge squares, bonbons, jujubes. What incense could match the fragrance of this refectory? What artistry could equal the making of chocolate soldiers, cocoanut eggs, glassy lollipops?

Remembering Belle Angevine, I think of her as the artist in her *atelier,* the smocked craftswoman in her studio, the bee making honey. She it was who made the fondants and rich chews, fluttering about the tables, hurrying to the stove, mixing this, dipping that, stirring rare flavors into colored pots, licking the spoons.

But I did not see her often at these fascinating pursuits. There was an element of secrecy compounded with the Angevine sisters' candy. No alchemists guarded their mysteries as these two maiden ladies guarded their recipes.

Village girls, begging the ingredients of a delicious caramel, would be firmly turned away by Melina's, "Please don't go in the kitchen; Belle ain't supposed to tell." Tradesmen were asked to make deliveries at the front, for Belle, involved in delicate cookeries, did not like to be called from mixing pots or stove. And the kitchen windows were covered with sheets of wax paper, which intrigued and baffled the village youth considerably.

Melina would snap, "Every boy in the village would be starin' in, botherin' Belle." Jealous of so much as a free crumb, Melina deprived us of even a pleasurable

stare. Belle, at her candy-making, became for us a priestess of mystic rites. Her kitchen was a place of enchantment; there were mysteries behind those windows covered with wax paper. That she was only a small, flurried woman in an apron in a country store kitchen never came to my realization in those boyhood days—and a boy's intuition is sometimes right.

I appealed to her, "Honest, Belle, I didn't mean to steal!"

She stood in the little hallway at the back of the store, smiling, conciliatory. Different from Melina as day from night, she was small and—well, the only word I can think of is sweet. Plump and not unattractive, even to an eleven-year-old, in a frilly-edged white apron and a big bow at her throat and a pan of butterscotch in her hand. Her hair was sunny and blonde, like spun honey, and her cheeks were a cheerful pink, her eyes blue and friendly. "Melina," I'd heard Mule Lickette say, "is made of prunes and prisms. The sugar and flavoring went into Belle."

"Bud's a good boy, Melina. He won't take anything again."

Melina countered coldly. "I run the front of th' store, Belle, and you take care of the confectin'. Also you know I don't like you caterin' to these village boys come beggin' for handouts. I'd prefer you don't admit anybody into the kitchen. Where's the profit if you give our candy out free? Times are hard."

"Yes, Melina."

"Very well. Isn't that,"—sniffing—"something burning in—"

"Just some brown sugar I spilled on the stove, that's all. I brought out this fresh butterscotch and heard you scoldin' the boy." Belle gave me a cheerful nod. "But he's a good boy, I'm sure."

Melina snapped, taking the butterscotch from her sister and walking rigidly behind the counter, "Well, next time I'll have his father put him in jail. Good boy, fiddlesticks! There's no such thing as a good boy. Boys are nothin' but men in short britches, and if you'll show me anything good about 'em, or men either, I'll be bound!"

That incident and its dialogue I remember clearly—Melina's sharp speech and her nod of dismissal at Belle as well as me. Her acid, spinsterish comment was deeper engraved on my memory by the arrival and response of the customer who joined the scene at that moment.

"Well, now, Miss Melina, I wouldn't say that about men or boys, really I wouldn't. As Shakespeare once said, 'There's good in everything.' Evenin', Miss Belle—"

ON the point of bolting, I paused. To stare with an interest verging on awe. He flourished off his straw hat, and although his face was polite, his manner courteous, there was a twinkle to his eye and his voice was soft and easy. Not many people dared banter with Melina Angevine, leastwise strangers newly come to the village.

He was spare and angular with a tall forehead and flat-combed, thinning hair; and his skin was pale, as if he didn't get out much in the sun. He had opened the drugstore across the street—pharmacy, he called it—just the month before. His name was Stick Hilton.

Doc Trosch had told my father, "Th' new druggist is all right."

I liked his voice. It was the first time I had heard a Southern accent.

"Warm," he went on amiably in the face of Melina's hostile sniff. "This's th' kind of April weather we used to have in Bowlin' Green. I thought maybe you ladies"—he smiled from Melina to Belle—"might like these hyacinths a seed salesman left me this afternoon."

He juggled a parcel from under his left arm; set it upright on the counter. String went askew, and plant and flower pot were revealed in the loosened paper wrappings.

Melina Angevine regarded this gift and its bearer with undiminished frigidity. She said waspishly, turning her back on him to light a gas globe over the cash box,

"I suppose we can keep 'em in our parlor upstairs."

But Belle exclaimed, "Why, they're beautiful! Thank you ever so much, Mr. Hilton!"

Mr. Hilton gave a little bow. "Charmin' flowers for charmin' ladies." And included me in this by giving me a friendly wink.

Behind the counter Melina rounded with a snap. I was not to forget the stiff-lipped disapproval hardening her features, the quick suspicion of her narrowed eyes glancing from the druggist to her sister.

"Mr. Hilton, I don't mean to appear unneighborly. Belle and I appreciate the flowers an' such you been sending over, an' you've bought considerable of us since you've been here. It's just that we can't reciprocate"—her sharp nod indicated the drug-store front across the street—"since we don't hold to a belief in doctorin', drugs an' things like medicine. We'd like to reciprocate, but we can't, and us Yankees don't like to be beholdin'."

"I'd heard you ladies didn't believe in pharmacopoeia," Mr. Hilton acknowledged pleasantly, "and I assure—"

"We don't like to be beholdin'," Melina Angevine cut him off with finality, "when we can't reciprocate. If you don't mind some advice, bein' new to the village, you'll spend more time tendin' your store. I see three customers over there now—they see you idlin' over here, you'll get a reputation you're lackadaisical—bad for your business. Belle,"—tartly—"I'm sure there's somethin' burnin' in the kitchen—it's that caramel! Now, Mr. Hilton, if there's somethin' you'd like before you go—"

He had frowned a little at Belle's hasty retreat to the kitchen; then his face was pleasant, but the humor had gone from his eyes. "I'll take a half pound of those chocolates I like. Same as I been getting."

I sidled out, forgotten, as Melina meted out the candy on the scales. She would take at least three minutes, absorbed as a jeweler, adjusting the balances, pinching a chocolate nugget into two morsels, dividing the morsels into grains, weighing that half pound down to the last, indivisible crumb.

That very night this miserly thrift of Melina's was to become the more remarkable in contrast to her wasteful ash-barrel. What backyard is not fair hunting ground to a village boy? What shed-roof is out of reach; what fence invulnerable? And when were the contents of an ash barrel beyond the right of salvage?

We were playing cops an' robbers when I, chief of police by right of my father being sheriff, risked the dangerous exposure of moonlight and dropped from shed-roof into the Angevine preserves, in search of one Jesse James.

So, skirting the rubbish cans behind the dark store, I spied Mr. Hilton's pot of hyacinths top of the heap, and, in rescuing that from the discard, came on other of our druggist's banished sentiments—a calendar bearing the greetings of his pharmacy—a large, square bottle of perfume similarly labeled—an unopened box of Cashmere Bouquet on which was pencilled, "I wonder if you ladies would care to try this," and a copy of Ouida's *Under Two Flags,* the fly-leaf inscribed, "The Misses Belle and Melina Angevine with respects and good wishes of your new neighbor."

That night, too, I heard intriguing things of the Sisters Angevine and Mr. Hilton.

II

"IT does beat all," Doc Trosch's voice drifted up to the window of my bedroom where I had hustled my loot, "how th' milk of human kindness seems to dry up in some people. Ain't many diseases worse than selfishness. This case looks like th' kind of heart trouble you can't deal with. Jealousy."

My father's voice drifted up on a scent of pipe-smoke, "She wasn't always that way."

I moved to the window and listened to find out who wasn't always that way. They were standing by the side of the house.

Pop with a lantern. Doc Trosch holding a pail. As Pop finished speaking, the doctor bent double like a jacknife, made a lightning snatch of the grass, plucked out of the lawn a writhing angle worm, and flipped it into the pail.

"No," he sighed, upright, "she wasn't. Sixteen, she seemed like a right nice girl. Appears like she changed when her sister grew out of pinafores, got better lookin', and became competition. I've seen that kind of thing happen between sisters. Never quite so ruthless."

"So she ordered Hilton out of the store?" my father asked.

"Just about, from what he said. Told me about it when I dropped in. Hilton's baffled; says he can't make out what she's got against him. But it's the same old story."

"It's too bad," my father said.

The doctor snorted. "And remember what happened with young Purdy and Twin Lickette and that automobile salesman was around here one summer? Huh! They were eligible, too." He jackknifed after another worm.

Pop put a match to his pipe. He said thoughtfully, "Maybe it'd been different if their mother'd lived, doc. They had kind of a skimpy time after the widow died. She always struck me as a mite odd."

"More'n a mite." The doctor rattled the cover of his bait bucket impatiently. "Silly pride. Never got over she'd been a Somebody-or-other in th' city. Despised the idea of bein' a widow left with two daughters in a country town. She's the one kept th' girls off to themselves; gave Melina all this high-chinned stand-offishness, an' pumped 'em full of this anti-medical nonsense."

"I remember how she used to avoid you," Pop said.

"Wouldn't have me in the house," Doc Trosch grunted. "Huh! When first she come here with those girls—Belle was maybe five, Melina twelve or thirteen—she didn't think a country doctor good enough to have. Trotted her husband way to Boston to die in that expensive sanitarium when he could've died right here for nothin'.

"Then she'd drive the girls over to Brockton to see Doc Waxer—remember that specialist committed suicide by swallowin' arsenic over there? It was after that the widow started her anti-medical campaign — anti-vivisection — anti-this'n that—took up fad water-cures an' astrology healing and all. That's where Melina gets her notions against doctors, all this cure-by-philosophy stuff from Phineas Quimby. I suppose that's the reason she gives for not wanting Hilton around."

"That kind of faith, she'd be dead set against a druggist."

"Melina don't believe in faith healing," Doc Trosch rasped. "Me, I think there's something in it, certain kinds of cases—Melina just don't believe in doctors. It's a sort of fatalism mixed up with self-will and the stars or somethin'. I once got in an argument with her about it; she told me to stay out of her store.

"She's worse than her mother was; ducks around a corner every time she sees me, an' pulls Belle with her. She dominates Belle like that. She don't believe in church—that's why she never goes an' Belle never goes. Hardly ever go anywhere, do they?"

"Melina makes out it's the store keeps 'em in," Pop said.

"Store keeps 'em in, hell. It's eight years since the widow died and they made the house over into a candy shop, but they never went anywhere before that. Besides, it's Belle that's the busy one, mornin' to night in that kitchen. It's that candy of Belle's responsible for their success—the mail order business they do in New England and down-state. They ain't poor like Melina complains. There's no reason for Belle to stay shut in like Cinderella."

"Never go anywhere much, for a fact."

"Ever remember 'em givin' a party or sparkin' around like other girls? And now Melina's drivin' this chap Hilton away. He's no masher. Come North for his health—darn good pharmacist—comforta-

ble off an' not too young. Nice a fella as has come to this town in a long time, an' a real catch for any woman gettin' along. Know, Sheriff, what I think?"

"What, doc?"

"There's something more than sugar in that candy store. Melina drivin' all these men away, they so much as smile at her sister—against Hilton because he's a druggist, but it was some other reason with each of the others, an' then she gives out how much she's done for Belle an' needs Belle in the store and all that.

"Well, listen. It ain't right or natural, women to keep shut off by themselves like the Angevines do. Either Melina's plain cruel selfish, jealous of her younger sister —or"—Doc Trosch paused somberly—"or it's somethin' worse."

My father coughed uneasily. Doc Trosch growled, "Well, if Hilton's set his cap for Belle, he's up against something. There'll be a tragedy around there some day, Sheriff. Huh! Come on, it's getting cold. I got enough worms—"

III

I SAID, "Pop, what's it mean—reciprocate?"

"Eh?" He lifted a contemplative gaze from the shiny, yellow eyes of his fried eggs. "That means somebody does somethin' for you, you do somethin' for them in return."

I spooned up some more oat meal, then, "Pop, what kind of a book is *Under Two Flags?*"

"You'd like it. It's kind of romantic. Your ma gave me a copy when I was courtin' her. It's gallant an'—eat your breakfast!"

I munched some toast, but my mind wasn't on it. I asked, "Pop, who was Phineas Quimby? What's fatalism? What's it mean—anti-vivisection?"

He looked at me across his lifted coffee cup; then carefully lowered cup to saucer, while his eyes, hardening, held mine. "Anti-vivisection?" His gaze fixed me. "I'll answer that." He explained about it and finished, twinkling: "Personally, I think for th' good of humanity some animals got to be cut up. Take little boys with big ears who listen out of windows to talk that don't concern them. Might be a good idea to cut off their ears an' sew ear-muffs on their heads, in place." He was kidding, and at the same time he wasn't.

He picked up the morning paper. From behind a screen of newsprint, his voice came in flat finality. "You keep in your clam what you heard us talkin' about last night. Go gossipin' around th' village, an' besides earmuffs I'll have your lips fastened up with hook-an'-eyes. You'll find out about fatalism and anti-vivisection!"

. . . Elmira Johns said, "He was there again yesterday."

Hesther Boul said, "He's there every day."

Mabel Watters nodded, "He sure eats a sight of candy. I see him cross th' street every afternoon. Buys a half pound box of chacklits."

Elmira scoffed, "It ain't the chacklits he's interested in, Mabel. My glory! It's plain as the nose on your face."

Tessie Sailor giggled, "My, he's got awful nice manners. Ma says Belle always did attract th' nicest—"

"It's a shame," Elmira Johns interrupted authoritatively. "Can't say as I blame Melina's attitude about it. Melina's worked an' saved an' built up that business ever since the widow died—looked after Belle just like she was Belle's mother. Melina used to be th' good-lookin' one. She had her chances, but she gave 'em up because she didn't want to leave Belle. Now I think it's Belle's turn. Belle ought to be grateful."

"Don't worry," Hesther Boul vowed. "If that Southerner thinks he can come here with his good manners an' ways an' get himself married where our boys right here in the village couldn't, he'll find out."

"An' that's a pity!" Aunt Lou Brickle spoke into the conversation gruffly. "Belle's still good lookin' an' attractive—if Melina's drivin' her prospects away just so's Belle

will spend th' rest of her life keepin' her company there in that kitchen, I think it's downright mean. Maybe Melina did give up her chances for Belle—then you'd think she'd be Christian enough to want Belle to *have* a chance. If Melina's tryin' to drive Hilton off for selfish reasons, then I hope he's got spirit enough not to give up like our town boys did—!"

I hurried out of the place with Father's mail. Lord knows, I hadn't opened my mouth; but all the ladies in the Post Office seemed to know about it anyway.

MR. HILTON'S store was interesting. He lived upstairs in three rooms in what he called "bachelor's hall." Before Mr. Hilton came the store had been a barber shop; Mr. Hilton had painted everything white and put in shelves and a counter.

There were big red and green globes of colored water in the windows, and charts showing people's insides, and displays of patent medicines. The store was dim and cool; on the shelves there were hundreds of fascinating jars and bottles—Castoria, Father John's, Dr. Dickerman's Famous Remedy—glass containers of liquids, powders and pills mysteriously labeled, *Nux Vomica, Digitalis, Camphor, Spirits of Nitre.*

Sometimes there were aromas almost as entertaining as those in the store across the street. In a back room Mr. Hilton compounded his own secret recipes. One was not forbidden entrance to this sanctum, however, and on occasion I joined him at his laboratory table, watching round-eyed while with mortar, spirit lamp or test tube he performed some rite in chemistry.

There were secrets in that back room I was not allowed to explore, jars of dark content set high out of reach and bottles marked with skull and crossbones. But Mr. Hilton would answer readily enough any questions about *Laudanum, Atropine, Strychnine* or *Cyanide of Potassium.* I made up my mind to be a druggist (I had been considering the Foreign Legion) and learn about these wonderfully named things. I liked best the little wax figure of a man without any skin, showing his arteries and muscles.

"Like to mind the counter for a minute, sonny, while I step across the street?"

"Oh sure, Mr. Hilton!"

"There's some sarsaparilla in th' cooler, there. Kind of thought I'd like some candy. Just give me a hail if th' phone rings or anybody comes into th' store."

"Gee whiz!" I looked toward the soft-drinks cooler. "Thanks."

He shrugged into his coat and picked up the green cut-glass bottle on the counter and stepped out into the heat. He was probably the only man in the village who had on his coat that dog-day afternoon. Labeled "Smelling Salts", the square green bottle had a fancy glass stopper; it would make, I reflected, a nice addition to my collection of salvaged treasure—I could keep beetles or lady-bugs in it, or something.

Peeking over the soft-drinks cooler, I could see Mr. Hilton in the store across the street exchanging words with Melina Angevine.

Some cars and passersby kept interrupting my line of vision, and I couldn't hear what was said; but Melina was talking vigorously, there was considerable gesturing over the bottle and the blur of voices loudened as Belle made an appearance.

I saw Belle say something to her sister and Melina said something back; Mr. Hilton intervened, and then Belle, with the green bottle in her hand, returned to her kitchen.

Two big springer wagons piled high with grain sacks rumbled slowly past the window to cut off my view; then Mr. Hilton was coming out of the candy store with his box of chocolates.

As he came through the screen door, I was dutifully posted behind his counter. "Whew!" he peeled off his coat; tapped his forehead with a handkerchief. His face was moist, pallid; he leaned against the inside door-jamb, panting a little, mopping perspiration and shaking his head.

He didn't seem to see me, murmuring under his breath, "That lady is sure a Tartar. But Belle's goin' to go, an' she—" He looked up, and his eyes were cheerful. "Well, sonny—still holdin' the fort? You Yanks know how to hold 'em. But I guess I'm learnin'." He chuckled. "Won't be long before I'm one of you. Say! Don't go out in th' street; it's hotter'n the grids of Avernus. Like some choc'late—?"

I was vastly indebted to Mr. Hilton during his drug store incumbency. Candy. Chemistry. Novel words. Heavy with soft drinks and chocolate, I hurried home to consult Noah Webster (a recent gift from my father) on "Tartar" and "Avernus." The latter was the more interesting with its reference to Hell.

Nor did I neglect that other follow-up; my after-dark visit to the Angevine waste barrels. I was not to be disappointed in my new-found Eldorado, and that night the beautiful green bottle with the fancy stopper was added to my growing hoard of windfalls.

IV

FIRECRACKERS snapped in the dusk, and a sudden rocket arched high in the darkness down by the river, sloped down over the treetops and burst into a scroll of stars. Red, yellow and violet the stars exploded into bouquets of sparks; afterwards came the echoing reports—*crack!—crack-crack!*

Mr. Hilton hurried from the back room, drying his hands on a towel. He wore a new suit—Palm Beach, he called it—and a new straw hat with a bright band.

"Started already? Somebody would call up for a hurry-call prescription an' make me late. Kept Miss Angevine a half hour now; she'll think I'm not coming."

He checked himself in passing me at the door; wheeled, groping in his pocket. I gulped as he held out a big, crisp dollar bill.

"It's a shame to ask you to miss the fireworks, boy. One of th' things about being a druggist. Makes you late even for your first date."

"They're going to have Niagara Falls an' a display of President Taft. Two hundred dollars' worth." But the big, crisp bill was a more than adequate bribe. "I—I hope you have a good time. With Belle."

Everybody in town knew he was taking Belle Angevine to see the fireworks. He grinned. "Thanks, Bud. Look. Stand out there on th' doorstep and you can see the high ones. You don't have to stay in the store." He turned with final instructions. "Just give Doc Trosch that brown bottle there on the counter when he comes, and when Mr. Saunders comes, he's to have th' blue bottle I just mixed up in back. It's got his name on it."

I gasped, "Mr. Hilton!" plucking his sleeve. "Melina's coming—!"

He rounded in the doorway, startled. Melina Angevine, crossing from candy store to drugstore, was not an ordinary sight. There was menace in her stiff-backed advance; her bonnet rode her pompadour in combative rigidity; her face was set, hard-eyed, chin like an argument, lips severe.

"Mr. Hilton!"

He held the door for her. "Miss Melina—! Won't you come in?"

She hesitated, marched in, stood just inside the screen, glancing with relentless disapproval—had I been older I might have detected in her glance a shade of unrestrainable curiosity—at the shelves about her. But even to my comprehension this was better than the constellation of skyrockets flaming up over distant trees. For once this long-resented oppositionist was in my territory, and I stood up before her, uncowed.

"I'm dreadfully sorry if I've held up Miss Belle," my companion in arms began. "I hope she doesn't think I'm—"

"Miss Belle, as you call her, isn't going!"

Mr. Hilton stepped back. "Not going—?"

Melina Angevine said firmly, "She doesn't want to go. She's got a slight headache, and besides she doesn't care for fireworks."

Mr. Hilton protested, "But day before yesterday when I asked—"

"Belle doesn't want to go," Melina repeated, emphatic. "She's changed her mind. I been waiting over there in the store to tell you. Suppertime she decided not to go to the park. Matter of fact"—she softened a little—"I rather expected her to go." She paused.

Fireworks crackled in the distance where a fan of bright star-shells spread open in the sky, illuminating the treetops lavender and pink. Melina nodded stiffly. "I'd kind of thought I might go along with you, too."

Disappointment blended into surprise on Mr. Hilton's features. He sent a swift glance at the store-front across the street; then, to my dumbfoundment, he placed his straw hat over his heart in courtly gesture and offered Melina Angevine a polite invitation.

"Miss Melina, I would be honored by your company. If you would still care to see the pyrotechnic display—"

"I hadn't ought to leave the store!"

He waved that aside.

"Oh, pshaw! It's Independence Day!"

"Very well"—arching her shoulders half resentfully. "But don't ask me to stay late, mind! I want to be back soon as it's over."

FOR two cents I'd have called after them to tell Mr. Hilton about the final destination of all his generous gifts. By the time I could recover from my dismay at this turn of events, they were well down the sidewalk; I restrained an impulse that would have dried up a source of plunder, and so, nettled, disturbed, I ignored a sense of disloyalty and held my peace, watching their progress down Maple Street with disgust.

But after a time I forgot them, my attention drawn from the deserted prospect of our main thoroughfare to the brilliant battle taking place in the sky. Doc Trosch came bustling after his bottle, and so did Mr. Saunders, and then I had store and fireworks to myself.

Once, during a lull in the spectacle, I looked over at the candy store, but the upper windows were dark and I saw no sign of Belle. Thereafter my gaze was trained on the bespangled firmament, applauding the hectic red comets, sprays of pale green fire, mercurial flashings, clusters of yellow sky-bombs and splashes of tinsel confetti ornamenting the night. Heavier booms and a scarlet flush that deepened and slowly waned ended the display. The village came filtering back into Maple Street—some hurrying farmers' rigs crossing Monument Square down at Main and turning up Maple with a clatter—joyriders in reckless Lizzies—parents hustling fretful little children.

Several neighbor women hustled by, and, in passing the drugstore, looked back over their shoulders, then went on, busily conversing. I caught: "Didn't I tell you?" And: "Now who'd ever believe it—!" I saw Melina Angevine and Mr. Hilton coming.

I waited, withdrawn behind the screen. Quick footsteps brought them opposite Mr. Hilton's door where Melina disengaged her hand from Mr. Hilton's mannerly arm.

"Don't bother to cross over." I saw her anxious scrutiny appraise the darkened upper windows of the candy store. I stared in real astonishment as she rounded on Mr. Hilton to take his hand. "It was good of you to take me, Mr. Hilton—I—I want to thank you more than I can say." Her voice was lowered, grateful. "I enjoyed goin'. A lot—!"

Then she turned away.

He watched her cross to her door and called a good-night.

"Say, Bud," he patted my shoulder, coming in, "Miss Melina isn't half so bad—"

"Aw—" I dissented.

"Well, now," he grinned, "you never can tell about women. Women are like fireworks—liable to do unexpected things. That display of President Taft, now—somebody got it mixed up with somebody else's picnic—it turned out to be a picture of King Victor Emmanuel—!"

SUNDAY dinner harvested, Father and Doc Trosch went out into our yard to look at the hollyhocks. I went out with them. Mrs. Armbruster, our neighbor, was out in her yard looking at her hollyhocks. Mabel Watters, Hesther Boul and Elmira Johns were looking at them with her.

"I tell you, Amy," Elmira Johns' whisper to Mrs. Armbruster was a yell converted into steam, "it's scand'lous! I always approved of Melina's attitude, but her carryin's-on since early summer—"

Hesther Boul joined in, "I was sayin' to my husband just today, 'Boul,' I was sayin', 'I just can't think what's come over her!"

"Did you ever see the like?" Elmira Johns took back the speakers' platform. "I declare, it looks like she'd dyed her hair an' come to usin' face powder. Her! and thirty-eight if she's a day—"

"I don't know, Elmira. How old d'you suppose *he* is?"

"Forty-five. It's in th' town clerk's records. He was married once, too, back there in that place wherever he came from. Bet he never told her. Amy, she *must* be thirty-eight! She use to look fifty!"

"Don't look it now. I never see such a change in a body."

"Change? Well! Do you remember how she 'lowed she'd never have a man around her place? No, but this Hilton's dawdlin' over her counter half th' time. Or she's trottin' over to *his* place—"

"Drugstore!" Hesther Boul reminded in an octave below alto. "It's not th' walks they take or them goin' to th' ice cream festival. It's how she's turned! After how she use to talk about all doctors bein' quack, she wouldn't have no medicines around and all—"

Elmira Johns panted fiercely, "That ain't the point! Belle's th' point! It's what I said to th' Sewing Circle—that druggist was interested in Belle, an' when it looked like Melina was goin' to be left behind in spite of her efforts, why she just stepped in an' took over. I'd never have thought it of Melina, no I wouldn't. I suppose, now, if she'd wanted those other boys who had an eye on Belle—but they wasn't such good prospects—"

"She once had her chance with Mule Lickette—"

"Belle should've seen what was happening—"

"Poor Belle—"

It was Mabel Watters, hard of hearing, who broke the headline news.

Although strategically situated as wife of our postmaster, her acoustic deficiency often relegated her advices to the second page; now with the pride of a gazetteer trumpeting an unheralded scoop, and in the loud tone of deafness, she called out, "He's gave her a ring! It came mail-order last night along with another big present—an Edison gramophone! Yessir, the postmaster told me! Looks like they're goin' to be married—!"

In the babble exploded by this disclosure, Mabel Watters' voice was engulfed.

Doc Trosch squinted up from the inspection of a black hollyhock. "Sheriff," he wondered aloud, "ain't there a village ordinance against leavin' hens run loose in the yards? Ought to check up around here; see th' householders keep their poultry to home behind chicken-wire!"

Pop grumbled something in assent. "Come on, doc; got your tackle box in your car? Let's see how th' bullheads are biting this evening."

I WAITED in impatience for the early dark. I had made up my mind about something. Eight o'clock and the street lamps burning, I scouted old territory at the corner of Maple and Walnut Streets, salvage-hunting. If by some malign chance I might come across a discarded Edison gramophone, then the time had come for Mr. Hilton to hear all.

My gleanings had thinned to zero since that startling Fourth of July—this was late September, and the Angevine barrels had rewarded my latest forays with little more than waste paper and ashes.

Certain as I was that a gramophone would not be forthcoming, I kept my fingers crossed and thefted into the Ange-

vine yard. Sundays the candy store was closed; but that Sabbath evening I was surprised by a dim light burning in the kitchen, and I had to carry out my raid with extra stealth. As I rummaged in the rubbish, I heard Belle in the kitchen call:

"In a minute, Melina. The cocoa's almost ready. Ask Mr. Hilton if he wants me to bring up a plate of his chocolates—"

Melina's reply called faintly from an upper room; I saw Belle's shadow pass across a wax-paper blind; then, to my consternation, a flood of light poured into my face, the kitchen door was open, Belle framed there. Caught with an arm in a waste barrel, I could only stare at her in wordless fright. Posed there with the light behind her, her hands clutched in her apron, she regarded me wide-eyed, white, lips parted as if in terror.

"Why, Bud Whittier," her breath came. "What are you doing there—?"

"Aw!" I withdrew my guilty arm. "Us kids are playin' a game—"

Her voice was low. "You're the one who took all those things last spring?"

"Please, Miss Angevine. I'll give 'em back. Please don't tell!"

She looked at me for what seemed to be a long time. An aching time while I shifted weight from one foot to the other, apprehensive of heaven knew how severe a judgment. All at once I was aware that her eyes were glimmering in a painful way; she was speaking huskily.

"I don't want 'em back! I don't want anything! You can keep anything you find, for all of me! You can have the—the whole store!"

"Belle!" Melina's call came sharply from upstairs. "What's the matter?"

"I'm coming, Melina!"

But as I crept from the yard she was still there in the doorway. Face in her apron. Weeping.

V

FATHER walked to the end of the porch and beckoned with his pipe. "Three o'clock, son! You want to be on time for the weddin', you better finish rakin' those leaves."

I scowled. "I'm not going."

"Not going?" Pop looked surprised. "I thought you were one of Mr. Hilton's best friends. You'll be 'bout the only person in town who isn't there."

So I might have missed it—what promised to be one of the most memorable weddings in our village history and developed into a dramatic sensation that shook First Church to the granite of its Methodist foundations. Shook the whole village, for that matter.

I was not on hand for the prelude—Mr. Hilton's arrival in derby and cutaway—Johnathan Sailor in the embarrassing garb of best man—Aminidab Coward, formidable in the valley's only tophat, recruited to give the bride away—those three in the vestry with benign Minister Minnis, awaiting the arrival of bridesmaid and bride.

I was not there when the packed church first began to fidget, when whispering began and people starting scrooging around in their pews while the organist, tired of fingering tentative chords, played *In The Valley Of Peace,* and Aminidab Coward pursed his lips and consulted his watch.

Purposely tardy, hoping to compromise between objection and curiosity by a late arrival, I sulked across Monument Square in my Sunday best, delayed to inspect the line of rigs, farm Lizzies and shiny hired cars, and must have arrived directly behind the bride.

She was there in the small vestry doorway, a foreign figure in veils, lace and sweet peas—although I think of her in purple, it comes to me now that she must have worn white—but my impression that day was of a woman utterly strange, Melina in masquerade; her face as I knew it, yet different, somehow, almost pretty, younger—the effect, perhaps, of a fluffy arrangement of her hair.

"Belle's not coming."

She must have been speaking in answer to a question put by her intended husband; I recall a certain firming of her lips after she spoke and there was unbelief in Mr.

Hilton's exclaimed, "Why not, Melina?"

"She's indisposed. She doesn't want to come."

"Why, Belle was all right when I talked with her two hours ago."

"Belle's changeable." Melina stiffened. "She won't be here."

"Your bridesmaid? Your own sister? After she said—"

"It can't be helped; she won't be here. She's going to wait at the store till after the wedding supper. It's Belle's own—"

"Johnathan," Mr. Hilton rounded on the startled best man, "drive to the candy store an' fetch Belle Angevine. Tell her—"

"No!" Melina countermanded. "We'll have the wedding without her!"

Mr. Hilton's eyes clouded. He said in a strained way, "You can't have a formal wedding without a bridesmaid, Melina. It was all planned. Belle wanted to come. I want your sister here. If she's just indisposed we can wait a while for her. I'll go after her, myself."

You could see Melina hardening, her shoulders going back. "We won't keep these people waiting any longer. You can't keep putting things off to suit Belle's headaches. We'll be married now, or—"

"Melina!"

THAT was an unfamiliar tone from Mr. Hilton. Uneasy witnesses, Messrs. Sailor, Coward and Minnis did not know what to do with their gloves or eyes. Heads craned from pews and eager faces looked up the aisle. It was hardly the moment for the organist, expecting something else, to come to a full stop *In The Valley Of Peace.*

Despite Mr. Hilton's gesture which begged a moment's privacy and bid his bride into the vestry behind closed doors, you could still hear them. Windows open to Indian Summer, the stillness of that autumn-tinted afternoon carried the nerve-jangled words, the sharp repartee of that dialogue. Not to be lost on such ears as Hesther Boul's, Elmira Johns' (or mine) was that passage of dissension between groom and bride.

"Simply can't do this, Melina!"—"I say now!"—"Unreasonable!"—"Won't argue with you!"—"Must have said something to make Belle act!"—"Belle! Belle! Think of me!"—"You're doing enough of that!"—"Can't go on!"

"Your own sister, and you won't!"—"Me or Belle! Which!"—"Melina, if you persist in this!"—"You always did think more of her than me! It's *her* you love, Stick Hilton! I thought so all the time! (Angry sobs.) Glad to know the truth, at least. Belle's really the one—"

It was pretty terrible, there, in that hushed, frankly listening church. Everyone must have heard the words which broke through restraint and chivalry and reserve as devotion crashed in Mr. Hilton and disillusionment rose as bitter gall to his lips.

"Maybe you're right, Melina! I can see it, now! Yes! I've been a great fool! It was Belle I saw in you—the glimpses of her in your makeup—I thought you were misunderstood — generous — kind! But you're not good-hearted, Melina!

"When you won't even wait for your sister at a time like this; won't explain—! I can't think but all the things this village has been sayin' are right! That you're jealous of her—selfish—mean! I must've been blind about you, Melina! Blind about Belle! Now I see!"

Everyone must have heard it; heard the resultant slam of the vestry door; seen Melina Angevine stalk from the church, laces trailing in the dust, sweet-peas clenched in fist, face like streaky, gray iron. There was no masquerade to her as she strode by me that time.

I stood stunned as she swept out to the pavement, appalled by her violent departure and a glimpse of Mr. Hilton in the vestry, bowed in a chair with his head in his hands. There was little need for the minister's hasty trip to the altar and high-pitched, "You may go, good people; the wedding has been indefinitely postponed—"

No one there could have guessed how indefinitely—

"SSSST! Boy!" I pulled back, frightened. Nobody had seen Melina these past three days; from that catastrophic exposure at the church she had walked into a dark seclusion, taken her sister with her —the candy store had been locked, the upper windows shuttered, the building wearing an aspect so deaf and dumb that the village had changed the breathless question, "Will he marry Belle?" to "Have they all three gone away?"

"Boy! Come here—!"

It was scary, that furtive finger hooked at me through the inch-opened door. Light from the corner street lamp barely reached the recessed doorway; in the blackness of the candy store's interior the beckoner was no more than a shadow, a suggestion of someone within.

But the whisper seemed Melina's, and I stammered, "What—whatcha want?" ready to run.

I had had it on Johnathan Sailor's authority that the druggist across the street, in retirement similar to that of the Angevine sisters, until, as Johnathan put it, "the shoutin's over"; but I had come to believe that the Sisters Angevine must have "gone off somewheres"; I had not expected a scouting detail which merely took me at a saunter past the storefront to divulge the mysterious whereabouts of Melina.

"Boy, please! I want you to do an errand. I'll pay you—"

The crooking finger withdrew; the door opened another two inches; then I saw a cupped hand extending an offering of nougatines. I moved up nervously to take the caramels in my cap; transferred the candy from cap to sweater pocket; then braved a stare at Melina's ghostly countenance half-formed in the inner glooms.

Her voice issued throatily, pleading, guarded. "You'd do something for Mr. Hilton, wouldn't you, boy? I've heard him say he liked you. Just run this across th' way to Mr. Hilton—don't give it to that Johnathan Sailor over there—and give Mr. Hilton this."

She made a rustle in the darkness; I took the candy box and the letter; as eerily as it had opened, the door silently closed. I knew she was watching as I ran in headlong flight to the drug store.

To Johnathan Sailor, enlisted as drug clerk, I panted, "It's just these chocolates he always buys. She said I should give him the box."

"He doesn't want to see anybody," Johnathan Sailor was positive. "He don't come down from his rooms only to fill prescriptions. I'll take them up."

I was sure eyes could see me from across the street. "She said I shouldn't give them to you. She wanted me to take them to Mr. Hilton."

Stairs at the back mounted to Mr. Hilton's living quarters; surprisingly a door whipped open at the stair-top, and Mr. Hilton looked down.

"It's all right, Johnathan, send the lad up." To me, as I trotted forward, "Glad to see you, Bud. You brought a message from the candy store?"

He didn't look any different—a little tired, maybe, as if he had overworked; his expression was cheerful, and always to me he had seemed palish, never red-throated or tanned like the menfolk I was accustomed to, but as Elmira Johns had described him to somebody, "white complected."

I found myself important, delivering candy box and missive. "It's the choc'lates you sent for, Mr. Hilton. And Melina said to give you this."

Disappointingly, he didn't ask me into his sitting room. "Melina—? I didn't send for any chocolates!" He stared at the box of candy in his hand; frowned at the handwriting on the letter. His mouth pulled down at one corner, and, as though he was not concerned with them, he tossed envelope and candy box to a littered writing table. "Thanks, Bud. Good night."

As I, bluntly dismissed, was closing the street door, I heard him call down the stairs to Johnathan Sailor, "I won't be down again tonight, Johnathan. I'm expecting Aminidab Coward some time after ten; when he comes in send him up."

Afterwards I was always sorry that, miffed by what I considered perfunctory thanks for a somewhat daring exploit in dispatch-bearing, I had not returned Mr. Hilton's good night.

I was in my bed room, disgustedly undressing, when I heard from three backyards away the grinding, crank-cough and rumpus of Doc Trosch starting his old car. Gears clashed as the doctor backed recklessly out of his drive, and the American Underslung made a familiar, slewing screech at the turn out of Chestnut Street. I heard my father go to a window downstairs, but I stayed mum, having sneaked in by the back way, aware that ten-thirty by Town Hall clock was no time for me to be other than secretly retiring. That same clock was chiming midnight when I awoke to hear excited voices in our lower hall.

"Johnathan was below," came Doc Trosch's bark, "and Aminidab had just stepped into the pharmacy. They both heard him fall. Johnathan says he'd heard him a few minutes before, talkin' to someone over the upstairs telephone. Whatever it was, he was all right then."

Father rumbled, "What'd Johnathan Sailor have to say?"

"Too scairt to talk. He and 'Minidab ran right upstairs and found him lyin' by a side window; looked like he'd tried to open it for air. They couldn't revive him, so they sent for me. Minute I saw him, I knew he'd been took bad. Johnathan kept yellin', 'He's dyin'! He's dyin'!' Funny thing. 'Minidab told me he'd sent for him early in the afternoon, something about makin' a change in his will. Well, he was lyin' there cold as ice with his eyes shut, an' it looked to me like it's too late for any lawyer."

I heard my father ask heavily, "What was it, doc?"

"Too much excitement most likely. Nerve strain. I saw it in him when he first came here. Plain heart attack. Cardiac spasm." The doctor's voice blurred low, punctuated by exclamations from my father, then his words came clear again. "So I sent Sailor an' Coward out of the room; told 'em to call Seymore. Yeah, he's up there at Theodore Seymore's now."

A door was closed, and I heard no more. But I had heard enough to know they had been talking of Mr. Hilton. Theodore Seymore was our village undertaker. And the undertaker had taken Mr. Hilton away.

VI

I COULDN'T eat my oatmeal, and Pop couldn't seem to eat his. He'd been up since five o'clock, I knew, awakened by an early morning phone call. All through breakfast he frowned in thought, worried about something.

I began, "I'm sorry about Mr. Hilton, Pop. It must be awful to die of cardiac spasm—"

"How do *you* know about Mr. Hilton's heart att—?" He broke off, startlement in his eyes changing to a threatening glint. "Now listen, son!" He aimed his spoon at me. "You just forget anything you heard the doctor and me saying last night. I can explain afterward, but for the present you don't know a thing about Mr. Hilton. Mum's the word, understand? Anyone in the village ask questions, you don't know a thing—!"

The phone rang. He hurried from the dining room into his office, careful to slam the door in his wake. Just the same I could hear him ordering one of his deputies, "Go down to th' station! Check up on the milk train. Keep an eye on all th' trains—"

He came back into the dining room, tugging on his hat. "I've got to go out. I know you feel bad about Mr. Hilton, son, but there's reasons I don't want to talk about him. Just keep out of any gossip you hear. Let other folks do the tongue-waggin'. Remember what I told you about anti-vivisection."

"Ah, crimminy!" I complained to Mildred, our old retriever dog, after Father had gone. "Bein' sheriff's son is worse'n bein' a minister's son. Gee, you can't even talk about a friend of yours that's dead!"

I couldn't tell anyone, either, that a deputy was down at the depot watching the trains. Why would Pop be keeping an eye on the railroad station? Was he afraid somebody might try to get out of town?

JOHNATHAN SAILOR and Aminidab Coward weren't the only outsiders who had seen the hearse on that nocturnal call at the curb before Mr. Hilton's drugstore. As if the summoning of the undertaker were enough of an explanation, Doc Trosch had ordered Sailor and Coward to go home, and they had departed, glad of an excuse, just as Theodore Seymore arrived.

Company had a way of withdrawing when our fishy-handed mortician came with his wagon into the scene, but, watching from down the sidewalk, they had observed Hilton carried out of the drugstore and into Seymore's sombre hack. Doc Trosch had followed in his car, and as the cortège joggled off in the darkness, Johnathan Sailor called shakily, "What was it, doc?" and doc had boomed as if he wanted the whole town to know, "Cardiac spasm!"

Then a door had banged open across the street; Melina Angevine had darted out of the candy store, followed by Belle.

Together they had stood at the curb, staring after the departing hearse. Belle, putting her face in her hands, had burst into loud sobs, fled back into the store. But Melina had stood there like wood. Stiff-backed. Stiff-lipped. Following the hearse with her eyes. She gave one glance at the drugstore; her mouth went thin and hard.

Then she marched back into the candy store and was heard locking the door. And that was remembered.

Lawyer Coward told Postmaster Watters that Hilton, just before he was carried off by the undertaker, had been going to change his will. Postmaster Watters told his wife, and his wife was shouting it out to the ladies gathered at Post Office.

Melina, walking in with a shipment of mail-order candy, occasioned a silence deader than anything up in Seymore's Undertaking Parlor. She looked so bleak and calm that Hesther Boul blurted, "Don't you know about it, Melina? The hearse called at Mr. Hilton's drugstore last night!"

Melina made no answer, going straight to the parcel post window, and someone at the back of the room coughed; but the cough sounded more like a scoff.

That was remembered.

For everyone seemed to know, by that time, that Mr. Hilton had willed his chattels real and personal to the woman he had intended for his wife, although after the fiasco at First Church he apparently had changed his mind. But he had "gone to Seymore's" before the change had been made on paper; Aminidab Coward, for all his legal perspicacity, was not a mind-reader, and no one had to tell the village how the legacy stood.

Documents remained to be publicly probated, but the dumbest villager could guess who owned the drugstore now. Certainly Mr. Hilton, "at the undertaker's," was no longer proprietor. As Elimira Johns was heard to declare, "I bet Melina's already painted the sign. Can you imagine it, after all that's happened? *Melina Angevine's Drug Store.* Looks like she's got his business after all."

That, too, was remembered.

IT WAS queer to go by the drugstore and see the blinds drawn and the door locked. Queerer still to see Melina, from across the street, staring over at the locked and darkened drugstore.

They said she stood there all that day, face expressionless, hands clenched. There was no business in the candy store, either.

Funny thing. That evening at dusk, Belle Angevine walked over and hung a wreath of black leaves on the doorknob of the drugstore. Elmira Johns saw her. But next morning the wreath had been removed.

Funnier than that, Mr. Binney, the florist, said that Belle had called up and ordered a big blanket of violets and a fifty-dollar "Gates Ajar" of roses and ferns sent

up to Seymore's. Ten minutes later Melina had called up and cancelled the order.

That was remembered, too.

Surely these were strange doings; little wonder the village thought there was something odd about it. One would have thought Melina at least would take charge of the funeral; the minister hadn't even been called. All Doc Trosch would say, when accosted, "He's still up at Seymore's!" glaring at his neighbors as if Mr. Hilton's obsequies were none of their business. Outraged ladies were heard to ask, "Ain't there no one willing to see the poor man gets a decent burial?"

I wanted to ask Pop a million questions, but his lips were shut like iron. Everybody seemed to be waiting for something. Alone of all the village, Belle Angevine went into mourning.

The second day, Belle was seen in black, heavily veiled, waiting in the doorway of the candy store. Waiting for the funeral? It had not been announced. And she was not there long.

People gathering, a little bewildered, at the corner of Maple and Walnut, expecting to see Mr. Hilton's body brought back, saw something else. Mr. Hilton's body did not come, and Belle collapsed. Flat in the doorway of the candy store Belle went down, and then Melina rushed out from somewhere in back and hustled her sister indoors.

They saw Belle carried into the kitchen; then Melina returned to drive them from the candy store entry. "Leave her be with her grief!" she said bluntly. "This has been too much for Belle."

If it had been too much for Melina, or if she was grieving either, she didn't show it. Brusquely she locked the door and pulled down the blinds, and once more the Angevine house was deaf and dumb. Once more it seemed that Belle was shut into a background, shelved away, deprived.

And that was not forgotten.

IT WAS that night I came on the empty bottle. A Hallowe'en moon, a black silhouette on a window blind, and a dare. "Dast you to put a ticktack on that kitchen window! That's Melina in there. You're afraid!"

"Who's afraid? Who's afraid of that old Melina! I been in that yard plenty of times! Here, gimme a boost over the fence—!"

I was terrified, but not too terrified to see the familiar waste barrel under the window; the brown, gill-sized medicine bottle sticking up out of the trash. Reminded of Belle's permission, I made quick salvage. This must have been fetched over from the drugstore. Now I had always wanted a bottle with one of these red skull-and-crossbones labels.

. . . Things were afoot in Four Corners, that I knew. My father hadn't been home for meals for two days. I hadn't heard Doc Trosch's car. People stood in little groups at post office and Clapp's store and lowered their voices when I went by.

Neighbors confabbed in yards with their heads together where yesterday they hailed from clotheslines. Nobody seemed to know when Mr. Hilton's funeral was going to be. Everybody knew he was still "up at Seymore's." I saw one of Pop's deputies hanging around the railroad station, but I knew better than to ask him why.

I remarked a growing pedestrian traffic on Maple Street where people peered at the two darkened storefronts, hurrying past the candy store, but apt to loiter on the drugstore side. I kept mum, obeying stern orders, even when Mrs. Armbruster called over to ask me, "Do you know when they're goin' to bury poor Mister Hilton? I asked Seymore and he says even he don't know."

Oddly enough, I didn't hear until afterward about the crank letter—my father was never certain about its author.

Pinned to the front door of the drugstore, it was addressed, *Attention Sheriff!*, and suggested, *Why don't you do something? Can't a man in this town have a decent burial? Maybe someone around here knows more about Hilton's death than Old Doc Trosch.*

The milkman, who found that letter

"right where the wreath had been," was less close-mouthed about it than my father. It joined the whisperings and excursions that seemed to quicken the wind in the November leaves.

Sensitive to this strange atmosphere, I was none the less unprepared for the storm which broke around me that Saturday morning when I returned from an errand and found my father ominously waiting for me in the hall.

"Step into my office, son!"

Then I was staring, dismayed, at the miscellany ranged on his rolltop desk. Smelling salts, perfumed soap, my copy of Ouida—

"Anna dug this stuff out of a box in your clothes-press. The book's not yours —that Cashmere soap—where'd you get it?"

"Pop, it is too mine. All those things. I found them in the Angevine's trash barrel. Last spring when Melina'd throw away everything Mr. Hilton brought over, and then Belle told me, herself, I could have anything I found in the—"

"This! It was in that box with the rest of this stuff! Where'd you find this!"

As he produced it from his pocket I would have made light of the little brown medicine bottle with the skull-and-crossbones label, but the sternness with which he regarded it frightened me.

"Why," I stammered, "Hallowe'en night —in the barrel behind the candy store— where I'd found those other things. I—I always wanted one of those skull-and-crossbones bottles from Mr. Hilton's. None of the other kids has one. Anna didn't have any right—"

The look on his face choked off my protest as he brushed me aside, grabbing for the phone.

"Daisy? Sheriff Whittier! Connect me with Doc Trosch, I don't care where he is! Yes, urgent! Put it through!"

A moment later I could hear the doctor's rasp in the receiver, something about measles. Father swore at the mouthpiece, "Hell with the measles! My kid picked up this bottle marked skull-and-crossbones in the Angevines' ash barrel night before last. Daisy, you get off th' line! Yeah, Doc! It's from Hilton's."

"What's that?" The doctor's voice came over the wire in a tiny shout. "The label —read the label."

"Arsenous," Father read, turning the bottle in his fingers. "A-r-s-e-n-o-u-s. Formula A-S, two, ought, three. I thought you'd know if—"

THE crackling receiver cut him off. Listening, Father looked grim. Then, speaking close to the phone, he said gruffly, "Looks like that settles it. Make the checkup at Seymore's soon as you can, and stand by. I'll want your findings. I've got the deputies out. Soon as I hear from them, I'll let you know. I'm waiting word from Albany now."

He was preoccupied, standing with the muzzled phone.

"Pop, what's it about that bottle—?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Who are you checking up at Seymore's?"

"Nobody. Take a chair, son. Tell you after lunch."

"But I promised Tiger Brown I'd go hunting—"

"Not today you won't. You've done" —his nod was unexpectedly laudatory—"a good piece of hunting as it is. I don't want you off around the village today, either. Sit down. There's your *Under Two Flags.*"

It was a long slow afternoon, enlivened only by my speculations. Long distance called, and I heard Pop telling somebody over the phone, "He'll come? Good! Drive him up here and get him here fast. Take him right up to Seymore's. Doc Trosch is waiting there."

Two o'clock it started to shower. I fiddled on tenterhooks throughout the afternoon while Pop moved restlessly about his office and looked out at the moody weather, growling, "This rain'll slow everything up!" A dingle from the telephone would bring him into action like a fireman answering an alarm, but the

call he wanted did not come until the lamps were lit and we were at supper.

"Okay!" I heard my father at the phone. "I'll get straight over there, doc. You and Seymore bring him fast as you can. No, no—keep him outside till I'm through talkin'."

Then I heard him phoning Mule Lickette and Jack Overlock, the second deputy. "I'll pick you up at the corner of Maple and Birch!"

Coming out of the office, he was pinning his star on the underside of his coat lapel.

"Get your cap, Bud. You're in this too."

"Where—where are we going?"

"Candy store, to call on the Angevines."

VII

ALREADY there was quite a crowd. Father used to say the biggest mystery he ever met with in Four Corners was the ability of rubbernecks to be on hand at a fire before the blaze even started.

That night, of course, it wasn't a fire, but something was going to happen and the onlookers were there. It was funny to see people congregated at the corner of Maple and Walnut, apparently waiting for Father and Mule and Overlock and me to arrive. Funny, too; the crowd was on the drugstore side, the pavement before the candy store was deserted; Melina Angevine, in full view at a pink and yellow window, posed motionless, solitary, staring out at the press across the way as if there'd been some accident there she couldn't see.

But she seemed to expect us; there was no surprise on her face as we entered her store. "Evening, Sheriff Whittier. Mule Lickette." Her tight nod included Overlock and me. "I didn't think you'd got my call."

"Call?" Father, removing his hat, looked at her.

She declared, "A minute ago. Your housekeeper said you'd gone out. I just phoned to ask you to move all those people crowdin' in front of the drugstore."

"We were on our way here," Father informed her gravely. "On our way here to see you, Melina."

Tall in her scratchy purple, she folded her arms on her chest and faced us stiffly. "What about?"

"It's about Mr. Hilton," Father said, glancing sideways at a shelf of candy canes, bottled licorice and skidoo balls. "Doc Trosch will be here from Seymore's in a moment." He moved his eyes. "Overlock, go ask Belle to come in from th' kitchen." Squarely at Melina: "I'm afraid we got to question you. You see, Doc Trosch has made some findings."

"The doctor made an autopsy?" That was a good word for my dictionary, of sinister import I was sure. Speaking, Melina had tinged a queerish color—although gaslight and blue ceiling had given us all an unhealthy cast—yet I can recall no break in her calm, then or afterward—even when Doc Trosch arrived with that awful pail.

He stomped in, muddy booted, just as the tall woman finished speaking and Overlock strolled from the kitchen, nibbling a taffy stick, to tell us Belle wasn't there.

Gaunt-faced Theodore Seymore came in at the doctor's heels, bringing half the village in with him. The candy store was airless with a close jostle of heavy-breathing humanity as Doc Trosch set his pail on the counter, nodded grouchily at Melina and grunted at Pop, "We brung him with us in Seymore's hack!" jerking his thumb to indicate the hearse outside at the curb.

Around me uneasy eyes were glancing at the black funeral wagon, and from that to the pail the doctor had set on the counter. Mule Lickette stretched an inquisitive hand toward the pail.

"Don't touch that bait bucket!" Doc Trosch snapped.

"Why, doc? What's in it?"

"Chocolates." Doc Trosch glared. "Six big rich chocolates stuffed with arsenic. Enough arsenic to kill every man and boy in this village."

Father said to Melina in a husky tone,

"My kid found the poison bottle in your ash barrel, Melina!" Overlock made a gagging sound, dropping the taffy stick, and the room seemed to surge around me. I heard Jonathan Sailor's voice shrill out, "She sent him that last box of chocolates he had!" and someone else cried, "Poisoned candy!" and a farmer at my elbow bawled, "She done it 'fore Hilton could cross her out of his will!" A big man near the door squalled, "She ought to be lynched!"

"Quiet!" Father thundered. "Any more yellin', I'll clear the store!" To the granite-faced figure in purple, "Melina, your neighbors here might as well hear anything you'd care at this time to say. Might save a heap of trouble if you'd talk, but you don't have to. Only we know the arsenic bottle was on your premises; you sent those chocolates to Hilton."

Melina said, low, "Ask the boy. I also sent over a note."

"Care to make public, now, what the note said?"

I THOUGHT for a moment she wouldn't, the defiant set of her chin. Then she said with an effort, "I told him I was sorry, the scene I'd made at church. I—I asked him to forgive me. I'd expected him maybe to stop over and see Belle, but he hadn't come. I asked him please to phone."

Father said, "I know. I went over yesterday and found the note where he'd thrown it in the fireplace. He called you up that night, eh?"

"Yes. We had a talk. He said he'd come over next morning."

Someone, jostling, shouted near the door, "As if she expected him to live long enough!" Johnathan Sailor shrilled, "He fell over right after he made that phone call!" A woman in the crowd screeched, "What you waiting for, Sheriff? You expect her to own up she poisoned poor Hilton?"

Father wheeled, enraged; but it was Doc Trosch who silenced the interrupters. Heightening himself on tiptoe to be heard, he bellowed, "Nobody poisoned Hilton!"

Melina, looking at the bait pail, whispered, "What—?"

Doc Trosch wagged his jowels. "He had a heart attack. Cardiac spasm just like I said."

Johnathan Sailor shrilled, "You just said those chocolates—"

"I said those chocolates are stuffed with arsenic. Enough arsenic to kill every man and boy in the village. I didn't say they killed Hilton. Man couldn't swallow down such a dose. This arsenic they poison with, it's diluted stuff; you got to give it piecemeal, little at a time or it's detected.

"Raw stuff in those chocolates, three grains would kill you, but you'd have to swallow the chocolate drop at a gulp or you'd die chewin' it. Nobody'd never live long enough to eat six. Hilton never ate these poisoned chocolates, an' I never said he did.

"All I said was the matter with him was a heart attack, like I diagnosed. Only way a man could have those six chocolates in his stomach would be for someone to stuff them down his throat with a wire after he was dead."

A silence soaked with reasty possibilities smothered us.

Doc Trosch glared. "I didn't say that's what happened. I said that's the only way these chocolates could've been in any man's stomach. Whoever mixed up that mess didn't know much about how to administer poison!"

Someone cried, "But, my God! What did happen?"

Father answered harshly, "It's plain enough. Someone tried to poison Hilton. It looks like Melina did."

The farmer near me snarled, "Then why don't you arrest her?"

Father rasped, "Because maybe she didn't. Maybe it was someone tryin' to make it look like Melina's handiwork. Someone who wanted to poison th' minds of the village and throw suspicion that'd send Melina to the chair."

I don't know who mentioned Belle's name, but suddenly it was in our hearing,

sharp and clear, and my father flung back, "I said *maybe!* On the other hand maybe not. There's been a lot of wrong conclusions going around, and after all, Melina'd publicly given up Mr. Hilton, so where'd her sister have any reason?" He checked himself, as if from thinking aloud; said to Melina quietly, "Where is Belle?"

The tall woman's lips were bleak. "Upstairs in her room."

"Overlock! Go up and bring her down!"

Melina said, backing before Overlock as he moved toward the hall-recessed stairs, "No. She can't come down. She's abed. Sick."

Overlock said, "Get out of my way."

They were at the foot of the stairs, Melina blocking the ascent like a figure in rock. "You can't go up. You won't be able to get in. I was afraid of that mob across the street, and that's why I locked her in—"

Father moved to thrust his deputy aside. "Give me the key, Melina! There's been quite enough of these mysteries!" Then everybody was crushing forward, flocking up the narrow stair-well, crowding into the upper hall behind Melina and my father.

I wasn't upstairs to see them open the door into the empty bedroom where the window was wide, November night blowing in through the curtains and a glimpse of moonlight and shed-roof beyond the sill.

I heard Melina cry, "She's gone!" and then, at the stair-bottom where I had stalled behind the rush, I was standing in a sudden gust of nightmare cold—a gust which had come from the street door like an icy breath.

Belle was there. In the store entrance. Her plump face white as wet baker's dough. Hair blowzy over dark-circled, frightening eyes. Her dress untidy, soot-streaked from black shingles, a rent at the knee where she must have torn herself on a nail.

I wailed, "Pop! Pop! Belle's here! Belle's down here!"

MEN came down on me, charging; Melina fighting her way through the crush to be first. But Pop and Doc Trosch were first to reach the woman who confronted us with that fearful gaze.

"Melina locked me in!"

"Belle! Belle!" Melina's face was like a tallow candle.

"Why'd you do it, Melina? I heard what they were saying down here. Why'd you give poor dead Stick Hilton that dose of poison?"

"You don't know what you're saying, Belle!"

She pushed a hand up through her snarled hair, glaring in a blind way at her older sister. "Oh, you're bad, Melina! All my life you've done things to me! You've kept me from having friends, forced me to stay in an' do all th' work, tried to turn my mind against sociables an' all the—"

"No, Belle! No! I've given my life for you! Tried to protect you—!"

"Do you hear that?" I could feel the packed crowd shudder under the circuit of the younger woman's stare. "That's what she's been telling me since I was a child. When she's bossed me! Driven me! You," she cried at Melina, "took Stick Hilton from me, too! Then when he turned on you at the last, you told him shocking things about me—lies—I heard you talking on the telephone—"

Melina whispered, "You heard—?"

"You tried to poison his mind toward me! Then—when you couldn't—you told him to eat that candy you'd sent—you wanted it to seem as if I'd poisoned him! Yes, you knew the village would think I did it! Because I make the candy! And you hate me! Hate me because he was more in love with me than he was with you! No, but I wouldn't be surprised if you tried to poison me, now! That gruel you made for supper—then told me to go upstairs and take a nap—I—just a few spoonfuls—but—"

Her words were blurring. Lips open, she paused, breathing heavily. Alarm dilated her eyes. "I—I did eat something! Doc-

tor!" She swayed, clutching at her dress-collar. "Doctor, I feel—! I'm—!"

My father tried to catch her. Her sleeve tore in his grasp, and she plunged through Doc Trosch's grabbing hands, turning on an ankle as she fell. Cold that swept over the candy store did not come from the door. Belle lay face up on the floor, limbs inflexible, face brittle as a china dish; her fists were gripped at her sides, teeth clamped, eyes staring through her hair like Death.

"Murder!" Someone aimed the word like a gunshot at Melina.

Doc Trosch was on his knees beside the stone-like body. He barked, "Somebody, quick! Run over to the drug store an' fetch some ammonia!"

Johnathan Sailor darted for the door, roughing Melina Angevine to one side. Mule Lickette grasped and held the tall woman by the arms while Doc Trosch spoke up at her, directly fixing her with his probing eyes.

"Melina, how long has this been going on?"

Melina Angevine's features dulled. She answered tonelessly, "Since she was seven. Mother asked me on her death-bed never to tell her—never to let anyone know—"

"That's why you'd never allow a doctor around!"

"The specialists couldn't do anything. Mother hated them. They said it would always be this way. Belle doesn't know—doesn't realize."

"They never do." Doc Trosch shook his head. "Just a blank. One of the strange things about it—up and generally all right a few minutes afterward. Last longer and more frequent as she got older?"

"I couldn't let her go out." Melina looked at the wall. "Excitements brought them on. My wedding day—and other times—Fourth of July—the other afternoon—"

My father asked, "She heard you? Telling Hilton on the phone?"

"Belle must have believed I was lying. For years I've had to lie," the tall woman said dully. "Keep up that pretense about hating doctors and disapproving of men and marriage and all. I couldn't have any friends. Belle couldn't have any. But when I fell in love with Stick Hilton, I—I should have told him then. Only I thought he'd find out after we were married, and then—at the church—when I saw he was really interested in Belle—well, I just had to tell him, that was all. It was all my fault—"

DOC TROSCH snapped, "It was your mother's fault, Melina. Her pride Not wanting anyone in the village to know her daughter was afflicted. Nobody ever should take seriously a death-bed promise." Scowling, the doctor addressed the hushed crowd. "It's a strange affliction, Belle's. Liable to take 'em any time. They never realize when they have these spells; Belle didn't even know she was subject to 'em. Melina can take it as a blessing Belle's getting toward the last." He felt the unconscious woman's pulse; scowled at the villagers. "Melina's mother made her promise never to tell. For years she's been hidin' from everybody, and Belle too, that Belle has these seizures. Belle's a cataleptic. It's worse than epilepsy. Belle, herself, doesn't know it when she has these fits."

Melina's voice was leaf-dry. "I should have told her long ago. She wouldn't have hated me. Wouldn't have thought I tried to rob her of her chances with Mr. Hilton. She hated me so much she wanted to poison Mr. Hilton—kill him and have me die as his murderer. Poor Mr. Hilton! He might still be alive—"

"Your mother put a brutal responsibility on you," Father said, placing a quiet hand on her arm. "Can you stand another shock, Melina?"

She straightened as if to face a blow. "What is it?"

My father said sideways, "Seymore, bring him in."

And that was the final climax—everybody turning to stare at that hearse out at the curb, then eyes widening, mouths jarring open, people going white, stunned. For the person who should have been the

occupant of Seymore's dreadful wagon was upright there in the candy store entry, standing where Belle had stood but a moment before, every bit as funereal of face and aspect; for all the world, the dead come back to life—

"Mr. Hilton!"

I was the one who wailed out his name; I know the villagers around me were too paralyzed for utterance, while Melina's lips slowly formed the name but made no sound.

HE WALKED in quietly, looked sadly down at Belle, then fixed eyes of sympathy on Melina's colorless face.

"I didn't want to do it, Melina. The Sheriff said I'd be subpoenaed if I didn't come willing. I wasn't going to say anything about the arsenic. That night you sent the chocolates over—well—it struck me kind of odd. I—I thought the candy looked sort of queer, so before callin' you up like you asked in your letter, I made a chemical analysis.

"Then when I phoned you and you told me about Belle, I figured she must've poisoned the candy, poor girl, but I wouldn't have said a word about it only to her. Except I had a heart attack after that phone conversation, and Doc Trosch, when he came, saw those chocolates I'd been analyzin' on the table."

Doc Trosch explained, "There was Hilton lyin' unconscious. There was that candy, and I spotted the arsenic straight off. How did I know Hilton hadn't eaten some? It looked like a heart attack, and I couldn't tell, but I had to make sure fast. Seymore's got a new stomach pump up at his place, an' mine's out of commission, so I yelled for Sailor and Coward to call the undertaker and go on home."

"I didn't like going to the undertaker's," Hilton protested.

"Best place for you," Doc Trosch insisted. "You were unconscious all the way there. After you revived, it seemed like a good place to keep under cover until the poisoner was discovered. Sheriff thought so, too." He snorted, "Anyway, I thought you were too sick to be moved."

"We'd have cleared this up that next day," my father pointed out. "But when you disappeared from Seymore's—"

"I ran away," Mr. Hilton said ruefully. "They put me to bed at Seymore's, and I ran away. I was afraid they might trace the poison to the candy store, Melina. I figured Belle must have taken it from the pharmacy that day we were all at the church. But nobody'd been murdered. I—I didn't want to appear against you or your sister on a charge of attempted homicide. I couldn't do that to you, Melina."

"We had to find him and fetch him back," my father growled. "For all we knew, he'd been killed and abducted from his room at Seymore's. Anyone tried to poison him, might keep on trying to murder him. My deputies learned a man had hooked a ride on the morning milk train, goin' south, but I had to find out and make sure. Better let the village think he was dead, and I could investigate the chocolates angle any time."

Melina Angevine said tonelessly, "I couldn't believe you were dead, Stick Hilton. I refused to believe it. I made Belle send back the flowers—"

"The sheriff traced me to Albany," Mr. Hilton told her, "and sent a man to bring me back this morning. He made me promise to keep out of sight until he talked with you. It's been terrible for you, Melina, and I'm glad I came back. Now that I know what's been the matter with poor Belle—"

Doc Trosch shook his head, doing what he could for the prostrate woman.

Belle dying, and Stick Hilton back among us, alive! It was hard to believe, that rain-darkened Saturday evening.

As we filed out of the candy store—we who were not needed—we saw Mr. Hilton at Melina Angevine's side, supporting her with a gallant arm. "I'm sorry, Melina," he said.

I know he spoke for everyone in the village.

By FRED MacISAAC

The exhausted prisoners stumbled on, prodded by the spears of the Araucanians

The Golden Woman

Begin now this exciting novel by the master of adventure fiction

IN THE manuscript of Robert Ames of Boston, uncovered by his grandson eighty years after it was written, a strange tale unfolds. For he was of the Company of Jason, that gallant band of young New England adventurers who set out for the California goldfields in 1850 on the bark *Golden Fleece*. . . .

Arrived at Pernambuco, the bark takes aboard the lovely Laura de Lorme, once morganatic wife of the King of Barnheim. Nearly all the young men are infatuated by her beauty and grace, most of all Enoch Stover and Ames himself. And since she spurns the lecherous captain of the *Golden Fleece* and seeks their company instead, the captain plots to revenge himself upon them.

The Company of Jason and Madame de Lorme go ashore on the wild coast of Patagonia off the Strait of Magellan, planning to hunt and rest while the bark awaits a wind. When the wind springs up, however, the captain sails away and leaves them stranded on the wild coast!

THE best shots of the group, Stover, Ames, Lawrence, Church and the surly but doughty Rankin, go hunting for wild game. They return to camp to find that their companions have been attacked by the fierce Patagonians. Several have been killed by the use of the bolas, the rest, including Laura de Lorme, carried off.

Stover and Ames, driven by their love for this beautiful woman of the world, are determined to rescue her. Rankin demurs, but eventually they set out upon the trail. Having avoided an armed band of Patagonians, they come to its village, occupied

This story began in last week's Argosy

now only by the women and children. They frighten these away, and they find there a Spanish lad named Garcia. He has been taken captive some time before, tells them that their surviving companions were brought to the village but were then taken on to the westward to the village of the head chief.

With the boy as guide, they set out toward the mountain peaks he has pointed out as their landmark.

They have not gone far when they see, riding toward them to attack, a band of fifty Patagonian horsemen. Some have swords and others their bolas. They are a fearsome sight as they sweep toward the little company.

"Remember," Stover, the leader, calls, "we can't waste a bullet. Let them come close enough to be certain targets."

The remainder of Robert Ames' Journal follows. . . .

CHAPTER VII

BATTLE AT THE RIVER

AFTER ten minutes of agonized waiting the dismounted savages climbed into their saddles. Shouts ran from man to man, and those who had swords brandished their blades in the sun. The rest unloosed their bolas and swung them tentatively.

No parleys. No summons to surrender. They closed up like a troop of European cavalry, and then, with horrid shouts, they spurred their horses and rode at us boldly. They came on at breakneck speed and they only had three or four hundred yards of ground to cross. My finger itched to pull trigger and I restrained myself with difficulty.

"Wait, Church," shouted Stover, for my friend was taking aim.

They were halfway now. Great giants of wild men, yelling at the tops of their lungs, riding only two or three feet apart.

"Now," cried Stover.

Five needle guns thundered. Two men fell out of their saddles and a horse was down. Some of the rest drew rein; but the majority remembering their success of the previous afternoon, rode on with triumphant whoops.

The Spanish boy's gun went off without effect. We others had picked up our second weapon and taken aim.

Fifty yards.

Like a volley from trained troops our five weapons spoke. Four men fell from their horses. They were trampled by the hoofs of the following horses.

That second volley must have astounded them. What scant discipline they had was dissipated. Although they would have found us defenseless, when fifty or sixty feet away, the charge broke up. Turning their horses, they galloped madly far out of range.

We had accounted for six of them—a trifling loss to brave soldiers, but apparently a disaster to these giant poltroons. Shouting hysterically, we began to reload. In a couple of minutes each of us again had two weapons ready.

The Spanish boy had forgotten to fire his second rifle, but he was on his feet shaking his fists and hurling Spanish oaths at the retreating barbarians. Stover pulled him down and showed him how to eject the spent cartridge and replace it, in the needle gun, with a good one.

At a safe distance, again the leaders among our attackers dismounted and huddled together. Their argument lasted a quarter of an hour. Finally they appeared to call a general council of war. The entire party put their heads together.

After a time, while we were anxiously awaiting their decision, all remounted and rode off to our right. We watched them cross the stream and assemble upon the opposite bank. Then they made a wide detour and approached from that direction.

"The idiots!" Stover exclaimed. "What good will it do them to attack from that side? All we have to do is to shift to the other bank."

Apparently the notion of a simultaneous attack from front and rear had not occurred to them, or, if it had, they had been afraid to divide their forces. Perhaps the chief knew that the party not directly under his eye would not do its part in the battle.

We ran down the bank. The stream was

only twenty feet wide and not more than a foot deep at its deepest part, and we crossed it on the run. Too excited to mind wet feet and legs, we stationed ourselves upon the opposite bank.

"The same tactics," said Stover. "They worked before; they must work again."

Now the savages set up a yelling and, spreading out in a long line instead of charging in a mob as before, galloped toward us.

I presume, even to a soldier, there is nothing so fearsome as a charge of horsemen upon dismounted men whose only hope of life is the accuracy of their shooting. Again I trembled in every limb at the terrifying sight; but my aim was steady and my finger, upon the trigger, firm.

At sixty yards we gave it to them. We dropped three, but they did not falter. A second volley at forty yards emptied three more saddles. At that, the line directly in front of us broke and fled—but a dozen riders on our right came on. In front was the fellow who had visited our camp. He held a sword in his left hand and swung a bolas with his right.

There was no time to reload. I was sure that the end was at hand. I grasped one of the guns by the barrel and prepared to hit with the butt end of it.

It was Enoch Stover who saved us.

He had forbidden the Spanish boy to fire. Now he seized one of the boy's loaded guns and fired it at the huge chief. The bullet struck the savage full in the chest and he slid off his horse. The others pulled up, some so quickly that they drew the forefeet of their mounts into the air.

Stover picked up the second gun and shot another Indian through the head.

It was enough. Though now within thirty feet of us, the entire mob turned tail and galloped wildly across the plain. They had left behind them eight dead and wounded men in front of our natural entrenchment.

"Reload," Stover commanded. "They'll be back."

In that he was mistaken. The enemy did not slacken pace until they were a mile from the battlefield. At the top of a ridge, they drew together and stood watching us. No doubt they were wondering how to succor their dead and wounded.

"I suggest," I said, "that we take advantage of this lull and remove the knives and swords from the dead Indians. They may come in handy."

We did that. We secured three swords and two sabres of Spanish workmanship, and six sheath-knives with blades six inches long of English steel. We offered water to the wounded men, after disarming them.

Attached to the saddle of the only horse which had fallen in the fray we found a skin half-filled with water. Stover declared it to be the prize among the spoils. We emptied it, filled it with fresh water and attached it to the saddle of one of our own horses. These had wandered downstream a short distance and we drove them back.

FOR an hour we waited for a new attack. It did not come. At the end of that time the Indians made a very wide detour and disappeared in the direction from which, originally, they had come. Only then were we able to draw an easy breath and discuss our own course of procedure.

"We must go on," said Stover. "I am aware they will have us at a disadvantage if they attack us in the open plain, but our purpose, after all, is to rescue Madame and the Jasonians. We cannot serve them if we remain here. There is a possibility that the loss of the big fellow out there, who had more courage than any of them, and must have been the chief, will have disheartened them and they have given up the attempt to capture or exterminate us."

Church nodded. "After all," he said, "they have lost fourteen men out of fifty. That's a big percentage of battle loss and these dogs don't seem to have too much courage. If each man had not been afraid of his own skin, they would have wiped us out. They may have given up."

"It is much more likely that they will hang on our flanks and make a night rush,"

I stated, "but I agree with Enoch that we must push on despite any contingency."

"I also," declared Rankin. "We're better off than we were. I can use a sword fairly well. We have something, now, with which to fight at close quarters." Sourly, he added, "No doubt they will cut our throats tonight, but it will all be the same in a hundred years."

"Rankin," said Lawrence dryly, "I hope they cut yours first. Let's be on our way."

We mounted and proceeded, keeping a sharp watch behind for the enemy. At the end of half an hour we were crossing very dry parched pampas, the long grass of which was almost as yellow as hay. With no sign of the natives for this length of time, it was reasonable to suppose that we were rid of them. We were mistaken.

The whole troop came suddenly into view in our rear, away over at our right and a couple of miles distant. We counted thirty-eight of the black dots which were men on horseback. The Spanish boy began to whimper and to wail that they would surely kill him for joining us. Stover gruffly told him to be silent.

"There is naught for it but to lie down in the grass," he said. "If we form a square of our horses and fight behind them, we offer them an opportunity to use their bolas. Speaking for myself, I would rather be slain with a sword."

We dismounted and looked to our weapons. Then, suddenly, there occurred to me a device of which I had read in Fenimore Cooper.

"The wind is strong and blowing from us to them," I said. "We have lucifers. Let us spread out and see if we can ignite the grass."

"And be consumed in fire ourselves," sneered Rankin.

"No, no," said Stover. "The wind will blow the fire away from us. We must light it over a wide space. A splendid idea."

We began our incendiary work immediately. The dry grass caught readily and the wind caused it to spread. We started fires over several hundred yards of space, and in no time the whole plain behind us was aflame and clouds of smoke were rolling skyward.

We mounted our horses then and rode off as rapidly as possible, delighted to see that the fire front was extending and was already a quarter of a mile wide. I had used, however, most of my matches and the victory was achieved at serious cost.

CHURCH rode at my right hand. The dour Rankin, who had been in the rear, now drew up alongside of me.

"Look at that madman," he remarked in his sneering manner. "No doubt he pictures himself as Lancelot riding to rescue an imperiled lady."

"Which, after all, is what we are doing," I answered.

"Yes," he admitted. "But he thinks we shall succeed."

"And why not?" I asked. "Things were desperate enough a few miles back. Look at that mighty conflagration. I expect it will dispose of our enemies."

"Those, yes," he agreed. "But it can be seen for a tremendous distance. In all probability it will draw toward us another force of savages."

I gazed long at the dark-visaged man. His black eyes sparkled in a mocking manner.

"One would think," I said sharply, "that you were hopeful of such a calamity."

He laughed. "I have a head to think with," he replied, "which is more than Stover yonder. Ames, you've more sense than he. It was your notion to fire the grass. Another charge would have finished us."

Church, who heard this, leaned forward. "Rankin," he said, "are you trying to breed dissension among us? You had your choice of remaining on the beach or joining us in our enterprise."

"Hobson's choice," Rankin retorted with a shrug. "Death lies in either direction, and, by banding together, we may delay it a day or two. I'll fight as long as either of you but my opinions will always be expressed freely. I say the fire will raise up a multitude of savages in our front."

"It's likely," I admitted, "but we must take the chance."

"There might be time to reach the beach," he insinuated. "A wide swing to the south. Let that madman pursue his golden-haired goddess by himself."

My anger rose but I suppressed it. While this fellow lacked chivalry he had proved himself a doughty fighter and we could ill afford to lose him.

"Our companions and the lady need us, Rankin," I told him. "You're free to leave us, but Church and myself and Lawrence follow Stover. As you have just said, death probably waits us in either direction."

"Ames, you're infatuated with the woman," he retorted. "Don't you realize that, if we should achieve her rescue, it's Stover who will receive her gratitude?"

"And he will deserve it," I said warmly. "And it's not the lady alone. Our companions—"

"Lost by their own stupidity," he finished. "Well, I've had my say. Remember it when the Patagonians are cutting your throat."

I kicked the sides of my horse and caused him to leap forward. In a few moments I drew rein beside Stover.

"I'm afraid we'll have trouble with Rankin," I told him. "The brute has no heart for this expedition."

Stover laughed gaily. "Willy nilly he must accompany us and fight with us for his life. Let him grumble. It seems to me that the more we ride, the more distant appears that gap in the mountains."

"He said one sensible thing, that the conflagration may attract other savages."

"If so, we shall beat them off," he said confidently. "She is not destined to be the slave of a savage chief, Ames. Something tells me that we shall rescue her and our friends."

"I trust you are told aright," I replied dubiously. Still, I was heartened by his confidence.

Stover conversed in Spanish with the lad while I rode close by in silence. I occasionally glanced back. There was a streak of black now which must have been a mile in breadth where the grass had been burned over, and beyond was a very wide line of fire above which rose a mighty smoke barrier between us and our pursuers. They must now be riding madly in the other direction ahead of the flames.

Rankin, thirty yards behind, was conversing earnestly with Church and Lawrence who had ridden up from the rear. That did not trouble me, because Lawrence was a stout fellow and a man of high principle. Rankin would have to desert alone and he wouldn't do that.

We saw no evidence of savages in front or on our flanks as we plodded steadily toward the ever-receding mountains. The vastness and desolation of the plain beggars description and, since leaving the stream which had been our refuge, we had seen no indication of water. This caused me growing uneasiness. I spoke to Stover.

"We shall find streams in the foothills," he said hopefully. "We must, however, camp for the night. Since, as Rankin said, we might wander many miles in the wrong direction when darkness conceals our landmark."

I agreed with some relief. I was saddle weary to a horrible degree.

CHAPTER VIII

WATER!

IT WAS not until the gray-brown hills had turned violet and then faded into nothingness that our leader gave the order to dismount. As a fire might draw the savages upon us we lay in darkness. Presently we heard a sound like the baying of wolves which caused us to huddle close. It was not for several days that we learned that these nocturnal noisemakers were a species of wild dogs similar to the coyote of the western plains of North America.

The stars were very bright but there was no moon. There was a vast hush over the great plain, broken occasionally by the barking of which I have spoken. At first, forgetting that we were alone in a treeless wilderness, we talked in whispers.

Church mentioned a wild tale from one of the sailors of the *Golden Fleece* regarding the presence in Patagonia of dragons as well as giants, and this caused Lawrence to start talking.

Lawrence was a man of good family, had been a school teacher in Boston, and was a person of much reserve. During the voyage I had talked with him less than with any others of the company.

"Darwin, who visited this country," he said, "declares that fossils of prehistoric animals have been found here—but set your minds at rest regarding dragons. The puma is the most ferocious beast but, from our point of view, the savages are most dangerous."

"Then something is known of this country?" asked Stover. "I believed it to be terra incognita."

"To all intents and purposes it is. One or two scientific expeditions, well armed, have landed, moved along the shore of the Strait and traveled a few miles into the interior. Save the interior of Africa, it is probable that no land is less known than this. If we survive we shall have more to reveal regarding it than Mr. Darwin dreams of."

"I would that we were well out of it," remarked Rankin. "There is still a chance to retreat, Stover. Every mile inland makes our death the more certain."

"If there were bridges to burn, I would burn them," Stover declared loudly and clearly. "No matter how great the odds, we shall persevere."

"As I told you this afternoon," said Lawrence to Rankin, "I suspect the savage tribes haunt the beach in hope of booty from wrecked ships. I agree with you that our quest is almost hopeless, that, if we should succeed in rescuing our companions, the prospects of reaching civilization in this region of vast distances is slight. After a few engagements wth the Indians we shall be without ammunition and they will make short work of us. But on the sea front our fate would be as certain."

Privately I was of their opinion. Nevertheless I said testily to Lawrence:

"You're as great a croaker as Rankin. Just now we are very much alive and I'm going to eat some of this cooked meat."

"Eat very sparingly," warned our leader. "We need our bullets for the natives. Who knows when we shall be able to replenish our provisions?"

We munched the cold meat and took a few swallows of water. After that Stover arranged watches, taking the first himself. We others turned up our coat collars, bitterly regretting our lack of winter flannels for the temperature was not far above the freezing point, and endeavored to compose ourselves to slumber.

I lay awake for some time, gazing up at the stars and considering how fate and the dastardly captain of the bark had played me this trick. In California was gold to be picked up upon the banks of any stream, but California was seven thousand miles distant. It was improbable that our relatives in Boston would ever learn our fate. I wondered if these savages tortured captives at the stake like North American Indians.

Then, strangely, I sank into a dreamless sleep.

A couple of hours before dawn Rankin called me to my watch. The stillness at that hour was oppressive. There were no more nocturnal cries, and I heard only an occasional whinney from our hobbled horses. It was bitter cold and I was chilled to the bone. I would have given all the California gold which I did not possess for a drink of hot coffee.

I was dozing when Stover's hand was laid on my shoulder. It was broad daylight. I had been asleep on post. He squeezed my shoulder kindly and said nothing.

A few mouthfuls of meat, a sip of brackish water and we climbed on our nags. The base of my spine was numb and my rump was badly chafed but I knew better than to complain.

BY THE end of that day we had consumed the last of our meat and drunk the last of our water. We slept again upon the great plain, kept careful

watch, and in the morning, resumed our journey breakfastless. Even Stover was depressed. The gap in the mountains seemed as distant as ever and the pampas endless and minus food and water, there was no likelihood of our long survival. Perhaps our destruction by the savages would be merciful.

Our horses, hardy beasts, were suffering from thirst. Our only hope was rain. Rankin, in this situation, curiously kept his silence; but it was a dismal little company which, late that afternoon, ascended a gradual slope which appeared to be conducting us to a table-land even more barren than the country over which we had traveled.

It must be remembered that, save for Rankin, who had been a sailor at one time and later a blacksmith in Boston, and the Spanish youth, we were men with no experience of hardship; to whom life in the open was unfamiliar and who had undue dependence upon food and drink. Nor did we yearn to lay down our lives for any cause whatsoever. Our mental state, therefore, is not hard to imagine.

The gap in the mountains which Lawrence had stated to be the Southern Andes was almost due west from the native camp where we had found the Spanish boy. This we knew from the sun. Riding across flat country there were no detours and our landmark was always in view. We came at last to the top of a slope, never losing sight of the mountains, and found ourselves upon another vast expanse of flatness. There was a glad shout from Stover, who as usual was in the lead.

"Water," he cried hoarsely. "A river!"

We galloped up beside him. Many miles ahead we saw a gleaming silver streak, beyond which were high hills.

Delight filled my heart. I shouted to Rankin, "What now, Killjoy?"

Alas it was Lawrence, good man, who killed our joy.

"Water, true," he said. "I suspect, however, that it is the Strait of Magellan we see. And the mountains beyond are upon Tierra Del Fuego."

Stover turned on him, almost angrily. "Impossible," he cried. "We have traveled sixty or seventy miles toward the mountains and away from the sea. How can this be the Strait?"

"We were only a few miles from the shore when we started west," said Lawrence. "The Strait has cut in toward us, no doubt. That cannot be a river. To be visible from this distance it must be at least a mile in width."

"You have your wish, Rankin," I said. "We are back at the beach."

"But we go on," shouted Stover. His hand pointed away from the water, toward the gap in the mountains.

I laid my hand on his arm. "Let's be reasonable, friend," I said. "Rivers empty into the sea. Animals keep close to them."

"And savages," he retorted.

"We haven't turned back, my dear fellow," I replied. "The sea has been accompanying us. A few miles out of our way and we secure water and food. Two days more without them and we shall be dead men and Madame Laura will sigh in vain for rescue."

"In a few days we may sight a ship," said Rankin eagerly. "We can obtain supplies, powder; perhaps we may persuade them to join us in the hunt for the lady."

Lawrence's was the deciding voice. "There is no choice, Stover," he said firmly. "We are in desperate straits."

Stover eyed us suspiciously. "An oath, then, that we shall not abandon our quest?" he demanded.

I lifted my right hand. "I give it."

"And I," said Lawrence. "I also," declared Church.

"And I'll do as my judgment tells me according to circumstances," said Rankin gruffly. "If there seems a chance, I'm with you. Otherwise, I go it alone."

STOVER, a look of contempt upon his handsome face, said no more but turned his horse toward the Strait. It must have been at the least ten miles distant. We followed eagerly.

Hardly had we gone two miles when the

wisdom of our decision was justified. We came upon a depression in the plain, at the bottom of which was a small pond of water.

Our horses had been aware of it before we observed it and had needed no urging to hasten. In a few minutes both horses and men were at the brink, drinking greedily. The water had a brackish taste but it was drinkable.

I rose first after refreshing myself and moved about a bit to exercise my legs. About the pool was a growth of bush. Here I made our second happy discovery. Almost concealed by the bushes lay a huge bird, dead.

It was an ostrich. One of its long legs twitched as I bent over it. The creature had evidently been struck by a bolas. It had failed to break its neck, but one of its heavy stones had dealt it a mortal blow in the breast. The ostrich had escaped the hunters, crawled to this bit of water and laid down to die. And it was hardly dead. As the savages hunted the bird, obviously it must be good to eat.

I called the others. Their relief at the sight of food was boundless.

As the pool was in a deep depression, we risked a fire. The creature, when upright, must have been as tall as a man and upon it there was surely forty pounds of meat. We broiled pieces of the fowl over the fire. It was not like our New England turkey but, in our starved condition, it seemed delicious.

Our horses also refreshed themselves upon the coarse grass which grew close to the pond. The pond was obviously a collection of rainwater, which indicated that rain was heavy and frequent though we had had none since landing.

It is curious how food and drink changes one's attitude. As we lay luxuriously upon our backs, our prospects seemed not nearly so hopeless as they had been. While I privately believed that it was most unlikely we could effect the rescue of our friends, assuming that we ever located them, I was no longer despondent. Heaven apparently was guiding our steps.

"Well," said Rankin with one of his mocking grins. "We have food and water. We have to fear, for the present, only the savages who undoubtedly are in the vicinity and thick as flies. The ostrich could not have fled far."

"An ostrich, Rankin," stated Lawrence, "can run twice as fast as the most fleet railway train. I have heard, though it sounds incredible, that these birds travel sixty miles per hour."

"Tosh," said Rankin. "They would be burned up by friction of the air at such a speed."

"Since birds fly through the air much faster," put in Stover, "you must be in error."

"It's not unlikely," Lawrence asserted, "that the ostrich was wounded fifty miles from this place."

Our leader rose reluctantly from the ground. "It's time to be on," he declared. "Let us fill the water skin, and dispose of as much of the meat as possible in our pockets and on our saddles. It is quite likely that there are native villages close to the shore and we shall keep inland and continue toward the gap in the mountain."

"So long as we also keep in sight of the Strait, I agree," said Rankin.

In half an hour we were under way, the Spanish boy still munching upon a portion of ostrich. Night overtook us some fifteen miles further along. We camped in a cleft in the plain, made a fire of dry grass and a few twigs we found there, toasted our ostrich meat to warm it, sipped the water and prepared for slumber.

CHAPTER IX

TAUNT FROM THE SEA

WE WENT to sleep that night with an assurance we had not felt since the day we returned to camp to find all our friends slaughtered or taken captive. Even the sharp barbs of Rankin's words had been dulled by our find of food and water. The less gloomy among us even felt some hope that our quest might really succeed. But before the next day was well

begun, we were destined to see those hopes rudely shattered.

Just before dawn Stover awakened me. There was a worried look upon his face.

"Sickness among us," he said. "The boy Garcia. His moanings awakened me."

I went over with Stover to the boy's side. His face was flushed with fever, and he tossed in his sleep.

I looked gloomily at Stover. "I have no medical knowledge," I said.

"Nor I. Plainly the rigors of our expedition, coupled with his past captivity, have proven too much for him."

Rankin, when awakened, oddly enough proved more useful than the rest of us. With some of the ostrich meat, he brewed a hot broth and pressed it between the boy's lips. The lad seemed then to rest more easily.

It was Stover now who seemed most ready to abandon our quest for the moment, to await here the boy's recovery. Rankin dissuaded him.

"If we stay here and hunt for food as we must," he said, "the savages are certain to find us. We must keep moving. We'll have to carry the boy."

And so it was decided. After our breakfast, we mounted and headed toward the mountains. We took turns in carrying the boy as we rode. The illness of young Garcia, our only guide in this desolate land, depressed us all. For two hours we proceeded at a gentle pace, saying nothing, feeling even more hopeless than the previous day before we had discovered water.

Then Lawrence, ever on the alert, drew rein. "I say, Stover," he shouted, "come back here."

Stover, who had been riding with head bent, turned toward us.

"Look," commanded Lawrence. He waved a hand toward the west. The Strait had curved until it was directly in front of us, a wide stretch of sea water, now, and beyond it high mountains.

"Isn't that our landmark?" asked Lawrence, pointing toward the split in the mountain which we had followed so assiduously.

"Aye. Of course."

"Your gap, then," Lawrence said, "is across the Strait and upon the island of Tierra del Fuego."

The expression upon the face of Stover was pitiful.

"Mayhap the Strait swings back," he mumbled. "It may still be upon the mainland."

Lawrence shook his head. "Beyond question those mountains are upon the island," he declared.

I felt like striking Rankin for his coarse laugh. My own zeal to penetrate the interior had cooled; I could not keep at white heat my desire to lay down my life for my friends; yet my disappointment now was almost as keen as Stover's.

"The boy lied," said Stover mournfully.

Rankin laughed again. "Obviously. And then fell ill at a convenient time to avoid questioning."

"Not necessarily," objected Lawrence. "From our starting point the mountains seemed upon the mainland. I was sure they marked the boundary of Chile and the Argentine. The party with the captives may have left the village in that direction, and the boy supposed they continued thus. But one thing is certain: The head chief of the Patagonians wouldn't reside in Tierra del Fuego."

I agreed with Lawrence. In any event, it was useless to question young Garcia; he had been alternating for the past hour between fevered sleep and delirium. I pitied Stover from the bottom of my heart.

"The situation is," I said to him, "that the village to which Madame Laura has been taken may be at any point of the compass. A strong, well-equipped expedition might hunt a year and never find it. What are we going to do?"

Stover hesitated, but only for a moment. "Obtain a guide," he answered slowly and thoughtfully. "We must capture a savage and force him to lead us to the stronghold of the High Chief."

I heard a sardonic chuckle from Rankin. Stover threw upon him a furious look.

"In the meantime," said Lawrence, "I

suggest that we make for the beach, locate in as strong a position as we can find, wait for a ship and signal her. A moment, Stover. . . . We shall bear in mind the necessity of going to the assistance of our friends and the lady—we shall refuse passage from a passing vessel but persuade them to equip us. We all have some funds. These needle guns may appeal to the cupidity of the captain. Let us swap them for muskets and plenty of powder and bullets. When our limited supply of cartridges are gone, these weapons are useless. It is possible that in the village of the high chief, assuming we penetrate there, we may find ammunition waiting to be captured."

Stover reached toward him with outstretched hand.

"You should be our leader," he declared. "I resign in your favor."

And so it was settled temporarily to abandon the search for the lovely, alluring lady and the companions of Jason. We moved steadily toward the stretch of gray water, coming, after some hours, to a downward slope. We followed it and continued upon the lower plane.

We debouched at last, as the sun was setting, upon a stern and rocky shore with no sign of a stream of fresh water. Pushing southward as near to the salt sea as we could get we stumbled finally, in the dusk, upon a small pool in a nest of rocks. Here we thankfully made our camp.

DURING the night we stood watch in turn, and it was mine to take that between darkness and dawn. I sat on a rock gazing mournfully at the Strait. Black and gloomy loomed the mountains of Tierra del Fuego. Nothing was known of that vast island except fables. In its interior was supposed to be a region of eternal fires. Shipwrecked sailors told tales of monsters, great beasts with mouths like crocodiles and with scales and wings, which came out of the fires and devoured unfortunate humans. It was said that there were real giants on that island. While I scouted most of these tales, I must admit that the island was fearsome as it hove into view in the dawning.

Shuddering, I turned my head toward the east, following the widening Strait. My heart thumped madly and I gasped for breath. There, black against the red ball of the sun, was a full-rigged ship under full sail with a spanking breeze behind her! She was many miles away but she was coming toward us. Rescue! And California bound, no doubt . . .

And then I remembered Madame Laura, how beautiful she was, how sweet, how unfortunate. I remembered the lads to whom I was bound by a covenant. There was the rescue ship and transportation to the land of gold. Rankin would go, no doubt, Lawrence perhaps, but Stover, Church and I must remain in this hellish country and keep the faith.

I roused the others. We gazed yearningly at the stately ship on which were many of our countrymen. This had no thieving coward of a skipper like the *Golden Fleece*. This skipper was already many miles inside the Strait and bound through.

In an hour she was within a mile of us, holding a course which would cause her to pass only a quarter of a mile from shore. We clambered upon a pile of rocks which jutted into the water. In fifteen minutes she was almost abreast of us.

Stover pulled off his coat and waved it in the air. We were jumping and capering and screaming with delight. We could discern figures on her deck—many figures. We saw the captain on his quarterdeck, regarding us through a telescope, and the man who stood at the wheel.

She was abreast of us. Almost within earshot. We screamed at the top of our lungs. People at the rail waved their hands to us. But the captain gave no indication of being concerned at our distress, though obviously, we were white men, not savages. No sailors leaped into the rigging to shorten sail. She held on a steady course.

I picked up my gun and fired it. In the still air it sounded like the report of a carronade. No response.

God in heaven—she was past!

"Look," cried Rankin hoarsely, "look."

A sailor had leaped into the shrouds. The ship was so close we could see what he was doing. He was thumbing his nose at us in a gesture of derision.

With an oath, Rankin lifted gun to shoulder and fired. The bullet, of course, fell far short.

And then we saw her stern, her name almost readable. And her great square sails bellied in the fresh breeze and, at ten knots an hour, she abandoned us.

Our despair needs no description. Rankin cursed furiously and picturesquely. Stover sank on a rock and buried his face in his hands. Tears were streaming down my cheeks, as much from rage as disappointment. Lawrence turned his back to the sea and stood with shoulders hunched, head downcast and arms folded.

It was a Yankee ship manned by our own countrymen and their behavior was incomprehensible to us. Long afterwards, though, I understood.

A fair breeze is rare in the Strait. The experienced captains who obtain one endeavor to take full advantage of it. To have stopped the ship would have been to lose vital hours. At any moment a gale might arise which would hurl a ship caught in these narrows upon the rocks. A humane skipper, of course, would have taken that risk. However, there were other reasons for ignoring signals from the shore. Savages concealed behind rocks had been known to force white captives to make signs of distress upon the beach. When a boat was sent for them, the brutes massacred one and all and made off with whatever was valuable in the possession of their victims. When fresh water was needed, in fact, the boats went heavily armed while the ship stood in and covered the landing party with cannon. Such were conditions, then unknown to us, on the Patagonian shore.

The ship finally was out of view and we gazed at one another at a loss as to our next move. The movement, however, was not in our hands. I heard a gasp from Rankin. I whirled to see him pointing.

Sitting on their horses, one hundred yards distant, were two huge figures with flowing long hair. One of them, realizing that he was seen, lifted both hands skyward. With an angry ejaculation Stover discharged a gun in his direction. The horsemen wheeled and galloped off at top speed.

"The shots we fired notified them of our presence," said Lawrence. "No doubt they were lying low in the hope that the ship might send a landing party. I expect that this is the end of us."

CHAPTER X

THE ARAUCANIAN

IT IS useless for me to write in detail of the days that followed immediately after the ship ignored our signals. We were attacked that same day by the savages, as Lawrence had predicted. We drove them off, but at fearful cost. At the end both Lawrence, in many ways the stoutest of our band, and my dear friend Church lay dead with spears in their breasts.

When we had buried our dead, even Rankin admitted the folly of staying on the coast. Ere any ship whose captain would pick us up should sail through the Strait, we were certain to be attacked again by a band of savages too large to withstand. So, dispirited and sick, we fled inland. Only Stover still kept a little hope, and it was he who insisted that we ride to the north and west, whence he thought lay the giant Andes. I knew then that even in our direst extremity he had not given up the thought of rescuing the lovely Laura.

After a week the Spanish boy, ironically enough, recovered. He was frightened when Rankin accused him of leading us astray, and it was plain that he had not meant to do so. But what little knowledge of the country he possessed added strength to Stover's argument that to the northwest lay the land we sought and our only hope of salvation.

For days more we rode on, keeping alive as best we could. We must hoard our car-

tridges, since we had barely more than two hundred left; yet we must eat. We must build cooking fires, yet once we had done so, we were in danger for hours thereafter of attack by the savages.

Thus, weary with our hopeless quest, we came at noon one day to a river far up in the shadow of the Andes. Here the river was too deep to cross, and we turned upstream.

When we had followed the river for an hour or more Stover, in the lead, called out to us excitedly. We hastened up to join him.

"See," he said. "A ford across the stream. And much used. No doubt it is the trail the savages take to the place we seek."

"No doubt," growled Rankin, "it's a well-traveled trail that will put us in constant peril if we follow it."

New hope had risen in me, and I knew that Stover was again as eager as at the beginning of our search. "We can do no worse than follow it," I said sharply.

Soon after, we were congratulating ourselves that we had done so. We had just crossed the river when a sound came to us from the brush to our right. It was the sound of a human in pain.

There in the brush where he had dragged himself, we found an Indian. His leg was broken and he seemed half dead from starvation. This savage was far different than the giant Patagonians. He was not much darker than a Spaniard. In his thick black hair was stuck a scarlet feather and his hair was shorter than the hair of the giants. His body was clean, his features straight and clean-cut. He wore the skins, not of a guanaco but of the mountain lion. On his back hung a bow and quiver filled with arrows, while strapped to his side was a Spanish longsword.

Had he been a Patagonian, I am not sure that we might not have passed by. As it was, we dismounted and gave him food and drink. Then Rankin, who as a seaman of experience knew how to set a broken bone, went to work. The Indian endured frightful pain in the process, but like a stoic he did not utter a cry.

When his leg had been set he smiled, showing fine white teeth. *"Muchas gracias, señores,"* he said.

WITH a shout, Garcia rushed to him and overwhelmed him with questions in the Spanish tongue. Stover drew close and listened intently.

At length Stover translated to us. "This follow says he is an Araucanian, whose nation lives across the mountains. While carrying a message from his chief to a Patagonian chief, he was ambushed by Patagonians. He escaped but his horse later tripped and fell suddenly and he broke his leg. The horse wandered off and he has been here since yesterday. He asks us to leave him food and a horse and, when he recovers enough to ride, he will return home."

Then Stover eagerly questioned the Indian further. The conversation lasted for some minutes and when Enoch turned to us he was much excited.

"Good news!" he exclaimed. "Wonderful news. Within two days' journey from here is an abandoned Spanish settlement in which the High Chief of the Patagonians has settled down. Now it seems that across the mountains is a White Chief who is in communication with him. He pays a pound of silver for each white captive brought to this place by the Patagonians. With the pound of silver the Indian on this side purchases from Spanish ranchers far to the north ten horses and gives in payment to the Patagonians two horses for each captive. A strange transaction, is it not."

"Silver, eh?" demanded Rankin. "Well, next to gold, give me silver."

"Then Madame Laura," I exclaimed, "is in this village only a day's journey."

"No," replied Stover. "Some days since she was sent across the mountains with six white men."

"Only six? How about the others?"

"He doesn't know. He only knows that among these prisoners was a snow-white lady with hair like the sun. He—he says she was well."

"This Indian will have to guide us to

the man who buys human beings with pounds of silver," I declared. "Ask him if he's willing."

He put the question. The latter smiled strangely. "If you will let me rest a few days, I shall guide you," he replied.

We set to work at once to pitch camp beside the trail. Stover was beside himself with joy. He grasped both my hands. "She is alive and well!" he exclaimed. "My friend, are you as happy as I am?"

"You need hardly ask," I said. Then, thoughtfully, I added, "Do you suppose, Enoch, that this 'white chief' is a white man?"

His face clouded. "That is my hope," he answered. "But this captive of ours is an Araucanian. There is a mortal feud between Araucanians and Spanish people."

"I never heard of them."

"You aren't much of a reading man," he replied. "The Araucanians are a nation of Indians which rule all except the sea-coast of South Chile. They are said to be brave, intelligent, partly civilized—and unconquerable. They defeated the army of Alvardo, Pizarro's companion-in-arms, and they besieged in a stone fort and slew Valdiva and his army to the last man.

"In the last two hundred fifty years one Spanish army after another has been beaten by them. The Republic of Chile has had to acknowledge their independence. Their hatred of whites is traditional. Yet this white chief lives among them; therefore I fear he is an Indian."

"Doubtless they have treasure," said Rankin eagerly.

Stover smiled at his greed. "So it is believed," he answered. "Don't you fear the Araucanians, Rankin?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But for a few cartloads of silver I'll risk my life anytime."

"Yet you were reluctant to attempt the rescue of Madame Laura and our friends."

"Madame Laura never knew I was alive," Rankin retorted, "and our friends were not very friendly with me, especially your particular coterie. However, since we found ourselves in the interior of this country and no way out of it, I've been willing to strike a blow for them. Let us set them free and carry off the silver. That's what I say."

Stover laughed gaily. "And I. But free our friends at any rate."

A CIVILIZED man with a broken limb lies immovable for weeks; but at the end of three days, this Indian assured us that he was willing to ride a led horse, if the saddle were reënforced by matting so that he could hold his leg stretched out. So, enthusiastically, we set out.

While we waited Garcia and Stover had asked him a thousand questions, but no information whatever could they receive regarding the white chief save that he had blue eyes and a black beard, nor would the fellow admit knowing why he ransomed Patagonian captives and what disposition he made of them.

Our march was slow on account of the injured man, but within three days we were winding along a very narrow and ill-defined trail in the foothills of the Andes. The weather grew cold as a New England winter and in many places our horses stepped knee deep in snow. We sighted neither living man nor animal but once we saw a great bird, larger even than the eagle.

We camped, one night, without a fire upon a lofty crag, huddling together to keep warm. Our horses stamped and whinnied with cold.

The following day we began to descend and the snow vanished and the weather grew warmer. The hills were giant rock-piles, without a blade of grass or a shrub on them. The way down was even more steep than the ascent.

Shortly after noon Stover, who had been conversing with the Indian, rode up to Rankin and myself.

"By mid-afternoon we arrive at the town of the White Chief," he said jubilantly.

Rankin began to inspect his gun. "I'm in hopes he keeps the silver handy," he said.

"It doesn't seem possible there can be

a town in this maze of mountains and desert," I remarked. "But I am glad to hear that it is near."

An hour later we rounded a shoulder of rock and with one accord shouted with delight.

Directly below us was the vale of Paradise. There was a long narrow stretch of deep dark green, through which flowed a silver-like stream. There were trees, and flowers and fields in which grains were growing and, at the lower end, was a walled town. Looking down upon it we saw that the buildings were of stone and that there were flat roofs upon which grew flowers and upon which were people moving about. And we saw men and women in the fields and a canoe upon the bosom of the river.

To us exiles and escaped captives, many weary months from the smiling countryside of New England, wanderers over the dreary plains of Patagonia, and climbers of the grim gray forbidding mountains, the spectacle was so lovely that we were moved almost to tears.

The twang of a bowstring caused us to look round in surprise. Our savage had fired an arrow. For a time we could follow its flight as it drove straight for the town so far below.

Stover, demanding his reason for shooting, was told that it was the custom for one returning from beyond the mountains to shoot an arrow to herald his approach. With that explanation we had to be content.

Our progress down the mountain trail took two hours longer, much to our impatience. Finally, our horses set foot upon growing grass and crossed a green field to a narrow stone path. This led directly to the gate which gave admittance to the town.

CHAPTER XI

THE WHITE KING

IT WAS not a large village, but in it we were amazed to discover evidence of civilized living. Here in the heart of a savage land we had come upon a settlement which certainly was not aboriginal; it might even be the dwelling place of white men. In that first moment our hearts lifted with relief.

But very quickly our jubilance cooled. For the men who came toward us from the fields were Indians, naked to the waist. Apparently they belonged to the race of our wounded guide.

"Have your guns in readiness," I warned my companions. "Perhaps all is not as we hope."

These men, however, were unarmed and did not approach. They stood gaping at us from a distance. When we were within fifty feet of the huge gate in the city wall, Stover spoke suddenly.

"This is no city of white men," he said. "Observe that there is no cement between the stones of those walls and notice the carvings. They resemble Prescott's description of Inca construction."

"If these people are Incas," I replied, "then they are not inhuman like the Patagonians and they do not practice human sacrifice like the Aztecs."

"Nevertheless—" Stover broke off, for the gate was opening. Then between the great doors there stepped a white man.

He was short and fat, garbed in a white robe of Vicuna wool. His pink face was covered in part by a curling black beard. He wore boots of skin, and in his belt he carried a pair of pistols and a hunting knife. But as he came toward us now he was smiling; his brilliant black eyes seemed friendly. Behind him walked a black man, also dressed in a white wool robe, who carried a blunderbus; and finally there came a score of Indians armed with bows and arrows.

"Who are you and whence come you?" the white man demanded in French.

Swiftly Stover dismounted, approached the bearded man, and extended his hand. For several moments they conversed in French. Then the white chief dismissed his guards and came toward us chatting agreeably with Stover. Obviously Stover was in a state of high excitement.

"My friends," he said, "permit me to introduce to you Antoine de Tournens. Laura is safe. Our friends, those who survived a massacre by the Patagonians, are also safe, thanks to this noble gentleman. Monsieur de Tournens is a Frenchman who has made himself ruler of the Araucanians. He has created an independent nation whose claims have been acknowledged by the French and will soon be acknowledged by other nations. Our journey is ended."

In the next instant we had surrounded de Tournens and were expressing our gratitude in an almost hysterical fashion.

De Tournens gave orders in the Indian tongue that our injured guide be cared for, and natives lifted him from the horse and carried him through the gate. Then de Tournens told us that our horses would be fed but that they must not be brought into the town. He invited us to follow him through the gate.

Our emotions may easily be surmised. To find sanctuary where we had expected hostility, to be united again with our companions and to learn that Laura de Lorme was safe—all this was overwhelming. I glanced at Rankin and saw that even that dour man was deeply affected. Stover, arm in arm with our French benefactor, was jabbering excitedly in French.

We gazed curiously at the village. The streets were very narrow and the stone houses were small, with one tall opening which served for both door and window. In many of these doorways stood the Araucanian women, a number of whom were really beautiful. Their complexions were no darker than a Spaniard's, and they possessed straight, regular features. Their white wool garments were spotless and their hair was combed and braided.

There preceded us a guard of twenty with spears and bows and arrows, marching two by two in military step. Behind us came other armed warriors.

"Tis lucky their intentions are kindly," commented Rankin. "We would have no chance here. They would be upon us before we could lift gun to shoulder."

After a few hundred yards we came into a square in the center of which stood a large building of two stories. This had window openings on both floors and a wide doorway beside which stood a guard.

"*Monsieur* bids you welcome to his house," Stover called back. "We are to be his guests."

I must explain here that I understood no French; the speeches of de Tournens which I have occasionally rendered in English were translated to me by Stover.

DE TOURNENS led us between a double file of armed guards to the doorway of the house. There we entered a dark passage, stone-flagged, that brought us suddenly into a large and well lighted room.

The walls were hung with rich draperies of intricate Indian design; a thick rug gave softly beneath our feet; and about the room there were scattered carved stools and divans piled with fine skins. But we had only an instant's glimpse of this barbaric luxury—for our eyes had found Laura de Lorme.

Dressed in a white Vicuna robe, she had been reclining on a divan; but now swiftly she sat upright, with a choked cry. Her face, framed by two long braids of golden hair, had suddenly become pale; her blue eyes were wide with fear.

Stover had dropped his gun and rushed across the room. He was on one knee now before Laura de Lorme; he was raising her hand to his lips. For an instant she stared speechless at us, and there was a terror in her eyes that I could not understand.

Then she made a swift, frantic gesture. "Quickly!" she cried. "Go—go before it is too late!"

I heard a mocking laugh behind me and whirled around. Antoine de Tournens held his drawn pistols aimed at Rankin and me, and the room was filling with guardsmen, their spears leveled. In the turmoil of that moment an Indian seized our guns.

Stover had leaped to his feet. "What

does this mean?" he exclaimed. He reached his hand toward Laura de Lorme. "Are you in danger?"

"I am not, but you—it is too late."

Stover turned to face de Tournens, but before he could speak the Frenchman said easily: "A small strategy of mine, *monsieur;* I did not wish to shed blood unnecessarily. The presence of the lady would reassure you, I knew, and then my men could relieve you of your weapons easily. My little plan, you see, has had success."

"But we meant you no harm," cried Stover hoarsely. "We would willingly have surrendered our weapons. All we ask is safe conduct to some port for *madame* and ourselves."

Laura de Lorme arose from the divan, and even in that moment I could admire the grace of her poised body. Her long white fingers clutched Stover's arm. "He does not mean to let you go, he will make you his slaves. Oh, my friends, you are lost, for this man is more evil—"

De Tournens rapped out something, and she did not finish. Slowly she turned to look at him, her beautiful face frightened as a child's. Without a word she sank down on the divan, and then she was weeping silently, her face hidden.

We had no opportunity to act or even to speak, for de Tournens gave brief, swift orders in the Indian tongue, and the guardsmen seized us roughly. The Spanish lad screamed with fear. As they dragged us from that room, I cast a last glance at Laura.

Escape would have been impossible for us, even had we still possessed our arms. We were rushed into a large courtyard where another group of the Indian warriors took charge of us, and instants later we were thrust stumbling into a bare cellar-like room, lighted only by one small aperture high in the wall. The door crashed shut; we heard the bolts slide into place.

In that earth-floored gaol we gazed at each other, so stunned by despair that for a time we could find no words.

CHAPTER XII

SILVER FOR THE MESMERIST

RANKIN was the first of us to break the silence. "I've been in French ports and sailed with Frenchmen," he stormed. "I have never met a Frenchman I could trust."

Sick at heart, I sank upon the floor with my back against the wall. Stover dropped down beside me. "And she, too, is his prisoner," he muttered.

"She said he wanted us for slaves," I said dully. "Why does he want slaves when he has these Indians?"

Stover shook his head silently.

We sat there as the hours passed, puzzling and pondering and arriving at no conclusions. It grew dark at last, and we became aware of a tramp of feet without. We stiffened. Were they coming to drag us to execution?

The door was opened and there came in a file of men in clanking chains—perhaps thirty men; ragged and bearded and filthy. But even in the dusk we knew they were white men.

Guards, with weapons ready, removed the chains and the door was closed. Immediately good English voices began to curse heartily. Stover leaped to his feet.

"Are there among you the members of the company of Jason?" he demanded. There were shouts then, and men crowded forward. "Stover, Rankin, Ames," they cried.

We recognized Hardy, Homer, Jackson, Worthy, Barnes and McCarthy. For a time we forgot our distress in the joy of reunion. We embraced, we thumped one another in the back, we babbled foolishly, while the strangers gathered round us, curious and eager.

Two of these were Chilean Spaniards, the rest British, American and Frenchmen who like ourselves had passed through the hands of the Patagonians to reach this place. Prisoners all, and all, save we three, men without hope. Even we did not cling to our hope for long.

Our reunion was interrupted by the

arrival of food. The newcomers threw themselves upon it like wolves, but there was enough for all. To our satisfaction, we found bread made from maize, venison, and a sour but not unpalatable wine to wash it down. It was the first decent fare we had had since leaving the ship.

After that we exchanged experiences with the Jasonians. These had attacked with their bare hands the twenty savages who were taking them north, and after a desperate battle in which two of our men had been killed and two wounded they had been overpowered by the savages. The wounded were Stone and Harper and these the Indians murdered. Brown and Wright, fortunately, had died under the first blows.

Finally, when we had told our tale, Stover asked the important question: "What does this Frenchman want of us? Why does he send to the coast for white prisoners?"

The reply appalled us. "To work in his silver mine," said John Worthy, a youth with whom we had been extremely friendly during the voyage.

"A silver mine!" cried Rankin, interested at once.

"Of fabulous wealth," declared Worthy. "As we well know."

"But he has his Indians," I said. "Why doesn't he put them in the mines and spare the men of his own blood?"

WORTHY laughed. "Because these Indians of his are proud free men who scorn to soil their hands with labor and who will kill themselves rather than be slaves. He does not dare disgrace an Araucanian by giving him mental tasks."

"Why do they tolerate the scoundrel if they are proud men?" I demanded.

"Permit me to answer that," said one of the Chileans coming toward us. He spoke excellent English but with a strangely Irish accent that was soon explained. "I am Captain Ricardo Lynch," he said, "of the Chilean Heavy Dragoons. My father was an Irishman but my mother is a native of Santiago.

"This man came to Santiago eight years ago as a stage performer. He was what you call a Mesmerist, one who puts people to sleep and substitutes his will for their own."

"I believe you," cried Stover. "I thought he had strange eyes."

"In a journey to a seaboard city, he was captured by Araucanian marauders and taken to the *ulman*—the ruler of one of the great tribes of the Araucanian nation. He bent the *ulman* to his will. In no time he was directing the affairs of that tribe. And at the great council of the nation, he extended his power over the other *ulmans*. He performs what they believe to be miracles. He reveals to them the spirits of their ancestors. He predicts the destruction of the Spanish-speaking peoples. These mighty Araucanian warriors, who defeated the best generals of Spain for two hundred years and who have warred successfully against my country, crawl on the ground before him."

"Then why not make them work his mine?" asked Stover.

"That he dares not do. And it pleases the Indians to know that the silver which he uses to buy them swords and agricultural implements of iron and steel is being mined by the whites whom they hate."

"The renegade!" I exclaimed.

"Somehow we must escape," cried Stover.

There was a burst of contemptuous laughter. "My friend," said Captain Lynch. "Between us and civilization to the east lies the Araucanian nation of one hundred thousand warriors. To the west is the desert of Patagonia and its fearsome giants."

"We know all about the giants," I told him. "Escape would be very difficult."

"Impossible, I fear," asserted the Chilean-Irishman. "Yet, if an opportunity presents itself, we shall revolt to a man."

Worn by terrible labor underground, some of the men were already sleeping, but Stover and I discussed the strange situation for several hours. To our minds,

escape was not impossible. Put arms in the hands of the band confined in this prison and we could walk through the Araucanian nation, we thought. Later we were to lose that confidence. For the Araucanians were magnificent warriors, trained to fight in military array. We learned from Lynch that a few years back they had routed a powerful Chilean army equipped with cavalry and artillery. Originally armed only with bow and arrow, the Araucanians had quickly acquired skill in the use of sword and spear from the Spaniards; and they were more than a match for disciplined troops, because they had not the slightest fear of death. But while we planned that night we had not yet learned these things; it was as well for our confidence.

THE next morning, we were rudely awakened by the guards who proceeded to fasten our left wrists to a long iron chain, and with the other slaves we marched forth to the day's labor.

During our short journey through the town Captain Lynch, who was chained between Stover and myself, explained that the Araucanians were usually a nomadic people, dwelling in tents. But King Antoine had chosen for his residence an ancient deserted town of the Inca period. Long ago the Incas had invaded Araucania, built towns and established colonies. But as soon as their main army had been recalled, the Araucanians had stormed the Inca towns and massacred the inhabitants to the last man. De Tournens had established his headquarters in this particular town because it was close to the deposit of silver which the Indians had revealed to him.

Escorted by a dozen Indians with spears, we tramped stolidly across the valley and up the side of a mountain. We were certainly a battalion of scarecrows. The Jasonians still wore the tattered remnants of their ship clothing; but many of the others were garbed only in filthy woolen shirts and loin-cloths.

When I asked Lynch why Chilean prisoners of war were not used in the mines, he said dryly that the Araucanians did not often take prisoners of war. He himself had come to Mana Cloto—the Inca name for de Tournens' town—as a spy, and there he had been captured.

After half an hour's march, we arrived at a gaping hole in the mountainside which was the entrance to the mine. At the right was a huge pile of earth and stones, at the left a crude rock-crushing machine. The African Negro who had accompanied de Tournens the previous day was there to inspect us. Also there was a stern-faced Indian who Lynch said was the mine boss. Half a hundred armed Indians stood on guard.

The mine was a level tunnel driven into the heart of the mountain, with innumerable side passages. Down into that dim cavern we were herded, after we had been equipped with implements. In the feeble glow of candles we set to work on the dark walls; we drove sharpened crowbars into the rock and laboriously pried loose heavy chunks of the ore. The sweat plowed furrows through the dust on our bodies, and the air was so vile that we were soon gasping with exhaustion. Brief surcease we had when we carried sacks of the ore to the mouth of the mine, for there we could swallow a mouthful or two of clean air. Outside some of our company were operating the rock-crusher and melting the silver in stone furnaces.

So it was that we, who had sailed for California with the high hope of mining gold for our own enrichment, found ourselves wresting silver from a mountain to fill the treasury of a monarch of barbarians.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DRUMS TALK WAR

THE terrible monotony of our existence speedily began to set its mark upon us. We talked continually of escape but could devise no means. From prison to mine and back again we marched, bound together by a heavy iron chain of the sort used

by African slave traders. In the prison we were unmanacled, yet escape was impossible, since the door was always barred and the window in the wall unreachable. It was some twelve feet from the ground, and heavily barred.

At the end of a week, however, desperation gave an idea to Stover. "If we could form a human pyramid," he said to me, "one of us could get upon the window sill."

"What good, since there are bars on the window," I demanded.

"Ames, this is an ancient structure, built by the Incas and by workmen who knew nothing of cement. Prison bars are immovable only when imbedded in cement. These may have been there for hundreds of years and may have rusted at their fastenings. I would like to find out."

"Suppose they yielded?" whispered Rankin. We were huddled in a corner after our evening meal and talked in low tones. "We are unarmed and there are Indians everywhere."

"We would be punished severely," I added. "Increased hours of work and no food for days. These fellows here have told us what happened the time when a madman attacked the food bearers."

"Do you want to die in the mines?" Stover asked fiercely.

"Show me the most forlorn chance. Assuming we escape through the window, in what way do we benefit?" I demanded.

"There is a thousand to one chance that, if one or two of us escape, we might capture de Tournens and force him to order the others set free. Then, with this scoundrel as hostage, we could proceed with Madame Laura to a seaport."

"If we could arm this mob with guns," I said thoughtfully, "we might win through —that is, if the Indians worship the Frenchman so much that they would not attack lest he be killed."

"Humph." The grunt came from Rankin. "These savages are not like the Patagonians who keep no watch. There are sentinels to be cared for. And how could we remove the bars without awaking these others? You'll find informers among them, no doubt."

"We can depend on Lynch and our own friends," Stover said eagerly. "Tomorrow night let us tell half a dozen to remain awake and I will attempt to inspect the bars. If they are immovable, that ends it."

"No more than two can go," I asserted. "A mob would be seen where one or two might hide in the shadows."

"Or three," added Rankin.

"It probably means death," warned Stover. "Hark!"

From without came the sound of drums; it continued—a dull steady thunder. Lynch, who had been sleeping on the floor not far from us, sat up now.

"What does it mean?" I asked him.

"War drums," he said. "I know the sound. They beat messages which can be heard vast distances. From village to village the message is sent along. In a few hours it will have spread throughout the Araucanian nation. I'm told that even the mustering place is stated by the drums."

"A code," exclaimed Stover, "like the dot and dash alphabet of Professor Morse—"

"If these are war drums," I said, "it may be that a white army is approaching this place."

Lynch shook his head. "Impossible," he declared. "The Araucanian frontier is five hundred miles north. There may be an expedition from Chile in that direction, but it would not be mad enough to attempt to penetrate so far into the Indian country. In the morning I may be able to discover what has happened."

So fatigued were we all that, despite the noise of the drums, we speedily fell asleep.

IN THE morning we were awakened as usual, fed, chained and marched through the town to the mine. Passing the market place, we saw that no booths were open, and we observed none but women abroad. After half a day's labor in the diggings we came forth for the mid-

day meal and Lynch seated himself on the ground beside Stover and myself.

"I have been talking with one of the guards," he said. "A great war has broken out. The entire strength of the nation has been summoned. All able-bodied men in this city left last night for the place of muster—all but the hundred warriors who guard the king."

Stover and myself exchanged glances.

"Doesn't his Satanic Majesty go to this war?" I inquired.

"He hasn't gone. I know he led the Indians at the battle of Desparillo two years ago. Probably doesn't consider his presence necessary as yet."

"Is a Chilean Army approaching, do you think?"

Lynch nodded. "For no other reason would they assemble their full war strength. This Frenchman, I know, is the cause of much apprehension in Santiago. Spain, which has hated us since we secured our independence, was considering recognizing his kingdom when I was sent south to locate his headquarters. We heard that he sent a vast present in silver to Louis Napoleon who is scheming to become emperor of the French and who, if he succeeds, might recognize Araucania.

"De Tournens, therefore, is a great menace to the independence of Chile; and sooner or later we'll strike with the whole military force of the Republic." He laughed. "If I had been able to return to tell what I know of the vast richness of this mine, our poverty-stricken government might have risked everything to secure possession of it."

We had eaten and been driven back to work. My mind was busy with the possibilities suggested by the absence of the warriors. We were thirty strong men and there were only a hundred guards to keep us down. A rush—no, they'd mow us down with arrows and finish us with swords and spears. But Stover's plan seemed more practical now.

That night, our minds made up, we waited impatiently for our companions to fall into their heavy slumber. Lynch, Rankin, Stover, Worthy and myself were all who were in the plot.

The moon faintly illuminated our bare cell. We crept toward the window, stepping over unconscious forms with the greatest care. Lynch and Rankin bent their backs and Stover steadied me as I climbed upon them. When I was standing on the shoulders of Lynch, Worthy mounted Rankin's shoulders, and with great difficulty we assisted Stover to the top of the pyramid. Now his breast was level with the window.

He swung upon the windowsill and grasped the bars. We held our breaths. After exerting his strength in vain, he clambered down upon our shoulders and then slid to the ground. We in turn descended and stood in silent distress.

"No chance," he whispered. "Let us get our sleep."

Thus our hope vanished.

AS USUAL, we were rudely awakened by the mine guard, fed, chained and marched to our labors. We had considered and rejected a rush upon the guards at feeding time or when released for work in the tunel. They were too numerous, too alert and too well armed.

Now day followed day with terrible monotony. Pick and shovel had first blistered and then toughened our hands and the dreary grind which hardened our muscles seemed to be deadening our brains. We saw only a long lane of years in slavery ahead of us. With bent backs, with no spirit, no hope of escape, we would walk the treadmill of our labors until death.

On the tenth night after our inspection of the window bars we heard the sound of distant drums. These continued for hours and we fell asleep to their steady mutter. Perhaps two hours after I had sunk into oblivion I became aware that I was being shaken roughly. I opened my eyes. Holding a candle in his left hand, the African Negro stood above me. He was clutching my shoulder with his right hand. Behind him stood two Indians, spears

ready, and at the open door were half a dozen more.

"Yo' Ames?" he asked thickly.

I nodded, too astounded to speak.

"Yo' come. *Venez avec moi.*"

I rose, and at the same moment Stover sat up.

"Ames, what's this?" he demanded.

The black brutally cuffed him and he fell back. Prodded by the spearmen, I moved toward the exit. In the hallway, after the door had been closed and barred, the candle flame was extinguished and the company moved along the corridor like cats in the dark. Presently we emerged into the courtyard and, crossing it, entered the building opposite. We turned into the room in which Antoine de Tournens had treacherously disarmed us. Upon a table there burned a whale-oil lamp. Then in the flickering light I saw Laura de Lorme. She was seated upon the same divan, dressed in a white robe fastened with a golden girdle, her beautiful hair unloosed. She appeared to be alone.

I'm afraid I stood there gaping at her. She smiled and stretched toward me one bare white arm. "My poor friend," she said softly. "How I have wept for you!"

I stood stiffly, my eyes darting to murky corners of the big room. Here once again there might be treachery.

"Is it possible that you consider me to blame for your misfortune?" she asked reproachfully. "Like you, I am a prisoner, a slave."

"Madame," I cried earnestly, "your state has given us far more suffering than our own."

"I believe you," she said. "I pray that some day I may be able to prove my gratitude to you." She spoke with moving sincerity, and for me the music of her voice was thanks enough for what we had done.

Ragged and filthy as I was, she begged me to sit down on the divan beside her and to recount the adventures of our company in these last terrible weeks. So I gave her the history of our sufferings, and while I spoke the burden of my great weariness seemed to drop from me. For once again I was under the spell of this woman; the nearness of her beauty, her gratitude to us, made me forget that I sat there a slave in rags. But at last something she said brought me swiftly back to reality.

"Antoine de Tournens is a strange man," she said slowly. "There is greatness in him, and madness, too. He is a king, yet in a sense he is a captive like ourselves. You hate him—"

"And for good reason," I growled.

She gave me a long glance. "I, too, hate him," she said softly. "But to win freedom I would willingly mask my hate. And if you are wise, you would do the same—for freedom and great wealth."

"How—" I cried eagerly.

SHE gestured toward a curtain. "Antoine—King Otalie—waits in the next room for the result of this interview. It is by his permission that you are here."

I stared at her dumbly. What could this mean?

She met my eyes steadily. "Antoine de Tournens is very much in love with me, Mr. Ames," she said slowly. "He wishes to make me his queen—but he is married to the daughter of the chief *ulman* of the Araucanians."

"But you couldn't—" I gasped.

She stopped me with a gesture. "A Frenchman in love is a gentleman. His marriage, of course, is an Indian ceremony, illegal elsewhere. I have told him that if he sets me free in a civilized country, I will consider—don't you see, one must temporize in circumstances like this?"

"Perhaps, but still I do not understand."

"In a moment you shall. . . . Antoine is immensely rich—actually a king. Both France and Spain are willing to recognize his rule over this great country."

"King of savages," I sneered.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Because he loves me, he did not go forth to lead his army into battle," she said rapidly. "He is accounted a magician by these

people—that is the source of his power. He sent a potent charm which assured victory to the army that went north to meet an invasion of the Chileans.

"Tonight the drums bring him news that the charm failed, that his army was beaten and has fallen back. He sent out immediately half of his bodyguard with word that he was coming to take command. No doubt he would go if it were not for me.

"And it is now or never," she continued excitedly. "There is only a skeleton garrison here. Before dawn we shall be well on our way toward the Argentine."

"We!" I exclaimed.

Her hand grasped my arm tightly. "Of course. You and the white men imprisoned here. You shall be our guard. You will help us fight our way to freedom."

"So the end is in sight for this upstart king," I remarked. "Madame, we would lay down our lives for you, but not lift a finger for this mountebank who captured us treacherously and enslaved us."

"Fool, you are saving your own lives! What do you suppose will happen to you when the Araucanians return and find that their king has fled? You will be taken out of your prison and tortured to death. The Indians are not interested in working the silver mine."

"So this is why you sent for me?"

"Yes. I vouched for your Company of Jason. I told Antoine that, if you gave your word, you would guard him loyally even against your fellow white men. And each of you will receive, when we arrive at an Argentine city, five thousand dollars in silver."

"I'd rather kill him and lose the reward," I said grimly.

"He has firearms for all of you. English muskets and your own German rifles. Thirty white men can beat off any attack in mountain defiles and the Araucanians will not pursue across the Argentine plains. Why do you hesitate? My life is at stake as well as your own."

"Let me get the rights of this," I said. "His goose is cooked and he knows it. If his Indians had beaten the Chileans, he wouldn't desert his throne, even for you, Madame."

"Does that matter, now?"

I hesitated. "It seems to be self-preservation," I said. "Without us he has no chance. His charm didn't work and they'll turn on him. He wouldn't have gone out to lead them after their first defeat, even if you hadn't been here to hold him. On the other hand, he can take to the mountains and leave us in prison, and they'll massacre us without a doubt."

"As I have been telling you."

"I can answer for the Company of Jason. We undertake to guard him to civilization. Most likely the others will agree."

CHAPTER XIV

FREEDOM FOUND AT NIGHT

SHE lifted her voice. "Antoine!" she called. Immediately a curtain lifted, revealing a door, and King Otalie the First of Araucania came into the room. The little, fat Frenchman was pale and his eyes had fright in them. He smiled at me and began to speak quickly in French.

"He asks you to promise that you will not take advantage of arms he gives you," said Laura in a contemptuous tone.

"Tell him that we'll treat him better than he deserves," I replied.

He bowed when she translated and offered his hand. I put both my hands behind me and gazed at him fixedly.

He spoke to her anxiously. "I have assured him that you are honest and your word may be depended upon," said Laura. "His Majesty says that there are fifty Araucanian warriors to be accounted for and that certain precautions must be observed until all is ready. You are to return, waken your companions and secure their allegiance to His Majesty. If they refuse, they will be left in chains for the savages to dispose of. His Negro will escort you back. Are you certain you can control the slaves when they have guns in their hands?"

"I feel sure of it," I told her. To my disgust, De Tournens threw himself at her feet and kissed both her hands.

He rose, opened a box on a table and drew out two double-barreled pistols which he offered to me. I concealed them in the waistband of my tattered trousers, their hilts covered by the guanaco mantle which I was wearing.

With mixed feelings I followed the Negro across the court. Two Indian guards accompanied us. They waited until the Negro had unbolted the door and thrust me inside. When I heard it once more bolted, I woke Stover.

"Tremendous news," I cried. "We're going to be set free. Help me wake them all up."

In a couple of minutes I stood in the midst of a circle of haggard, bearded desperate men and told my tale. "No shouts," I warned them. "Now listen carefully. We're slaves no longer; we're to have guns in our hands and escort the king into the Argentine."

"I've an idea," said Rankin, when I had finished. "Why not let him arm us, capture him and turn him over to the Chileans. He broke faith with us. Perhaps the Chileans would pay us plenty for him."

This suggestion met with the approval of several, but it was squelched by Captain Lynch.

"I assure you, men," he said, "that we have to deal not with Chile but with the Araucanians. It's most unlikely that my countrymen are in sufficient force to penetrate this far into Indian country. In any event, the savages will be here first. Our only hope is to accept his terms and get across the mountains before an Araucanian army arrives. I've seen them defeat an army of five thousand Chileans. What chance have we?"

That settled everything. With one accord the prisoners agreed to accept King Otalie Antoine's terms. I had no doubt that several of them made mental reservations. Some of these men had labored for two years in the mines.

Now they were like horses champing at the bit, wild for action. When the door was unbolted, half an hour later, there was a rush for it and the Negro closed it in a hurry.

"Stand back, men," I shouted.

"Tell him in French that everything is all right," I requested of Stover.

THE Negro was back in a few minutes with four muskets, powderhorns and bags of bullets, and he promised to return with more. I did not know what disposition had been made of the prison sentries, but within an hour the Negro had made half a dozen trips and every man jack of us had a rifle or a musket. We had no trouble, we Jasonians, in swapping English guns for the needle guns which the others did not understand how to use.

Armed and ready we waited and, while we waited, I told Enoch Stover the details of my interview with Madame Laura.

To tell the truth her selection of myself instead of Stover had surprised me, but now an explanation suddenly occurred to me. "He understands no English," I told him. "And perhaps she was fearful at what you might say to him in French. If my anger got the better of me, it did not matter."

I heard him breathe heavily. "Perhaps that is why," he said after a moment.

Presently the black emissary of the Frenchman appeared again at the door and Stover talked with him.

"He will guide us to the dormitory of the king's guard," Stover reported. "We must attack them and let not one escape. Though they are savages, it seems brutal—"

Rankin laughed harshly. "What do you suppose they'd do to us if given the word?"

"He's right," I agreed reluctantly. "Come, men. See that your guns are ready. Follow me."

Thus I involuntarily took command, which after all was my right since it had been with me that King Antoine had made his treaty. Stover took it in good part.

At the exit to the courtyard we found a sentinel weltering in his gore, treacherously slain by the Negro. The moon was behind a cloud as we freed slaves moved in single file toward an entrance in the right wing of the building.

I had no stomach for a massacre of sleeping men, but the crime was upon the soul of the Frenchman who had ordered the slaughter of his faithful Indian warriors. Nevertheless it was almost a relief when I heard a challenge from a watchful sentry on the opposite side of the court and an answering shout from another. And then an earsplitting whoop was heard, and the sleeping Araucanians in the building were up. With arms in their hands, they came plunging through the exit into the court.

"Make ready, fire," I shouted.

The stillness of the night was broken by the discharge of muskets. Our bullets plunged into the mass in the doorway. As those in front fell, their places were taken by others. Some of our bullets must have passed through two or three bodies, but those in the rear leaped over the fallen.

At length there were a dozen warriors in the open, and they rushed upon us. There was not space for arrows, but they hurled their spears at us. Then, drawing their knives, they charged to their death. Several of us had had time to reload. I pulled out my two pistols and dropped one fellow when he was but three feet from me. Some of our men brought Indians down with clubbed muskets. One or two whites received knife wounds, but at the end of a battle lasting only two or three minutes every man of the Indian guard lay upon the ground, either dead or seriously wounded.

And when it was all over, de Tournens appeared upon the scene. "Well done," he cried in French. "Now follow me."

No doubt there was a strong temptation among the white slaves to put a bullet into His Majesty in exchange for wrongs endured; but they knew that our escape still depended upon him. Stover shouted a translation of his command and I repeated it as an order. Leaving the wounded where they lay to be cared for by the women of the building, we moved away after the French scoundrel.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE INCA TRAIL

THE thunder of guns, of course, had awakened the town. Women were screaming from windows; and suddenly three Indian soldiers who had been acting as sentries appeared in front of us. They were brave men, those three; heavily outnumbered, they charged us, and we were compelled to shoot them down.

In the wake of de Tournens, we entered the part of the building where he resided. A door opened and Madame Laura appeared, a heavy fur robe wrapped around her slender form. Her eyes were shining.

She took the arm of the Frenchman and Stover, who was beside me, muttered angrily. De Tournens addressed us in the dark passage.

"We must cross the town and go through the south gate of the city," he said, and Laura translated quickly. "We must shoot the town patrol and also the guard at the gate. In a place to which the Negro will lead you, horses are waiting with plenty of supplies and ammunition."

"Come on, men," I shouted. "Close up around the lady and the Frenchman as we go through the town. Reload your guns as soon as we're out in the moonlight. Kill any who try to halt us."

The Negro was already throwing open the front exit, and we poured through it. The open square was filling with the inhabitants, women and children, old men and boys who had rushed naked from their beds.

"Let us march in a hollow square with Laura in the middle," suggested Stover.

We took that formation outside the building and moved in the direction indicated by the Negro. A few shots fired in the air sent the natives flying in all directions and cleared the street. We came

swiftly to the gate where six Indians greeted us with a flight of arrows, one of which penetrated the body of a burly Englishman in the front rank.

We answered the arrows with a dozen shots, and then out of the shadow of the gate these gallant soldiers charged our band with leveled spears. But none lived to reach us.

The African swung the bars, pulled open the great gate and we rushed forth. There was no pursuit; apparently there were no warriors left to pursue us. We moved, four abreast, down the road and swung to the left toward a clump of trees indicated by our guide, the Negro.

Here we found, in a corral, a half hundred horses and a dozen mules heavily laden. Horses were saddled and bridled, and half a dozen unarmed Indians who were in charge of them fled when they saw the approach of white men with guns.

The Negro led Stover and two others into a hut. A moment later they came out carrying boxes of cartridges, bags of bullets and sacks of powder. These were placed for the time being upon a packhorse. De Tournens was assisting Laura to mount. Then I gave the order and we rode forth. We were thirty-three white men, not including His Majesty, the runaway. Each man had a musket or rifle and plenty of ammunition. It seemed to us that no power could be strong enough to stop us.

DE TOURNENS, with Laura at his side, led the way, not toward the mountain down which we had descended so full of hope, but to the other side of the canyon upon which the mine was located. A quarter of a mile beyond the mine he turned into a broad trail which at some time or other had been an excellent road. Captain Lynch told me, as we rode side by side behind the leaders, that it had been built by the Incas.

I glanced back and the long line of bearded, broad-shouldered, armed horsemen was an inspiring sight in the moonlight. For hours we rode, on that smooth road which followed the contour of the canyon, twisting, turning, but always climbing. The moon shone upon the beautiful valley and made the town stand forth like a medieval stronghold. Fires had been lighted down there and drums were beating monotonously.

"Will there be pursuit?" I asked the Chilean.

"Judging by the speed with which that scoundrel de Tournens abandoned his kingdom, there will be," he replied. "I trust that the main army of the Araucanians is still hundreds of miles to the north."

"Will they chase us into the Argentine Republic?" I asked.

He laughed. "White men's boundaries mean nothing to them. Our hope is to be so far in advance of them that they will consider pursuit useless."

For hour after hour we moved steadily skyward. For long periods the valley would be invisible and then we would round a turn in the trail and there it would be, an incredible distance below.

At last the dawn came, painting the eastern sky with rose. We had been six or seven hours on the march, but at this season the sun rose late in the morning. Daylight came swiftly, then; and suddenly, we rode out on a ledge and saw the valley bathed in brightness thousands of feet below. I heard a faint cry from Madame Laura.

At the bottom of the valley, spreading out like a fan as it debouched from a narrow pass was a mass of warriors. Upon the spears the early sun flashed dazzlingly.

It was the Araucanian army, beaten in battle for the first time in centuries by the Chileans, cheated by its ruler with a worthless talisman. These were the warriors returning to exact vengeance from the King who was already in flight. Their war cries were inaudible from this great distance; yet we seemed to sense the savage anger that stirred in that great army.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

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

The FRONT-AND-REAR • CAP BADGE •

Today, the Gloucestershire (British) regiment wears a badge on the back, as well as on the front of its caps. This is in honor of the action at Alexandria (1801) where the regiment was surprised by French cavalry before it could form in square. The men fought back-to-back, and repulsed the double charge.

•SOUNDING OFF•

When a U.S. army band sounds three notes before playing the march at a review, it symbolises the three cheers given the medieval soldiers going to the Crusades.

first use of NATURAL OBSTACLES

Miltiades, the Greek general, was the first to take tactical advantage of natural obstacles. At the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.) he protected his army flanks by resting them on streams and hills.

•FIRST ARTILLERY REGIMENT•

Until the reign of Louis XIV. of France, gunners and gun-team drivers were not soldiers, but civilians hired by contract. King Louis organized the first artillery regiment.

As they swung out the lifeboats, the crowd was shouting and shivering in the icy wind

A Ton of Gold

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Bells of St. Mary's," "Shake Hands with Davy Jones," etc.

Pioneers had walked her decks, and every sourdough in the Yukon loved the old *Northlander;* but only three men could guess the secret she bore uneasily for forty years. A No-Shirt McGee story

THIS ton of gold business starts back in Skagway about the time folks first commenced callin' me No-Shirt McGee. And it ends nearly forty years later when I'm an old buzzard, two jumps ahead of the undertaker and limpin' every jump.

I'm just in from Dawson, and waitin' for the *Northlander* to sail for Seattle, when I meet up with Mike Garrett. Me, Mike and his three pardners, had come North together. I'd gone on to Dawson while they'd stayed in Skagway and started a freight and express business. They had pack trains runnin' to Lake Bennett, and a small steamer with a leaky boiler runnin' up and down the Yukon.

They charged plenty high freight rates, but the miners paid 'em cheerfully because Garrett and Company agreed to duplicate, pound for pound and ounce for ounce, every shipment of grub or gold they lost in transit. Some outfits charged plenty less, but the shipper had to stand all losses.

"Come over to Soapy Smith's place and I'll buy you a drink," Mike offers. As no true McGee ever kicked a dog or refused a drink, I accept on the spot. We have two drinks and I watch some of Soapy's honest, hard-workin' boys roll a drunk Swede and pinch his poke; then I ask Garrett how he's makin' out.

"You know my motto, No-Shirt," he answers, " 'Even hard luck turns out for the best in the long run.' "

"How come you believe in such a crazy motto?" I ask.

"If you remember we intended going on to Dawson. We lost our outfit in that stretch of bad water above Lake Bennett," he explains. "Well, that looked like tough luck, because we had to go back to Skagway for another outfit. We noticed that while most of the boys were getting their outfits through safely, all of them were worried, and again and again they said they'd pay plenty to be assured of a complete outfit when they reached Dawson. Right off the bat we decided we could make more money as shippers than as prospectors. And—we have. That's why all of us believe even hard luck turns out for the best."

"Come on over to the Pack Train," I suggest, "and we'll have a feed on me. I'm filthy with dust. Goin' home to see what a horse-car looks like and get some of ma's grub."

"They claim these electric cars are goin' to put the horses out of business," he says. "I suppose they'll find something to put the electric cars out of business, but I don't see what it can be."

"Maybe it'll be these new fangled horseless carriages we hear about," I says, laughing.

Us McGees are cards when we get a couple of drinks under our belts and everybody roared at that merry quip. Even a damned fool would know them horseless carriages never would work.

We're eatin' at the Pack Train when Mike Garrett says, "No-Shirt, as long as you're going to Seattle why not let me sign you on as guard? We are shipping a ton of gold for the Stribling Brothers. We'll pay your expenses and twenty-five dollars a day."

"Listen, Mike," I tell him, "you ain't got money enough to hire me as guard. I'll do it for nothin'. Now don't argue. If I ain't got nothin' to do on the run to Seattle some cardsharp will clean me slicker'n a whistle."

"We'll insist on paying your fare," Mike says.

"If it'll make you happy," I answer, "that's all right with me. Say, who's that elegant so-and-so just come in."

"Fellow named Markoff, the biggest gladhander and handsomest man in Skagway," Garrett answers. "He's a gold broker and is good for a grubstake if you have a likely prospect. He sings in one of the churches on Sunday. The *nice* women all like him. The girls below the line think he's hot stuff, too. He hasn't seen you before, so he'll be over."

And sure enough he comes over to our table and gives Garrett a chance to introduce us. He stands two inches over six feet and was built to absorb wear and tear. There's plenty of hardness in his steel blue eyes. He's got a heavy black moustache which is carefully trimmed and perfumed. Naturally he'd wear a boiled shirt. There was a diamond stud in the middle of it. And he wore links to match. He's got a gold nugget chain that runs clean across his vest.

He says he's heard a lot about me and is very glad to know me. He's a damned liar on two counts, but I don't tell him so. I shake hands. His hands are strong and smooth. Nowadays they'd claim he used some kind of lotion, but in them days a man's hands was smooth, hard, calloused or chapped dependin' on what he done with 'em. Markoff didn't do hard work, so I figgered he was one of them lucky cusses who're just naturally strong.

"I'm sending a gold shipment out, Garrett," he says, "I'd like you to insure it for me."

"Sorry," Mike Garrett says, "We've got all we can swing on the *Northlander.*

If you'll wait until the *Valencia* sails—"

"I'm sorry, old man," Markoff says, "but I'm afraid I'll have to take it myself. I've obligations to meet in Seattle and San Francisco."

"Some other time, maybe," Garrett suggests, "we're in business to stay."

NOW if Garrett's ton of gold had been in a solid block, guardin' it wouldn't have been necessary. But it was in dust and nuggets just as the Stribling brothers had turned it over to him. It came aboard in specially built boxes, like the banks and express companies used. Each box is twelve inches long, ten inches wide and six inches deep. The boards are screwed on and the heads of the screws went into countersunk holes. The heads were covered with wax on which was stamped the Garrett Company's seal. With all them safeguards you could tell whether anybody tampered with the boxes or not.

The purser's safe was already filled with moosehide pokes containin' gold the passengers was takin' South, so the ton shipment was stowed under the purser's bunk, which was located in his office.

As soon as the *Northlander* shoves off, me, Garrett and the purser had a session. It was agreed the room would never be left unguarded. We split the shifts so each man would have four hours on and eight hours off. We worked it so the purser could do his trick at the time his office was open for business with the passengers.

From the time the *Northlander* clears Skagway I'm popeyed. You must remember I'm a small-town boy. I'd never seen any of what the folks in our village called high life. There wasn't any high life on the boat goin' North. It was loaded with stampeders who'd put everything they had into their outfits.

Comin' out, it carried folks in steerage that the North had licked. In the first-class cabins it carried the boys and gals who was in the money. Champagne flows like water. There's a dance every afternoon and evenin', with the lads swingin' the gals in quadrilles until the tails of the skirts popped, or two-steppin' until they melted their ankles. None of the lazy stuff you see nowadays. Even the waltzes was fast.

Thousands of dollars in dust changed hands in the poker games which run twenty-four hours a day. Professional gamblers made big cleanups in a few hours. Nothin' like it was ever seen before. Nothin' like it will be seen again.

The purser could tell how most men's luck was runnin' by the gold they checked in and out. Me and Garrett had a fair idear, too, because we was around the office so much. Markoff was in the thick of everything. One hour he'd be dancin', the next buyin' champagne, and the next gamblin'. But I noticed while he was ready to buy, he drank mighty little hisself. Instead he smoked big black cigars.

Once when we landed at night I went ashore and looked at the *Northlander*, ablaze with lights from bow to stern, and I thought it must be unreal—a part of some fairy story. In a way it seems like that now, after all these years.

An hour after I went aboard again, the fog shut down—a cold, gray fog that covered the riggin' with ice. But the cold never got inside, except when somebody opened a door. It was hot with excitement, champagne and steam heat.

Me and Mike Garrett is standin' in a corner watchin' Markoff dance with Two-Step Mary when a shudder runs through the ship. If a mighty voice had bellowed, "Shut up!" it wouldn't have been quieter.

WE COULD all hear the throb of the engine, it was so still. Everybody was thinkin' about the *Islander* that struck a berg and how she went down. A second shock came and those standin' up went sprawlin'. A woman screams and a man yells, "To the boats!" He was half drunk or he wouldn't have done it.

"Be calm!" It's Markoff. You'd expect his breed to take charge at a time like that. "Make no effort to reach your personal belongings," he warns, "but pro-

ceed immediately and in an orderly manner to the lifeboats. Then, if danger is past, we'll be ordered to return below, or else given time to pick up our valuables before taking to the boats."

He opens the door and commences to help women through. "Here, Mr. McGee," he says, "take my place. My roommate was pretty drunk, he may be dead to the world." He hurries away, leaving me and Mike Garrett to do the honors.

The fog is pressin' in on all sides, and overhead I can hear the shufflin' feet of those who've got to the boatdeck. "Do you think we hit a berg?" I ask Garrett.

"It's possible," he answers, "though the skipper keeps pretty well offshore here. A current brings ice from a glacier and strands it in water the average steamer can pass safely through. He may have gotten off his course, though."

He breaks off suddenly. A man is screamin' all hell can't stop him from gettin' into a boat, and an officer is tryin' to calm him. Other passengers are gettin' excited. We can hear their feet bangin' the boatdeck. Then a big thud as the officer knocks the man cold. "Remain calm," the officer bellows, "the ship isn't making water. She won't sink. The captain can beach her. There are enough boats for all. Be calm, people. If you get excited, someone will be hurt."

We can hear his voice boomin' through the fog as he stops a panic cold. Deck lights are castin' somber glows over parka-clad men when I reach the boatdeck. Here and there a man is comfortin' a woman. Most of the fast girls are wearin' evenin' gowns. They shake in the cold, and the fog falls so fast on their hair it makes it look gray.

Men hurry below to get their coats. Markoff dashes past me to the bridge. The skipper whirls, ready to raise hell with anybody who comes there at such a time. He recognizes Markoff and says, "Oh, it's you?"

"The purser sent me up to ask for instructions, sir," Markoff says. "He is wondering about the gold."

"Instruct him to stand by," the captain answers. "If a landing is necessary we'll put the passengers on the beach first, then the gold. The mate and chips are below checking on the damage. We hit a berg. Glancing blow, fortunately."

The carpenter hurries up and I can't hear his report, but I get the drift all right, because officers come among the passengers and tell them to get their coats. "We were ordered to the boats, Captain," Garrett says, "shall we stay here, or report to the purser?"

"Report to the purser," the skipper answers. "If it is necessary to hurry matters, he will be notified."

Garrett leads the way to the maindeck. We hear a woman screamin', "Let me out!" I yank on the knob and realize the door has jammed. The ship had hit that berg pretty hard to jam doors. I hurl my weight against it a couple of times, then it splinters instead of openin'.

The woman runs out in her nightgown. Garrett pushes her back into the cabin and tells her to get some clothes on. She's hysterical and so we both stay near the door to make sure she dresses and calms down. A sailor takes her to the boatdeck and we hurry to the purser's office.

The door is locked and the lights are off. We bang away at the door and yell. There's no answer. "He's locked up and gone to his boat," Garrett says. We both hurry to the boat, but the boat's crew say they haven't seen him.

Boats commence goin' over the side to the water. Somebody empties a five-gallon tin of coal oil over a heap of driftwood and touches a match. We can see a dull glow in the fog. The boats come back and pick up loads of blankets to keep the people warm. Other fires blaze up and everybody gets warm and begins to make a lark of it.

I chase up to the bridge and tell the skipper the purser's office door is locked and nobody answers. "And nobody's seen him, either. His boat went ashore without him," I add.

He sends one of the mates and the car-

penter to open the door. They have to open it with bars. The purser ain't there. Somebody's tried to get into the safe and failed. Garrett drops to his knees and looks under the bunk. "Gold's gone!" he gasps.

I can tell by his voice, it's a blow below the belt. Garrett Company had insured the shipment against perils of the sea, but had taken over guarding it themselves. They'd have to pay Stribling Brothers for the loss.

A FEW minutes later the skipper is on the job, making a personal inspection of every little thing, and shooting questions right and left. A ton of gold had vanished into thin air, so had the purser.

The skipper reasons the thieves hadn't broken into the safe, otherwise the door would have been left open. "And don't get the idea the purser made off with the gold," he says, turnin' suddenly on Garrett. "I've sailed with him for years. He's honest. I'm afraid he's been murdered and the gold stolen."

"How could anyone or several people, dispose of a body and make off with a ton of gold?" Garrett asks. "Somebody's been on deck ever since we left Skagway. If they weren't cooling off after too much liquor, they were trying to walk off a hangover. Besides, no boat was missing. That gold's aboard."

"If it's aboard, we'll find it," the skipper said.

Me and Garrett went ashore. He's pretty sick. "We can pay the Stribling Brothers in full," he says, "but only if we write up the value of our express business to the limit, throw in every pound of food we have in our warehouses and toss every cent we possess into the pot."

He's pretty smart, even if he's only twenty-five years old. He reasons whoever turned the trick worked at high speed, with nerves strained to the breakin' point. There's bound to be a reaction and he starts lookin' for signs. The trouble is, everybody's been through danger and all of 'em are lettin' down.

Garrett spends two hours prowlin' 'round the campfires, studyin' folks. On most faces there is relief. It makes 'em laugh easy and over little things that wouldn't get a rise ordinarily. They're all tickled to death to be alive.

"Markoff's the man," Garrett said at last. Not likin' the cuss, I'm ready to believe anything. Kids are that way, but I like Garrett. He's all wool and a yard wide. I don't want him to make a mistake, and tell him so. "I've thought of that, too, No-Shirt. Markoff was the calm man at the time of the crash. His type stays calm afterward. But he's tense now. Something else has come up."

We go over and start talkin' to him. His perfect moustache is awry. Several crimson dots on his scalp show where hair's been torn out by the roots. His boiled shirt is crumpled and the diamond stud is missin'.

"You lost your stud," I say, "that's too bad."

He looks down, as if he was half-scared. "When did that happen?" he says thickly. "I went below to arouse my roommate and got caught in a mob. Had a little trouble bringing a hysterical woman to the deck. She scratched and pulled hair, but I don't remember her touching my shirtfront." His eyes narrow. Either he's sincere, or a damned good actor. "Maybe she wasn't hysterical," he says softly. "Maybe it was an act to give her a chance to pinch my stud?"

Others was scratched up some, too, so scratches didn't prove a thing. "He's a cool one," I says to Garrett. "You can't prove a thing on him."

"I'm going to do my damndest," Garrett answers. We go aboard ship as soon as it's daylight. The skipper is in a dangerous mood. The quartermaster's found a small piece of a kid's magnet near the compass. It's a lead-pipe cinch it was planted there to throw the ship onto the beach durin' the fog. If we hadn't struck the bergs a glancin' blow we'd have landed there, too, with most of the ship's bottom left on the rocks.

Whoever attempted that job was after a million dollars' worth of gold. They prob'ly figgered the *Northlander* would hang onto the rocks, everybody would go ashore and their pardners in a small boat nearby could make a quick raid. They'd figgered on everything but bergs, drawin' more water than the ship, and strandin' well out beyond the rocks.

"Confidentially, Captain," Garrett says, "Markoff's your man."

The skipper roared with disgust. "You're crazy, Garrett," he shouts. "That man's worth millions, or will be some of these days. He isn't crazy enough to do a thing of this kind."

"May be he's in a financial jam and we don't know it," Garrett argues. "He makes friends with everyone, learns their business. He's a gold broker and he knows what's going through. He had the confidence of the purser; of you. He's one man not likely to be suspected. Between the time he went below to get a drunk roommate and when he landed, a good hour elapsed. There was plenty of confusion. People were thinking of themselves. They wouldn't notice whether the purser's office was locked or not. And if they did they'd conclude he had gone to his boat station."

"You'd better forget this Markoff theory," the skipper advised, "or you'll be laughed out of Alaska."

"Another thing, if an unknown man tried to market stolen gold," Garrett argued, "he might be spotted. But a gold broker can put hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth through the assay office and banks and never be questioned."

"That's true," the skipper admitted, "but don't go around accusing Markoff. He's not only liable to take it out of your hide and sue you for damages, but you'll never do business again."

DURIN' the next twenty-four hours they made a survey of the *Northlander* and found she could make it safely to Seattle. At the same time they searched for the missin' purser and the ton of gold.

As soon as the ship docks in Seattle the company puts armed guards around the wharf. A safe expert opens the safe and the contents was found untouched. The miners got their gold, but the guards stayed. Every piece of cargo was examined before it was took to the wharf, then they searches the *Northlander* from top to bottom. Not a trace of gold or purser was found.

I delay my trip home, because Garrett is pretty well down in the dumps. I don't dare mention his motto about hard luck turnin' out for the best in the long run.

A couple of boats later the rest of the Garrett outfit comes to Seattle. The Stribling brothers are along, too. Now mind you, there ain't a scrap of paper showin' the Garrett company is responsible for that gold shipment. In them days big deals was put through and a man's word was good.

"We owe you three hundred thousand," Mike Garrett tells the Stribling brothers. "We can't pay that in cash, but we can give you our business at a fair figure. If that don't cover the loss, we'll pay it as fast as we can earn it."

"You're making a success of the business," the oldest Stribling boys says, "and we might ruin it. Our mines are paying all we can use right now. Suppose you give us a note for three hundred thousand dollars. Put the interest rate at five percent. Pay when you can and it'll be all right with us."

The note was signed a half hour later and everybody had a drink. After that, Mike Garrett hired two men—one to watch Markoff, the other to go to the spot where the *Northlander* hit the berg and stay there. He had an idea the gold had been throwed overboard and Markoff would show up sometime with divers.

He never did!

He did offer the Garrett Company two hundred thousand for their business a year after the gold was lost. I was up North at the time. "Do you know," Mike Garrett said to me, "I've been expecting that offer for a year now. I've thought

over the whole affair a lot. I think Markoff had two plans in his head when that ton of gold disappeared. First, the gold; secondly, he hoped the Stribling boys would force a sale and he could pick up our business. Through it, he was making a bid to control an empire."

"It raised hell with your plans," I says.

"Yes," he answers, "It did. We expected to make a cleanup in five or ten years, then take our families and see the world while we were all young enough to enjoy it. Now—well, that's a long way over the horizon, unless that ton of gold turns up."

If you've made trips through Alaska in the last thirty-five years you've seen some of the Garrett Company's stores and tradin' posts. None of 'em are large. The company hasn't had the money to expand. There's been a steady drain as it reduced the note. Some years they couldn't even pay the interest. Other years, they'd pay as much as twenty-five thousand dollars on the note. And they never stopped watchin' Markoff.

The man was always developin' somethin'. Maybe it would be low-grade ground in Alaska; or some salmon packin' proposition. The next thing he'd pop up in some growin' town and put a real estate division on the market. Always he had the grand manner; always somebody was left holdin' the bag when things went wrong; always he skims the cream when things went right.

I had my ups and downs, too, but I never forgot that ton of gold. I'd set and figger by the hour what I'd do if I wanted to steal that much dust and not get caught. I always come around to the same answer—I'd cache it aboard until I could get it off.

WHEN war breaks out in China and Japan needs iron and steel, a lot of old sailing ships and steamers was busted up into scrap. It didn't surprise me none when Markoff goes into the scrap business. Sometimes he'd buy a old ship, fill her with scrap and sell her to the Japanese. Again he'd break 'em up hisself and the silk liners would take the scrap back with 'em.

He must've handled fifteen or twenty old steamers and wind-jammers before he bought the *Northlander*. She was famous now. She'd brought grub North so long, and taken gold and miners back, that she was almost a legend. Sourdoughs loved her and there was quite a roar when she was taken off the Northern run. The owners explained the gov'ment wouldn't let her operate across the Gulf of Alaska any more. They put on another and better ship. But she wasn't the *Northlander*. You've got to be a sourdough to know how we felt.

Markoff was smart. He waited until protests had died down before sendin' her to his boneyard to be broken up. A big crew of men worked for weeks day and night, with Markoff on the job. Then when the torches commenced eatin' into the frames and bulkheads, he lays off his crews. He tells 'em the Japs won't meet his price. But he says they have to have the scrap and it's only a question of time until they'll meet his figger.

Right then is when I sent word to Mike Garrett. The Garrett Company's had three years of hard times and ain't been able to pay the interest on the last thirty thousand dollars. The Stribling boys have died and their heirs are howlin' for the balance due.

Mike Garrett comes down from Alaska on a Canadian steamer and I meet him in Vancouver. There's no need of lettin' Markoff know he's come South. If the man's got a guilty conscience he's liable to stop his plans. "I may be raisin' false hopes, Mike," I tell him, "but after all these years things are beginnin' to make a pattern."

"It's too much to hope for," he says, "and it don't make sense to me."

"What don't?"

"Caching gold dust on a ship that can't be reached until the ship's broken up forty years later," he says.

"I don't think he planned it that way," I argue. "Somethin' went wrong with his

plans. Well, you can't very well buy a steamer and start tearin' it apart without causin' comment. He had to wait until the *Northlander* was sold for scrap-iron. He tried to buy her ten years ago, but the company wouldn't sell. She was too popular with the oldtimers."

I felt sorry for Garrett. He wanted to hope, but he was afraid to. I'd rented a couple of rooms in a cheap hotel overlookin' the wharf where they're breakin' up the *Northlander*. I took Mike there and give him a pair of binoculars.

Her salt-sprayed stack and masts was layin' in heaps of other junk. Her ribs was showin' where the plates had been taken off and she makes you think of somethin' beautiful bein' et by buzzards.

For two weeks we took turns watchin' the *Northlander*. Sometimes Markoff would work nights. Sometimes he fooled around in the day time. Nobody bothered him as he'd leased the wharf and nobody had business there. He kept the doors and gates locked, but we found a way to sneak in.

The fifteenth night we got there ahead of him. We sneak aboard the hulk and get down behind a heap of scrap. He's nervous and drawn. He takes up a torch and cuts through a bulkhead plate and it falls back with a clangin' sound. He listens several minutes, then he turns a flashlight into the space between the double-bulkhead plates.

He goes to work with the torch again and slices out a big square of plate. We get a whiff of burnin' wood and somethin' else. "Burning wax!" Garrett whispers, rememberin' wax was put over the countersunk screw heads.

That plate clatters down and for a few seconds before Markoff turns off his light we can see boxes of gold in the space. After a long time he turns on the light again. He leaves it on a section of deck, picks up a box of gold and moves slowly to a car he's got parked at the foot of the gangway.

He comes back for a second box, then a third. Mike Garrett leans over and whispers, "There's a main switch over there, used when they worked nights on the hulk. I'm going to throw it. You can be a witness," he adds, and I know from the tone of his voice the weight of the burden he's carried all these years has left him in cold rage. "But, No-Shirt, you're to keep out of it."

HE CRAWLS to the switch, fifty feet from where Markoff is bendin' over a box of gold. When Markoff gets it into his arm, Mike throws the switch and it seems like every cubic foot of the hulk is flooded with light.

Markoff stands there paralyzed. Then his eyes sweep around. He only sees Garrett standin' there. He drops the box and the two of 'em rush at each other. They're both sixty-five years old, but they're fit. Garrett's kept fit by hard work in his tradin' posts and on the trail. Markoff has boxed, played golf and handball.

They meet swinging, Garrett backed by forty years' accumulation of rage; Markoff by fear of what's ahead. Within a minute Markoff's fist catches Garrett flush on the jaw. He goes down, but gets up again. He figgers he hasn't a chance boxing. He hasn't the skill. He steps inside the next punch and drags Markoff to the steel deck.

They roll over and over, kickin' and sluggin', with now and then a little kneein' and gougin'. Handball is good for the wind, but days on the trail makes a man harder. Toughness began to tell and pretty soon Garrett slugged Markoff into unconsciousness.

"Go over to the wharf telephone and call the police," Garrett tells me.

I make the call in less than a minute. Markoff is still dazed when I get back. He don't see me. "Listen, Mike," he's sayin' thickly, "we can fix this up. I'll walk away and leave you the gold, the scrap—everything."

"Wouldn't you like to walk away?" Garrett pants. "I can see the purser's skeleton down there. Murder's murder, even after forty years."

"You can't prove a thing on me," Markoff says desperately. "Sure, I bought the *Northlander* for scrap. I found gold and a skeleton. Before I can do anything about it you jump me. Okay, I've given you a chance to clean up big, and you turn me down. I'll fight you to the last ditch."

"The gold is already mine," Garret says, "and—" He stops and Markoff turns pale. There's a police siren dronin' along the waterfront and it ends its whine on the wharf near Markoff's car. I'd unlocked the gate from the inside when I went to telephone.

Markoff sees the cops, then sees me. "McGee! I might've known it! You're the one who brought Garrett here."

"Sure," I answer cheerfully, "I had a hunch."

WHILE the cops are askin' Garrett what it's all about, I'm searchin' amongst the bones with a flashlight. Suddenly there's a answerin' flash. Markoff fairly dives into the bulkhead space, but I crack him on the noggin' with the flashlight, and down he goes.

"He wants to dispose of that little trinket down there," I says, "it's the link connectin' him with the crime. It's the stud tore from the front of his boiled shirt the night he killed the purser."

They pick up the stud, mixed with hand-bones. It's tarnished, but there're plenty to prove it belongs to Markoff. And that's what cracked him.

The cuss was yellow, just as I figgered, and he spills his insides, as the feller says, in the hope he'll get off with a life sentence. It seems he was a mess boy in the days when the *Northlander* was on the China run. She had a different name in them days. They had trouble with pirates. A secret compartment was built in the space between the bulkheads, and entrance to it was concealed by panels in the purser's office. In case pirates boarded the ship, the valuables in the safe could be shifted into the compartment in a hurry. The idea was to leave enough in the safe to fool the pirates and save the rest.

As the *Northlander* was the crack ship of the run, she sometimes carried millions of dollars' worth of jewels and the like when them Indian princes traveled.

Markoff remembers the compartment when he hears the ship is on the Alaska run. He figgers nobody else knows about it, or has forgotten if they'd ever heard. It looks like a cinch robbery as he planned it. He expected to beach the ship, shift the gold durin' the excitement, then get it again when the *Northlander* was laid up some winter.

The purser recognizes him and puts up a fight. He kills the purser and shoves his remains into the compartment. Then he tackles the safe and can't open it. Next he dumps Garrett's ton of gold into the compartment. And right there was where he made another mistake. The floor in the compartment wasn't made to stand any such weight.

It broke out, droppin' the whole business between the bulkheads.

Markoff came clean, to the last detail. And maybe that had somethin' to do with it, or maybe it was because the judge was old and he didn't think Markoff had many years left either. Anyway, he gets life imprisonment.

And what did No-Shirt McGee get? Garrett tries to press fifty thousand on me, but I ain't takin' dust from an old friend, specially when I've had a lot of fun helpin' him. Six months later I'm on the wharf when the various members of Garrett Company start on their long-postponed trip around the world. There're children and grandchildren—so many they almost have to charter the steamer.

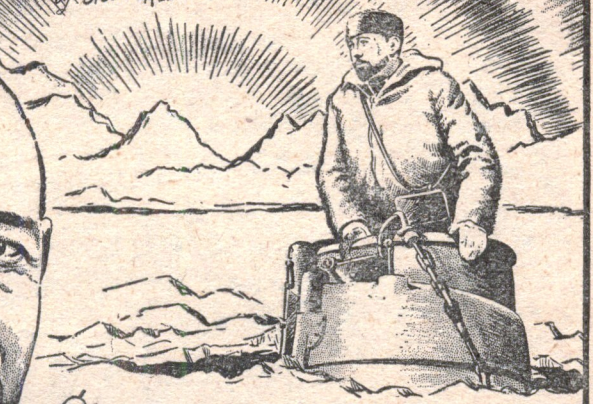
"Well, No-Shirt," Mike Garrett says, "Even this early-day hard luck turned out for the best in the long run. That ton of gold is worth almost two and a half times as much as it was forty years ago. It's a good thing it is, otherwise Garrett Company couldn't take all these kids along and do a lot of development work it is planning in Alaska."

MEN of DARING

by Spook Allen

Sir Hubert Wilkins

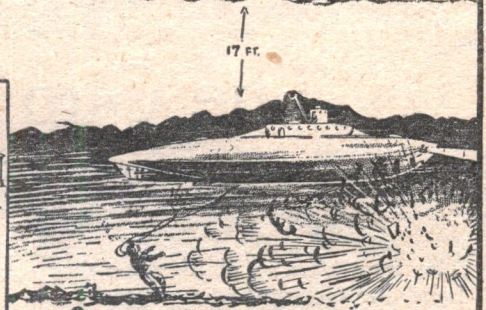
FROM HIS YOUTH HE HAS FREQUENTED THE DANGEROUS SPOTS OF THE EARTH. ALTHOUGH BORN IN AUSTRALIA AND KNIGHTED BY THE KING OF ENGLAND, AMERICA HAS A RIGHT TO CLAIM HIM BECAUSE HE LIVES IN THE U.S.A. WHEN NOT EXPLORING OR FIGHTING.



THE WORLD HAS BEEN HIS OYSTER

Sir Hubert has opened endless ice to man's gaze. Not content with venturing over and above the ice pack of the frozen Arctic, he was the first man to venture UNDER the wastes of the polar sea. In his submarine, the Nautilus he did one of the most hazardous feats ever attempted.

HE RECEIVED THE BRITISH MILITARY CROSS FOR BRAVERY IN THE WORLD WAR. AS A PHOTOGRAPHER HE TOOK PART IN MORE BATTLES THAN ANY AUSTRALIAN OFFICER. HE ALSO SERVED IN THE BALKAN WAR.

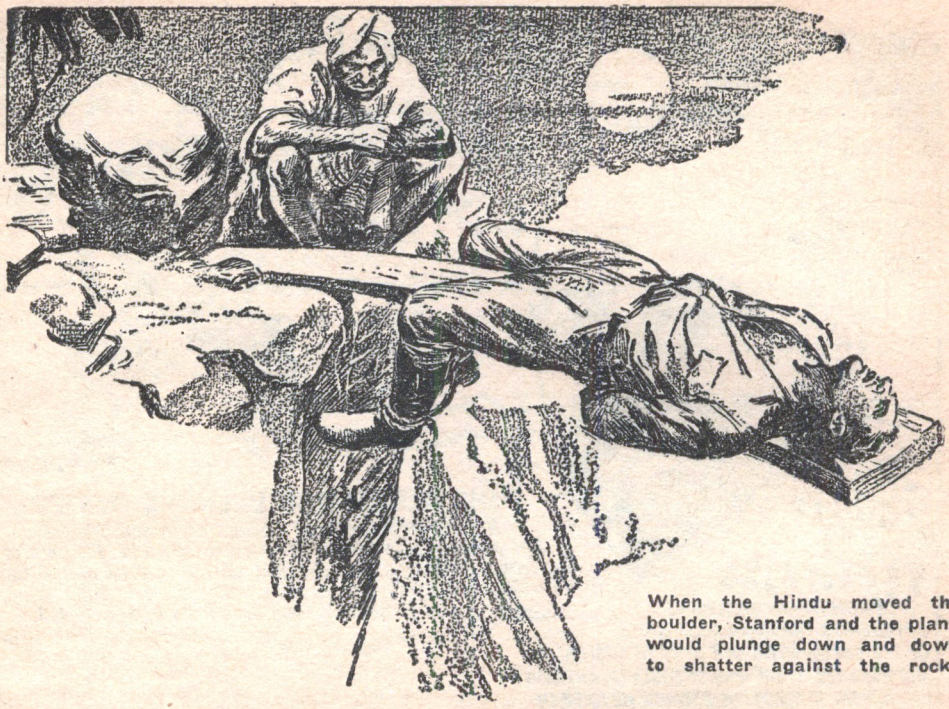


ONCE, WHILE UNDER 17 FEET OF ICE, AN OBSTRUCTION HAD THE SUB TRAPPED. FRANK CRILLEY, THE EXPEDITION'S DIVER, DESCENDED TO THE BOTTOM AND PLACED A BOMB UNDER THE BARRIER AND BLEW IT WELL TOWARD THE OTHER POLE. THEY WERE SAVED!

HE CAME OUT OF THE WORLD WAR AN EXPERT FLYER WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR THE SUCCESS OF HIS AMAZING POLAR FLIGHTS.

ODDLY ENOUGH HIS CLOSEST CALL WITH DEATH CAME IN HIS OWN AUSTRALIA AMONG THE ABORIGINES, STRANGEST OF ALL HUMANS. ONLY HIS COOLNESS AND IRON NERVE SAVED HIM.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



When the Hindu moved the boulder, Stanford and the plank would plunge down and down to shatter against the rocks

The Cup of Satan

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

Author of "The Magic Monkeys," "The Beast of Allah," etc.

The man on the plank was tied hand and foot with the great abyss yawning below; only his brain was not bound, and only his brain could save him

CAPTAIN STANFORD of the Baluchistan Police opened his eyes. Immediately he closed them again with a groan. Pain like the hot stab of a dagger had shot through his head. What a hangover, was his first hazy thought. What a devilish variety and inordinate quantity of strong liquors he must have imbibed to have made him feel like this!

Then he made other discoveries that didn't seem to accord with the hangover theory. He was lying on his back on a narrow plank. His arms were tied behind him. His legs hung one on each side of the plank and were tied to it and also bound together loosely at the ankles. He was excessively cold, there was a taste like blood and glue in his mouth. And he felt—

He couldn't define his last sensation. He had never felt anything quite like it before. A feeling of dizziness—of—of swinging in space. An unstable, giddy feeling as if he were hanging precariously at the end of a rope. A rocking, swaying feeling as if the world had dropped away leaving him floating on this plank among the stars.

There was a multitude of stars. When he opened his eyes again he could see myriads all around, twinkling in the vast black bowl of sky in which he hung. But what the devil? His tent, his mosquito curtain? He'd gone to bed the night before in his forty-pounder with the curtain lowered

over the camp-bed. And Maul Singh? Where was Maul Singh, and what the blazes had happened?

Feebly he called the name of his Sikh orderly. Someone, who was not Maul Singh and who appeared to be only a few feet distant, laughed derisively. Then he heard a harsh voice speaking Pushtu:

"*Salaam,* Stanford Sahib. This is Pir Khan who speaks. There is a debt between us, and tonight it must be paid in full!"

By the way he shouted it sounded as if Pir Khan were almost mad with triumph and excitement.

STANFORD made no reply. He lay like a frozen body on that mysterious, unstable plank that seemed to have no connection with solid earth, trying to puzzle out what had happened.

Pir Khan? There was no mystery about Pir Khan. He was an Afridi outlaw, a man notorious for his cunning, his cruelty and his strength. A Robin Hood of the Gomal Hills, the placing of whom in the Perrin Jail a few months previously on a charge of robbery and murder had been the biggest achievement of Stanford's official career.

Unfortunately Pir Khan had escaped from Perrin Jail. *Most* unfortunately, Stanford thought grimly. And evidently he hadn't fled across the Border as had been believed. He'd been hiding in these hills, waiting for his chance of revenge.

Stanford's memory was returning. He could remember now setting out with Maul Singh, his Sikh orderly, on a leopard-hunting expedition. Rather a silly thing to have done in these danger-haunted Gomal Hills. But he was young and he liked taking risks. And he hadn't dreamed that Pir Khan would be lurking in the hills like a human tiger . . .

Last night? . . . He could remember now that on the previous afternoon they —that was to say Maul Singh and the two police sepoys who had brought up the equipment from Perrin—had pitched the tiny camp on a spot not far from the edge of a four-hundred-foot cliff. Then the sepoys had departed with the mules leaving Maul Singh and himself alone. Maul Singh had lighted a fire and they had turned in early in preparation for an arduous hunt on the following day.

He could see himself climbing into his sleeping bag. And then? Fearful, nightmarish memories his mind couldn't assemble. The sound of a shot followed by a scream. Himself struggling to get clear of the mosquito curtain . . . He hadn't been able to find his revolver. There had been a moment of blind panic and horror. . . .

Someone, probably Maul Singh, had yelled something. Another shot had crashed out, and then suddenly it had been as if a grizzly bear had charged into his tent. His throat had been seized, he had been flung down and then there'd been a shock as if a rock had fallen on his head. . . .

So the bear had been Pir Khan! Pir Khan who had raided the camp, shot Maul Singh and knocked himself unconscious. But what in the name of the devil had Pir Khan done to him now?

HE WAS afraid to move. The plank felt so insecure that it seemed as if the slightest movement might cause it to fall.

The upper part of his body had not been fastened to the plank. With infinite caution he raised himself to a sitting position, feeling the plank bend as he did so.

By the moonlight he could see at last where he was. He was straddling the end of the plank, which protruded over the cliff-edge. At the further end his weight was balanced by a huge stone placed on the plank. And beneath him—so far below that it made his head swim—the great boulders at the base of the cliff shone like polished skulls in the moonlight.

He had been placed on the plank so that when he sat up he faced the cliff. Only a few feet distant on the security of the rock squatted Pir Khan. He was entirely at his ease. He had rekindled the

remains of the previous night's fire; strewn all around him were the articles he had looted from the tent.

Stanford could see him as clearly as if they had been in the same lighted room. Matted beard, sloping forehead, thick body and cunning, bestial features, the Afridi looked more like a gorilla than a man. Low, depraved and brutal. A wild beast who had lived a wild beast's life in these bitter hills.

Like any monkey he was pawing over things he had taken from the tent. The rifles and the revolvers he understood; other articles were to him but mysterious toys belonging to the white man. Ever and anon he paused to look at his captive. And when he did that his expression was a blend of triumph, gratified cruelty and—anxiety. Utterly helpless as the white man appeared to be, the Afridi still dreaded his superior wits.

When he saw Stanford sitting up his hand went quickly to the rifle lying at his side in a menacing gesture.

"Are you looking for the Sikh dog who was thy servant?" he snarled. "Look down and you will see him. After I had shot him I tossed him over the cliff and he is down there—smashed as if he had been a bird's egg."

Stanford threw a horrified glance down. Directly below him, spread-eagled on one of the cruel boulders, there lay something that looked like a little black doll . . .

PIR KHAN'S idea of fastening his prisoner to a plank and suspending him over space had not been original.

In the Afridi villages in that quarter of the Furious Gomal it was a comon form of punishing malefactors. Usually a water-cask with a slow leak was placed on the land-end of the plank of death. As the water gradually escaped the cask became more and more light, until it was overbalanced by the victim's weight and he fell.

The torture lay in the waiting. Men often went mad under the strain. And it was good sport for the spectators to sit around and watch and make bets as to how long the gibbering wretch had still to live.

Pir Khan had had no water-cask, but the plank—which Sepoy Maul Singh had found the previous day and carried to the camp with an idea of using it as firewood—had given him the notion of torturing the white man in the traditional fashion.

Had Stanford been a heavy man, the Afridi would have found getting him into the required position over the edge of the cliff beyond his strength. But Stanford was light and Pir Khan himself was heavy and as strong as a bear. After tying Stanford astride the plank he had contrived to push him out until he overhung the cliff; the great stone he had placed on the other end of the plank acting as a pivot.

And there he was! More helpless than a mouse in a trap! Utterly at the mercy of his captor, a dangling, ludicrous object to be gloated over and mocked at at leisure.

The dreaded white man! Pir Khan intended to keep him there as long as he was capable of feeling fear and pain. He would play with him, tease him until he went mad. Pretend to move the stone and then not do so. Let the plank slip a little and then secure it again. No man's nerves could endure the strain. Long before he fell Stanford would have died a thousand deaths. He would be laughing, crying and shouting and jerking his body in anticipation of the cruel impact of the boulders.

He would be very thristy, too, before he died. Just now it was bitterly cold up on the cliff, but in a few hours the Gomal sun would be beating down out of a cloudless sky. The white man would fry on the plank like a piece of skewered meat. He would call for water—and perhaps Pir Khan would pass him some. Water mixed with salt which he would gulp in his frenzy.

Stanford had again lain back upon the plank of death. Nor would he move for

all the Afridi's taunts. Even when Pir Khan flung stones at him, put his foot on the plank and made it rock and spring like a branch in a high wind, he remained as still as if he were already dead.

The Afridi snarled and turned back to his examination of the articles he had looted from the tent. A sporting gun, a service rifle (the property of the late Maul Singh), Stanford's revolver and a hunting dagger were the spoils he appreciated most. He understood their purposes; the other things he fingered ignorantly as a monkey would have done. There was a prismatic compass, a pair of binoculars and a safety razor that seemed to him mysterious, possibly dangerous things. Black magic of the Unbeliever! He put them aside together, intending to sell them when opportunity should offer.

THE clothes and the camp-kit interested him but little. He turned his attention to the commissary department and stuffed himself with biscuits and marmalade and raw sausages.

There was no *mullah* present to see him defiling himself with food prepared by an Unbeliever. He smelt and tasted and devoured everything that took his fancy. Tea and sugar he scooped out of the cannisters and devoured in his fingers. His gastronomic experiments were not all successful. A cake of scented soap for instance was too much for even his Afridi palate, and a mouthful of the contents of a beer bottle he spat out again in disgust.

Finally he found a flask of brandy. He drank it neat and thought it poor, tasteless stuff compared to the rice-toddy flavored with resin that was his accustomed drink. Still, the stuff warmed him. He threw the empty flask away and lit one of Stanford's cheroots, sucking the smoke native-fashion through his curved hands.

All this time the white man had not moved. His face showed as white as a statue's in the moonlight and there was a dark stain on the plank where his head rested. Had he died already from cold and loss of blood? Or was he shamming? He seemed helpless as a trapped mouse, but Allah alone knew the cunning of these white dogs.

Pir Khan took a rifle. By holding it at arm's-length and leaning as far as he dared over the edge of the cliff he was able to prod Stanford's knee with the muzzle.

"Rouse yourself, Unbeliever! In a few moments I am going to raise the stone and let the plank drop. When I have counted ten you will go hurtling down to your death. One—two—three . . ."

Ah, that was better! The white man was sitting up now and staring at him wild-eyed with terror. The sport was about to begin. Like a contented cat the Afridi squatted down with his hand on the stone that held the plank. He was laughing.

"Yes, when I've counted ten I will move the stone, *sahib*. Or, perhaps, you would like to live a little longer? Shall I wait until it is dawn? No, it is cold on this cliff. I think I shall make an end."

"Stop!" Stanford's voice was a scream. "You are a fool if you kill me. Think of the punishment that will certainly follow. You will be caught and hanged and burned in the skin of an unclean animal so that you can never hope to reach Paradise. If you spare my life I will reward you like a prince. You will be given a pardon and made rich for life. I swear it. I swear it by—"

Then he screamed again, for Pir Khan's answer had been to raise the stone so that the plank tilted horribly.

"It would seem," Pir Khan grinned, "that you are very afraid to die, *sahib*. This is not how I had expected to see an officer of the British Raj facing death. And if you are like this now, how will you be in a few hours time? Let me hear you scream again, *sahib*. Scream so loudly that your friends can hear you in Fort Perrin. Or see if you can arouse the Sikh where he lies on the rocks down there. Scream as loudly as that, *sahib*, and I swear I will spare your life."

And Stanford obliged him with a scream

that rang round that desolate place like the voice of terror itself.

FOR some hours the "sport" continued. When dawn came it found the white man too exhausted to utter a sound.

Again he was lying frozen on the plank of death. Do what he would the Afridi could not arouse him. To rock the plank, strike him with the rifle and pelt him with stones was of on avail. He seemed to have lost consciousness from sheer terror.

But he would wake up again and then the fun could recommence. Pir Khan composed himself beside the fire to wait. At last he saw his prey make a feeble movement.

"Hola, *sahib!*" he shouted. "Have you waked up at last? It is a comfortable bed I have provided, is it not?"

The answer was a moan. "I am cold . . . In the name of Allah who is All-Merciful and Compassionate, move the stone and let me die quickly."

The Afridi jeered. "Don't be so impatient, *sahib*. Your death will come soon enough."

"Then I wish I could at least die warm. Will you not give me a drink? There is *sherab* (wine) in that black bottle. Let me drink some before I die."

Pir Khan lifted the bottle he had already sampled and held it tantalizingly before the prisoner's eyes.

"Is this the wine, Unbeliever? Then you must have a stomach like a jackal! For my part I would rather drink rifle oil."

The white man uttered a croaking laugh.

"You speak ignorantly. Mixed with sugar and made very hot that wine is a drink fit for kings. It tastes like milk and honey; it warms the body and gives peace and contentment to the mind. Had I but some of it now I could mock death."

"It must indeed be potent if it could give courage to such a coward as thou," Pir Khan grunted. "Anyway, I will test your words and if the wine be good I will drink it myself."

The man on the plank of death raised himself to watch. His face was white; despite the cold, perspiration streamed down his forehead.

"You must heat it slowly, Pir Khan. Put sugar in that saucepan. Now pour the wine in and place it on the embers. Keep stirring, keep stirring . . . Don't let it boil . . ."

"It smells like—" Pir Khan began.

And then it happened. There was a bang and a sheet of blue flame that enveloped the Afridi.

He leapt to his feet. He was a pillar of blue fire from head to foot. And from the swaying plank the white man shouted his derision.

"Wine to warm you, Pir Khan! Scream . . . Scream so that Maul Singh can hear!"

Pir Khan heard nothing. He was blind, reeling, beating at the flames like a man beset by wasps. A longdrawn howl such as a tortured animal might have uttered, and then he dived from the cliff, a human rocket with a tail of fire.

Stanford's bonds had been tied by an inexpert hand. Before long he had freed himself and had crawled with infinite caution to the safety of the cliff.

He looked down at the empty bottle and laughed. Petrol! Petrol he had brought to use in his spirit-stove.

And it had avenged Maul Singh!

All through those nights the man named "Smith" had hacked at those walls . . . to what purpose?

Cancelled In Red

By HUGH PENTECOST

MAX ADRIAN was a stamp-dealer, and the sort of gyp artist whose victims line up in rows to get a crack at him. There was Lon Nicholas who was certain that Adrian was the mysterious Mr. Ribero, who had cheated him of forty thousand dollars and driven him out of business years before. There was Larry Storm whose path had crossed Adrian's devious trail scores of times, and who had sworn that he would see to it that Adrian ended up "on the street or in the river!"—a threat unfortunately overheard by Inspector Bradley on the afternoon that Larry had prevented Lon Nicholas from killing Adrian.

There was Lucia Warren whose father's priceless collection, when auctioned off by Adrian, had brought far less than the price it should have. At first Lucia believed that Larry had cheated her father when selling him the stamps, but Larry convinces her of his honesty and promises to help her prove that Adrian had juggled the Warren collection before putting it up for sale.

There was Ezra Luckman, whose standing request for a rare Newfoundland stamp Adrian had ignored when Jasper Hale had offered a bigger price. There was Howard Stevens for whose collection Adrian had paid much less than the salvage value. There were plenty of others.

And then someone killed Adrian, and Inspector Bradley found himself faced with an incredible mare's nest of suspects.

LUCIA WARREN discovers the body when she goes to accuse Adrian of cheating her. She leaves his office in a panic. Recalling that she must have left fingerprints all over the room, even on the gun that was lying on the desk, she calls Larry.

Larry, worried by the disappearance of

This story began in the Argosy for May 6

Lon Nicholas and Bones, the office boy Larry had left to guard him, promises to do what he can to help Lucia, much to the chagrin of his worried secretary, Ellen Dixon.

He goes to Adrian's office and discovers that the police, summoned by an anonymous phone call, are ahead of him. He is relieved but mystified to learn that the gun Lucia saw has disappeared. The police have found her catalogue, but Larry convinces them she left it on an earlier visit that afternoon. Books of precious stamps are scattered around the inspection room, as if someone had been searching for a particular item—but nothing, apparently, is missing.

Inspector Bradley follows Larry to Lucia's apartment when he goes there to advise her what to tell the police. Bradley deftly manages to secure Lucia's fingerprints; he also accuses Larry of withholding important information.

BRADLEY learns that the offer for Luckman's Newfoundland stamp had been made not by Hale—who is not interested in any Newfoundland issues—but by Paul Gregory, Hale's secretary-agent. Larry wonders about this, and wonders why Gregory had begged him to secure for him a duplicate of the rarest stamps in Hale's possession, explaining that he had destroyed it accidentally.

Meanwhile Lon Nicholas, roaring drunk, turns up at Larry's apartment and swears that he has not gone near Adrian all evening. Bones, who had been watching for Nicholas near Adrian's office, is still missing. Did he see the murderer enter the building? And has that murderer taken steps to make sure that Bones will not tell what he knows?

Larry wishes he could find out . . . and wishes he could forget Bradley's tone when he said: "You know, Storm, I ought to slap you in jail right now. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

THE BOTTLE WITH THE TREE

THERE was a pause, brief, ominous and uncomfortable. It seemed to Larry, who couldn't think of what to say next, much longer than it was. Finally his brain began to function again. "Arrest me? Why?"

"For being a bad boy."

The elevator arrived then and conversation was delayed until they were out on the street and into the inspector's automobile, driven by a uniformed cop.

"Jasper Hale's house," said Bradley. "At 93rd and Fifth Avenue." He leaned back against the cushions. "Listen, Storm," he said. "You knew Adrian was dead when you arrived at that office tonight. Don't interrupt. Let me speak my piece. I don't know how you knew it, but you knew it. You expected to see a gun on the desk. It wasn't there, but you tripped over it." He smiled dourly. "Until Louderbach spilled it, you neglected to tell me anything about the beautiful Miss Warren, who, it turns out, didn't like Adrian very much either. Then there was something about the writing on the back of that stamp which you picked out of the stock book. You kept *that* to yourself, too. You're not being helpful, Storm. Do you know what I think?"

"What?" Larry asked.

"I think you're covering up," said Bradley. "You're trying to protect your friend Nicholas—or is it the lovely lady we just left? I know your type, Storm. You'd stick your neck out for a girl like Miss Warren. Maybe you went to the office to see if she'd left anything—a catalogue maybe, or a few odd fingerprints."

Larry was silent.

"Well, if it *was* fingerprints," said Bradley, "we'll soon know. I'll bet I've got some nice samples from her on that compact."

Still Larry was silent.

"You know what you are, Storm?" Bradley asked more sharply than usual. "You're an accessory after the fact. You're trying to help the murderer. You can burn just as quickly for that as you can for pulling the trigger."

"You're dreaming," Larry said. "Or maybe it's just hope."

Bradley sighed. "The only other explanation of your actions, Storm, is that you're trying to play detective. Please, please don't do that, my friend. I have enough trouble with my trained assistants."

When the police car pulled up Larry and Bradley got out and started across the sidewalk toward the front door of the big stone house.

"Meant to ask you something about Hale and his secretary," said Bradley. "Can you make it quick?"

"Hale is probably the biggest collector in the country," said Larry. "He's lousy with money and he's spent hundreds of thousands on stamps. He's rumored to be a nut—but then most collectors are. I've never met him. Gregory I met today for the first time. He's not prepossessing."

"It's a small world," murmured Bradley. "So you met Gregory today?" He reached out and rang the doorbell.

"He wanted me to try to find a certain stamp for him. It's just possible that's why he went to see Adrian. He wanted that stamp badly."

THE iron grille door was opened. "I want to see Mr. Gregory," said Bradley.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible, sir," said the butler. "Mr. Gregory has retired for the night."

"I still want to see him," said Bradley, hopefully.

"I've told you, sir, that's quite impossible."

Bradley sighed. "This always makes me feel so theatrical," he said to Larry. He produced a police badge. "Let's start over again," he said to the butler. "I want to see Mr. Gregory."

"Come in, sir," said the butler, his eyes popping.

They walked into a great entrance hall.

"If you'll wait here a moment, gentlemen, I'll rouse Mr. Gregory," said the butler. His voice seemed to echo in the vaultlike room. He had just started for the stairway when a door on the far side of the hall opened. A tall, gaunt figure appeared, wrapped in a dark-blue silk dressing gown.

"What the devil is all this disturbance, Halliday?" he demanded.

"These gentlemen want to see Mr. Gregory, sir," said the butler.

"At this hour!" snapped the man. "What the devil do they want with him?"

"It's the police, sir!"

"Police!" The lean figure came briskly across the hall, his heels clicking on the marble floor. His white hair was thin and wispy, but his eyebrows were luxuriant, and as he scowled they were drawn together over his long, thin nose.

"I'm Jasper Hale!" he snapped. "What's the meaning of this?"

Bradley eyed him mildly. "I'm Inspector Bradley of the Homicide Division," he said. "This is Mr. Lawrence Storm."

"Homicide!" Hale exploded. "Storm!" He turned on Larry. His eyes were blue, a cold, pale blue. "I know you," he said. "Is this some trick? Steered clear of you for years because I don't like flippant young men!"

"It's no trick," Bradley said. "A man has been murdered. Your Mr. Gregory may have been the last person to see him alive. I want to ask him about it."

"Who's been murdered?"

"A man named Max Adrian has been shot. Mr. Gregory had an appointment with him just a short time before he was killed," Bradley said.

"That's idiotic," said Hale. "Gregory wouldn't put his foot inside that shyster's office." He jerked a thumb toward Larry. "Storm can tell you no smart collector would have anything to do with Adrian. You've been misinformed, Inspector. My secretary would have no reason to visit Adrian."

"Maybe not," said Bradley, "but he *did* have an appointment with Adrian at seven o'clock tonight. No doubt he can clear it up."

"No doubt!" said Hale testily. He turned as the butler, followed by Paul Gregory, came down the winding stair. Gregory was wearing a drab brown flannel bathrobe. His face was deathly white—whiter than the marble stair itself. He clung to the iron rail as if he was in danger of falling.

"Gregory!" Jasper Hale said, his voice harsh. "This is a police-inspector. He is under the mistaken impression that you had an appointment with Max Adrian tonight. And Adrian's been murdered.

Kindly put him straight about it." His pale eyes narrowed. "What the devil have you done to your head?"

Across the back of Gregory's skull was a large patch of adhesive tape. Gregory stood on the bottom step, still clinging to the iron rail.

"I—I bumped it on the c-corner of m-my b-bureau," he stammered. "I—I was getting something out of the bottom drawer, and when I straightened up . . ."

Bradley looked at Larry. "Mercy," he said. "What a coincidence."

"Coincidence?" exclaimed Jasper Hale. "What's a coincidence?"

"The bottle with the tree in it," said the inspector absently. Larry knew he meant the liqueur bottle in Adrian's office —the one somebody had been hit with.

Hale turned exasperatedly to Larry. "Storm! Is this man a lunatic?"

"Sorry," said the inspector, his gray eyes resting on Gregory who seemed suddenly to have been seized with an attack of palsy. "I was just thinking out loud."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FRIGHTENED SECRETARY

PAUL GREGORY came down the last step, but he did not loosen his clutch on the iron rail. He kept opening and closing his mouth like a stranded fish. His watery eyes flitted from face to face to rest finally on Larry, a look of silent pleading in them.

"Well?" said Jasper Hale. "Well, Gregory?"

"I d-don't know what he's t-talking about," said Gregory. "I b-bumped my head on the c-corner of the bureau."

Bradley spoke to Jasper Hale. "Mr. Hale, I have a feeling this interview can't be completed as quickly as I had hoped. Do you suppose there is some place we might sit down? Mr. Storm and I have had a rather tiring evening. And Mr. Gregory doesn't look too—er—robust."

Hale frowned at him for a moment. "My study," he said. He turned abruptly and walked back down the hall to the door through which he had first appeared. Larry and the inspector followed. Gregory brought up the rear. Larry could hear a bronchial rattle in the secretary's throat.

Jasper Hale's study was simplicity itself. It contained a roll-top desk, a safe, several comfortable leather chairs; around the walls, bookcases ran all the way up to the ceiling. A library ladder leaned against one section. Larry, glancing about, realized that this was probably the most extensive collection of books on stamps and stamp collecting he had ever seen. At the far end of the room was another door which, Larry guessed, must open into a lavatory.

Hale sat down in a high backed wooden arm chair near the bookcases. He waved vaguely at other chairs.

Bradley was, as usual, unhurried. He stood in the center of the room, looking around at the booklined walls.

"Well, get on with it!" said Jasper Hale, impatiently.

Bradley drew a deep breath and concentrated on filling his pipe. He was looking at Gregory when he got it going.

"I hate wasting time," he said, almost apologetically. "Now, Mr. Gregory, Adrian's secretary says that you had made an appointment with Adrian for seven o'clock tonight. You're going to say you didn't have an appointment; or that, if you did, you didn't keep it. Then I'll have to go to a lot of trouble.

"I'll have to have a doctor examine that injury to your head. I'll have to compare some of your hair with the hair we found sticking to the bottle with which you were struck. That will take a lot of time, and in the end we'll be just where we are now. So please, Mr. Gregory, don't make it necessary for us to go through all that. Just tell me what happened tonight."

"Were you at Adrian's office tonight, Gregory?" Jasper Hale demanded.

Very slowly the secretary nodded his head. "Yes." It was a whisper.

"What the devil for?" Hale's tone was short. "What sort of dealings would you be having with a man like that?"

"Perhaps I can explain that Mr. Hale." Larry said. "Under the circumstances, Gregory, there doesn't seem to be much reason why . . ."

"No! No!" Gregory said. "I'll explain! I—I was d-doing a little collecting of my own—on the si-side. I had had some p-private dealings with Mr. Adrian."

Hale snorted in disgust.

"So you had an appointment to see him at seven o'clock tonight on personal business?" Bradley asked.

Yes . . . yes, I had an appointment with him," Gregory said. "I had to go after my d-day's work was done here."

"But you weren't here all day," said Bradley, gently. "You visited Mr. Storm's office this afternoon, didn't you?"

"Yes," Gregory admitted. "I took a few moments to visit Mr. Storm while I was out doing some errands for Mr. Hale. I commissioned Mr. Storm to find a stamp for me—a stamp for my own collection," he added hastily.

LARRY'S eyes never left Gregory's face, but he didn't contradict. "Well, I'm blowed," said Jasper Hale. "Were all your private dealings with brokers who weren't on my personal list, Gregory?"

Gregory nodded. "It seemed better."

"About tonight," Bradley prompted the secretary. "Did you go to see Adrian?"

"Yes," said Gregory.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"Alive?" Bradley asked.

Gregory jumped. "My God, yes!" he said.

Bradley nodded. "At what time did you see him, Mr. Gregory?"

"I got there early," Gregory said. "At about a quarter to seven. Adrian was not engaged so I saw him right away."

"A friendly interview?"

"Yes, of course it was friendly. I—I wanted him to get a certain stamp for me. He said he would. Then I—then I . . ." He floundered again.

"Now we're coming to the bottle with the tree in it," said Bradley.

"Heaven help me, I d-don't know what happened then!" he stammered. "I . . . I walked out of the private office into the waiting room. Something struck me over the head. Everything went b-black."

"You're lucky if you haven't got a concussion," said Bradley. He seemed to be in no hurry. He waited calmly for Gregory to get control of himself.

"I—I came to after a while. I was lying on the floor. I couldn't hear anything—anyone talking. But something was thundering inside my head. Somehow I got up to my feet. First I wanted to run. I felt sick—I was afraid I couldn't get down to the street. Then I decided to see Adrian . . . find out what had happened." He moistened his lips. Nobody helped him, nobody prompted him. "I opened the door to the private office. There he was!"

"Dead?" Bradley asked.

"He was lying on the floor beside his desk. I—didn't go over to him. I j-just got out of there as quickly as I could." He leaned forward. "That's exactly what happened, so help me!"

Bradley tapped the stem of his pipe against his teeth. "It could be," he said, thoughtfully. "On the other hand, maybe you quarreled with Adrian and he slugged you. Maybe after you came to you went back into the office and shot him."

"No! No!"

"Maybe not," said Bradley. "I don't suppose you know what time it was when you finally left the office?"

"When I got down to the street," Gregory said, "I called a cab. In the cab I looked at my watch. You see, I didn't know how long I had been unconscious. It was just twenty-five minutes past seven."

Bradley nodded. "But before you got into the cab you went into the drugstore on the corner, didn't you?"

Gregory's hands tightened on the arms of the chair. "I—yes, I did. My head was bleeding. I—"

"You telephoned to police headquarters, didn't you, Mr. Gregory?"

"No, I—"

"Now, now, Mr. Gregory, you're rattled," said Bradley. "You're not thinking. It's a fact in your favor."

GREGORY looked at him anxiously, then he nodded, slowly. "Yes, I called the police," he said. "I—I thought they should be told. But I didn't give my name because I didn't want anyone to know I'd been there. I was afraid they'd think I killed him." He hesitated. "Did someone see me in the drugstore?"

The inspector smiled. "We have to do some guessing in this business," he said.

"The whole thing's incredible," Jasper Hale said. "You mean to say, Gregory, that when you came out of Adrian's office somebody hit you over the head with a bottle and then murdered Adrian while you were unconscious? Didn't you get a glimpse of the man who struck you?"

"No, sir. He m-must have been standing behind the door."

"By heaven, the whole extraordinary business serves you right, Gregory. It's what you get for dealing with a man like Adrian. You know what I've always said about him! You know I wouldn't touch a thing that had passed through his hands."

"I know, sir," said Gregory, wearily.

"But you have done just that!" Larry said. Fatigue had put a sharp edge on his voice. "You bought a Newfoundland Number 10 from Adrian and paid a cockeyed price for it! How about that, Mr. Hale?"

Hale's pale eyes flashed. "I never bought a stamp from Adrian in my life," he thundered. "It's true I brought a Number 10, but I—" He stopped abruptly and turned a baleful stare on his secretary. "Gregory!"

Gregory seemed to shrivel in his clothes. "Mr. Hale d-didn't know that stamp came from Adrian, gentlemen," he said. "I—I had been commissioned by Mr. Hale to get it. None of his regular dealers was able to locate one. One day, when I was seeing Adrian on my own business, I mentioned the Newfoundland Number 10. He had one so—so I bought it for Mr. Hale. I d-didn't tell Mr. Hale where I'd gotten it."

"There seem to be a lot of things you haven't told me!" Hale said, angrily.

"That still doesn't account for your willingness to pay thirty-five hundred dollars for a stamp that is listed at two thousand," Larry said to Hale. "Particularly since you don't collect Newfoundlands."

Hale smiled, an acid smile. "I give you credit, at least, for asking an intelligent question—though it's none of your business! However, I think you'll understand. A collector friend of mine has a stamp I want badly, one of the 1861 Cape of Good Hope Triangulars—the Number 11, wood block."

Larry nodded.

"Who's your friend?" Bradley asked.

"My dear Inspector," said Hale, dryly, "you don't think I'd give out his name, and have Storm and every other dealer in town camping on his trail! The point is, this gentleman has a stamp I want, the one I've just mentioned."

"It's worth about five thousand," said Larry.

"Quite right, Mr. Storm. But five thousand won't buy it from my friend, nor ten thousand, nor any amount! Even though he does not specialize in Cape of Good Hope issues. But there was a way I thought I could get him to part with it. I knew he wanted that Newfoundland Number 10. If I could get one, he might be willing to make a trade. I wanted that stamp quickly—the Newfoundland, I mean—before my friend got hold of one on his own. Money was no object. That was why I paid a sucker price for it."

"And have you made the trade?" Larry asked.

"That is my affair," Hale said, stiffly.

LARRY stood up. "That seems to be that, Bradley," he said. "I'd like to be getting on."

The inspector sat where he was for a moment, watching the smoke curl up from the bowl of his pipe. Then he too got up. "Yes, that seems to be that," he admitted. "And very interesting, too." He looked down at Gregory. "Of course you'll keep

yourself available, Mr. Gregory? Your testimony is important. I wouldn't like to have to arrest you as a material witness, but if you should decide on any trips—"

"He'll be here," Hale said. "I'll see to it."

On the street Larry paused beside the inspector's car. "I'll take a taxi home," he said. "If you're planning to have me followed again, it might be simpler to have your man ride with me!"

Bradley smiled. "You look tired enough to do a little sleeping," he said. "If I can see you first thing in the morning . . ."

"I'll be at my office," Larry said. He hailed a passing cab. "You believe Gregory's story?"

Bradley shrugged. "It fits the facts. Didn't you?"

Larry avoided the grey eyes. "As you say, it fits the facts."

Bradley knocked his pipe against the heel of his shoe. "Of course he wasn't telling the truth about his dealings with you and Adrian," he said, placidly. "Not a good liar, Mr. Gregory. Too anxious to catch your eye, Storm. Too anxious to forestall anything you had to say." He rubbed a hand over his chin. "I wish you wouldn't play detective," he said, sadly. "You're not helping, Storm. Really, you're not helping."

Larry looked at him. "That suspicious mind of yours is still working overtime," he said, forcing a smile.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," murmured Bradley. "Maybe when you've slept on it you'll decide to come clean, Storm. I hope so. Goodnight."

CHAPTER XIV

BLANK WALL

ELLEN came into the foyer of the apartment as Larry wearily dropped his coat and hat on the wooden bench. "Lon here?" he asked. His voice was husky from too many cigarettes.

"He's asleep in the guest room," Ellen said.

"I've got to talk to him," Larry said, starting past her. She checked him, her hand on his arm.

"He's in bad shape, Larry. You won't get anything out of him."

"Got to," he said.

She still barred the way. "You're tired. I've some coffee and a sandwich for you. Lon can't talk yet. What happened? Did Bradley arrest Miss Warren?"

"Ellen, lay off. Of course he didn't. I—coffee would sit pretty well. No word from Bones?"

Ellen shook her head. "I've tried hospitals—every place I could think of." She led him in to his chair by the fire, and he seemed to be too tired to resist. "Sit here. I'll have coffee for you in a minute."

Larry leaned back, and closed his eyes. Presently Ellen came with a tray. She poured the coffee for him, and then sat silently by while he ate the sandwich and drank the scalding hot liquid. It wasn't until he reached in his pocket for a cigarette and filled his cup a second time that she spoke.

"What happened, Larry?" she asked again.

He told her now, in detail.

"It's getting clearer," he said, when he had described the interview at Hale's house. "Gregory arrived at quarter of seven and saw Adrian. Probably he was trying to get the Green Bear he wanted from me, from Adrian, too. He seems to be in a great dither to keep Hale from knowing about that.

"It's the one thing that makes me wonder about his story. But, as Bradley says, he's a lousy liar and the rest of it sounded pretty straight." He drew on his cigarette. "Gregory arrives at quarter of seven and sees Adrian. While he's there the murderer comes into the waiting room. He hears Adrian talking to Gregory. He waits there behind the door. Lord knows where he got that bottle of *Fiore di Alpa*. I forgot to ask Bradley about that."

"There's a liquor cabinet in the inspection room," said Ellen. "I remember seeing it one day when you sent me to see Adrian

about the Hoffenstein stuff. I wasn't offered a drink, but then I wasn't a favored customer."

"Perhaps the murderer went into the inspection room while Adrian and Gregory were talking. There's a door from the waiting room as well as from the private office. He may have thought he could get a glimpse of Adrian's visitor from there. He picks up the bottle and goes back into the waiting room. That'll do as a possible explanation.

"Then, when Gregory comes out, the murderer clouts him over the head. Why he didn't hide till Gregory was gone is beyond me, but he didn't. After he'd knocked Gregory out he goes in to see Adrian and shoots him—in cold blood. Then he yanks the keys from Adrian's pocket, puts his gun down on the desk, and goes over to the safe and opens it.

"He takes out some of the stock books and carries them into the inspection room where the light is better." He paused.

"Enter Miss Warren," said Ellen, dryly —"or so she says."

Larry gave her a sharp look, "Enter Lucia," he agreed. "The murderer hears her and watches—sees her pick up the gun and put it down again—sees her go to the phone, and then bolt. He realizes he's got to get out before she notifies the police, so he makes tracks, taking the gun with him. That's the way it must have happened, Ellen."

Ellen looked down at her finger nails. "Did Miss Warren step over Gregory's body when she came in?" she asked. "Or didn't she notice him lying there on the floor?"

"You," said Larry, "should be whacked! Stop harping on Lucia! Gregory came to, went downstairs and phoned the police, and was in a cab by twenty-five minutes past seven. Lucia's appointment wasn't until seven-thirty."

"In that case," said Ellen, "If the murderer was still there when Miss Warren arrived, he must have been poring over those stamps for a good half hour. A cool customer, Larry."

"Or too drunk to use his head!" Larry said. He passed a hand across his eyes.

"DON'T you see it's just the kind of thing Lon would do? He'd barge up there, drunk, to see Adrian. It wouldn't occur to him he could just let Gregory walk out. He'd slug him. Then he'd walk in and shoot Adrian. He'd take out the stock books and find his own stamps in them, Ellen . . . his own stamps with his own code penciled on the back of them.

"He'd stay with them—he'd handle them—he wouldn't want to leave them. But he wouldn't take them, because he would be shrewd enough to realize that that would point directly to him. But he loved those stamps, Ellen. It doesn't seem at all remarkable that he'd spend as long as he dared, looking them over."

"And Bones?" Ellen asked.

"Maybe he caught Lon at it."

"Then they must have been operating on a hair-splitting schedule," said Ellen. "Gregory at quarter to seven. Gregory is knocked out. The murderer at, let's say, seven. Gregory leaves at about twenty past seven. Miss Warren arrives at seven-thirty and leaves about five minutes later. According to you the murderer leaves immediately after she does. If Bones came in, he could hardly have avoided passing that parade in the hall."

"Maybe he saw Lon coming out of the building," said Larry. He pulled himself to his feet. "Drunk or not, I'm going to talk to Lon. He's *got* to remember, if I have to slap him dizzy. Bring some coffee if there's any left."

Lon Nicholas lay on the bed in Larry's guest room. He was fully clothed except for his shoes, which Ellen had removed before she pulled a light coverlet over him. His white shirt was dirty, and open at the throat. His closely shaved head was turned on the pillow, his right arm thrown up over his head. His face was deathly pale and he kept groaning and mumbling in his sleep.

Larry stood over him for a minute, his face stern. Then he reached down and

shook Lon by the shoulder. Lon groaned and tried to wrench himself free.

"Lon!" Larry said, sharply. "Lon, snap out of it!"

Lon flung his arm to one side and rolled over flat on his back. He opened his eyes and squinted up at Larry. His eyes were bloodshot, heavy lidded.

"Oh, it's you, Larry," he muttered, and started to turn over on his side again.

"Lon, I've got to talk to you!" Larry took him by both shoulders and jerked him to a sitting posture. Lon's head lolled to one side as if there were no strength in his neck.

"Larry, please!" he moaned. His eyes stayed shut.

Larry released his right shoulder and gave him a flat stinging slap across his face. "You've got to snap out of it!"

Lon's eyes blinked open. He ran his tongue along his lower lip as if the inside of his mouth were dry and fuzzy. "Can't talk, Larry," he whimpered. "All in—talk in the morning."

"Now!" Larry said.

Ellen came into the room with another cup of coffee. Between them they forced Lon to drink, spluttering and choking.

"Where did you go when you left here this afternoon?" Larry demanded.

"Anywhere . . . everywhere . . . how do I know? For heaven's sake, Larry, let me alone. I'll be all right—all right in the morning." His voice trailed off.

"Lon! Did you shoot Adrian?"

"Sure, sure!" murmured Lon. His eyes closed, and his head drooped. Larry slapped him again. A bright red mark appeared on Lon's cheek. Lon jerked his head up and opened his eyes.

"Cut that out, Larry! What's the idea?"

"Listen, half-baked!" Larry shook him. "Adrian's been murdered. Murdered!"

LON stared at him for an instant, then began to shake, and then laughed—hysterical, jangling laughter. "Adrian murdered! That's good! That's wonderful. That's a joke!"

"He had your stamps, Lon. I saw them."

Lon stopped laughing. "*My stamps!*" he whispered almost soberly. "He had them?"

"Yes, and you shot him! You saw them yourself and you shot him."

"No! No, Larry!"

"Where have you been since five o'clock this afternoon? What have you been doing? The cops are looking for you. They know you had it in for Adrian. If you didn't kill him, what have you been up to?"

Lon raised his hands to his face. He shook his head from side to side. "I don't know, Larry! I left here—went somewhere for a drink—must have had too many. I . . ."

"Where did you go for your drink!"

"I don't know. Some bar somewhere. Can't remember, Larry . . ."

"You went to Adrian's," Larry said harshly. "You slugged one of his customers with a liquor bottle and then you went in and shot him. Then you opened his safe and found your stamps! Isn't that right?"

"Stop it, Larry! *Stop it!* I don't know what I did. I don't remember. I can't remember anything."

"Where's the gun you took out of my desk when you left?"

"Gun?"

"Damn it, Lon, this is serious! It's murder! Can you get that through your head? Didn't you go to Adrian's when you left here?"

"Please, please! I can't remember!"

"What have you done to Bones? Where is he?" Larry demanded.

"I don't know where he is, Larry. I left him here—"

"You killed Adrian," Larry persisted, "and Bones caught you at it. What did you do to Bones? Lon, if you've hurt him, so help me, I'll break your neck!"

"Larry," Lon almost shouted. "I can't remember anything. But I'd remember killing Adrian, wouldn't I? I *wanted* to kill him! And I didn't see Bones. I'd remember that too, wouldn't I? Good kid. I wouldn't hurt him, would I? Would I, Larry?" His voice rose hysterically, "I wouldn't hurt him, would I?"

Larry let go of Lon's shoulder and gave him a little push back onto the pillow. "Go to sleep," he said dully. "We'll have it out in the morning." He turned and walked out of the room. Ellen followed him.

"I was afraid it wouldn't be any use," she said.

Larry went back into the living room and dropped down in his chair by the fire. "He's soaked up so much alcohol in the last two years he probably *can't* remember."

"You'd better get some sleep yourself," Ellen told him. "You're all in."

"God . . . yes!" Larry muttered.

"But aren't you going to tell the police about Bones?" she said, coldly.

HE RAISED his eyes to her face. "Let me explain this to you, Ellen. Maybe Lon *is* innocent. But if the police get hold of him and he pulls this blank on them, they'll railroad him to the chair.

"He was out to get Adrian! He had a gun! He can't remember! But I still can't believe he'd hurt Bones."

"Then Bones' absence is even more serious than if Lon had done something with him!" Ellen said.

"Listen, Ellen. Let's look at it from the blackest point of view. Bones caught the murderer redhanded and the murderer gave him the business—killed him. It isn't going to help Bones to notify the police, and it might put Lon or Lucia into a spot where they'd be railroaded for a crime they didn't commit. If the murderer didn't kill Bones, but is just holding him, the minute we send out a general alarm for the boy the killer may get cold feet and finish him off."

"Larry, I can't bear it!" Ellen cried.

"Take it easy," said Larry. "If we don't frighten the killer into action, he may get careless and we'll find Bones before he's harmed. Just a few clues, Ellen—that's all we need. Then we might get on the trail of the murderer without giving Bradley information that would lead to Lon's arrest—or Lucia's."

"But, Larry . . ."

"And there's a third possibility," he interrupted. "Bones may have seen the murderer, but not have been seen himself. The murderer may have started to make a getaway, and Bones may have followed. He'd have the nerve for that, Ellen, and he had a little money. He may be following the killer—on a bus or a train where he couldn't get in touch with us by phone. We may hear from him any time."

"If I could only believe that!" Ellen cried.

"In the morning we'll do a little sleuthing on our own," Larry said. "There's Mickey Hogan, Bones' pal. He knows that Nassau Street neighborhood like a book. He may be able to get on Bones' trail somehow without rousing suspicion. And if Lon doesn't remember tomorrow, we'll have to find out where he really was.

"Once we provide him with an alibi, we can go to the police if Bones is still missing." He reached out and took her hand in his for a moment. "Ellen, I want to find Bones just as badly as you do. But I'm sure this is the right line to take."

Ellen drew a deep breath, and then withdrew her hand from his. "All right, teacher, maybe it makes sense," she said. "Now you'd better go to bed."

"I'll sleep here in this chair. I might not hear the phone from my room—in case Bones *should* call. But you'd better go home and get some rest yourself."

"I'm sticking here," said Ellen.

He smiled, faintly. "But what will people say!"

Then he closed his eyes and was asleep before Ellen got out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

MURDER FOR STAMPS

GEORGE, the elevator man at 64½ Nassau Street, stared with open-mouthed amazement and curiosity when Larry arrived the next morning shortly before nine. According to the papers, Mr. Storm had officially identified the victim

in a sensational murder case. The papers were guarded in their remarks, but it was hinted that Mr. Storm's presence at Adrian's office at eight-thirty at night was, to say the least, out of the ordinary.

George had never come into personal contact before with a principal in a murder case. George swallowed hard as he closed the elevator gate. "There's a few gen'lemen upstairs to see you, Mistuh Storm."

"Gentlemen?" Larry was frowning.

"Yassuh."

"What kind of gentlemen, George?"

"I guess they's from the papers, Mistuh Storm."

"Damn!" said Larry.

He had just had a long talk with a chastened and sober Lon Nicholas. The net result of that talk was nothing.

Sober, Lon had been unable to remember any more than he had, drunk. He had left Larry's apartment in the afternoon after locking Bones in the bathroom; gone somewhere for a drink or two to get up his courage; and after that he drew a complete blank.

He didn't even remember coming back to Larry's and going to sleep in the hallway where Ellen had found him. But worse than that, he was in a jittering, hysterical panic. Maybe he *had* killed Adrian! Maybe he *had* slugged Mr. Gregory with the bottle! Maybe he *had* done some harm to Bones. He might have done all those things, but he couldn't remember.

"Please—please, Larry, find out what I did do! Somebody *must* have seen me. Somebody must know where I was and what I was doing! The gun I was carrying must have fallen out of my pocket somewhere. Surely if anyone found it, they'd report it. That might help to tell you where I was!"

"I'll do my best," Larry told him. "You know I'd like to get you in the clear, Lon. It would make things a lot easier."

GEORGE'S gentlemen were in the dark hallway outside Larry's office. At the sight of Larry they crowded round. They wanted a statement of what had happened the night before.

"This is Inspector Bradley's case," Larry told them, shortly. "If there is any information to give out, he'll give it."

Somebody laughed. "Bradley never talks until he's all ready to deliver the murderer to the police commissioner."

"Me, too," Larry said. He unlocked his office door. "Now, little men, I'm going to be busy. Don't bother me."

"But you've got to make some sort of statement!" they protested.

"I think that Hitler's treatment of the Jews has been a shock to the whole civilized world," said Larry. He went into the office and shut the door behind him.

There was mail on the floor inside the door which he picked up and deposited unopened on Ellen's desk. He hung his coat and hat on the rack and went straight to the telephone. A moment later he had Lucia Warren on the wire.

"I thought you'd call back last night," she said.

"It was too late," Larry told her. "I didn't want to disturb you."

"Has—has anything new happened?" she asked.

"Nothing that helps," he said. "I'll tell you about it when I see you. But you're definitely in hot water, Lucia. Bradley got a set of your fingerprints on that compact last night. I tried to stop you from handling it, but he was too quick."

"Oh, Larry, I realized afterward that it had been a trick! What am I to do?"

"Only one thing you can do, Lucia. Tell him the truth, as you told it to me! It places you at the scene of the murder, but that can't be helped. Your fingerprints on the telephone which will match the ones on the compact do that, anyway."

"But won't that get you in trouble, Larry—if he knows you deliberately went to Adrian's to destroy evidence?"

Larry laughed. "He can't arrest me for what was in my mind," he said. "I didn't destroy any evidence, so that's that."

"About the gun," Lucia said. "Should I tell him since he didn't find it?"

"Tell him everything," Larry said. "He already suspects the truth. And keep your chin up. Practically no one ever gets hung by mistake!"

"Larry! When am I going to see you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Nobody knows what the day holds. But the first chance I get, I'll come up to your apartment."

"I won't leave the place at all," she said, "unless Bradley—unless they . . ."

"Take it easy," he said. "They can't do more than question you, and all you have to do is tell the truth."

"I'll have plenty of scotch on hand," she told him.

"Lady, you have a customer—as soon as I can make it."

AS HE hung up he heard the voices of the gentlemen in the hall as the office door was opened and closed again. He looked out and saw Ellen accompanied by Mickey Hogan. He had sent Ellen to find Bones' friend and customer who operated a newsstand a couple of blocks away. Mickey's eyes were excited.

"Gee, Mr. Storm!! Holy mackerel!" he said.

"That seems to express the situation completely, Mickey."

"I haven't told him anything yet," said Ellen."

"Come in here, Mickey. Sit down by my desk," Larry invited. "You've read the papers, I take it."

"Gee, yes!" said Mickey. "It must have been pretty tough to walk in and see a pal of yours lyin' dead on the floor."

"Mr. Adrian wasn't exactly a pal of mine. Mickey, you and Bones are pretty thick, aren't you?"

Mickey snorted. "That doublecrossin' chiseler. I ain't settled with him for what he tried to pull on me yesterday, Mr. Storm."

"Ah, yes," said Larry. "The unperforated Trans-Mississippi."

"The rat!" said Mickey.

"Bones is in trouble . . . bad trouble."

"Serves him right," said Mickey. "I suppose he tried to cheat a big customer."

Ellen joined them. She stood in the doorway. "This is serious, Mickey," she said. Her voice wasn't quite steady. "Bones may be dead—or badly hurt!"

Mickey stared at her, his mouth open.

"Mickey, I'm going to trust you with a secret," Larry said, gravely. "I'm going to tell you some things that I don't want passed on to anyone—particularly the police. But if you trust me—"

"Gee, Mr. Storm. Sure I trust you. You know I'll do anythin' for you."

"Good boy," said Larry. "Well, here it is, Mickey. A friend of mine didn't like this man Adrian. He was drunk yesterday, he was carrying a gun, and he was threatening to kill Adrian. I sent Bones to stay with him—to make sure he didn't get into trouble. This friend of mine gave Bones the slip. Bones talked to Ellen on the phone last night about six-thirty, and since then we haven't seen or heard from him."

"You mean this friend of yours done somethin' to Bones?" Mickey asked. His hands gripped the arms of his chair tightly.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't," said Larry. "My friend has turned up, and he doesn't remember seeing Bones since yesterday afternoon. But Bones was hanging around Adrian's office, Mickey, and I think he must have seen the murderer go in or come out."

"Gee! Then you think . . ."

"I think the murderer may have done something to keep Bones from talking!" Larry said.

"But, gee, Mr. Storm, why don't you tell the cops?"

"On account of my friend, Mickey. The police would like to make an arrest, and my friend is ready-made for them. He hasn't got any alibi."

"I get it," said Mickey, slowly. "The cops would pin it on your friend and let the real killer get away."

"That's it," said Larry. "And if they let the real killer get away, we may never find Bones, or know what's happened to him."

"Gee, Mr. Storm, what can I do?"

"You know this part of town inside out," Larry told the boy. "Bones was hanging around a saloon just across the street from Adrian's office."

"Yes, I know." Mickey nodded. "Pat's *Pavilion.*"

"That's where Bones phoned us from at six-thirty," Larry said. "What I want you to do is to ask questions—kids who might know Bones—shopkeepers—boot-blacks—all the regulars down here. Find out if anyone saw him after six-thirty, what he was doing, where he was going."

Mickey jumped to his feet. "You bet, Mr. Storm. Somebody must of seen him. The minute I find out anythin' I'll let you know."

"You might need some money, Mickey," Larry said. "Sometimes a little bribery helps to loosen tongues."

"Nuts to that," said Mickey, scornfully. "Anyone who don't wanna talk gets his teeth knocked in!"

Mickey darted out of Larry's office and ran through the outer room. They heard the hinged section of the counter slam against the wall and then a querulous voice.

"Why don't you look where you're going, you young rapscalion? This place is turning into a damned mad house!"

Ellen raised her eyes to heaven. "Mr. Julius!"

THEY could hear him stomping across the office. He appeared in the doorway, wrapped in his magnificent trailing overcoat. His high-crowned brown derby was pushed slightly toward the back of his head. His bone-handled umbrella was crooked over one arm; the black metal ear-trumpet protruded from a pocket of his coat. He gave Larry a look of malicious satisfaction.

"Well, I see they haven't arrested you yet!"

Larry looked at Ellen and spoke softly. "The man can read," he said.

Mr. Julius seemed to have no difficulty hearing that remark. "I can read all right," he said, testily. "And when I heard you'd identified the body, I wondered if you'd had the honesty to say to yourself, 'There, but for the grace of God, lies Lawrence Storm!'" He pointed his umbrella at Ellen. "Always told you he'd come to a bad end, didn't I? Warned you time and again to get out before you get mixed up in something shady. Murder! Got to admit I never expected that—except in the rôle of victim!"

"Mr. Julius," said Larry, wearily, "things are a little too tough for me to think up any bright comebacks this morning."

"What's that?" Mr. Julius shouted. He suddenly produced the ear trumpet.

"I say, I don't feel very witty this morning!" Larry shouted back.

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. He sat down in the chair opposite Larry, and put his hat, umbrella, and trumpet on the desk in front of him. He leaned back, the tips of his withered fingers pressed together. "Tell me about it," he said.

"There isn't anything to tell," said Larry. "Somebody shot Adrian. I don't know who did it and neither do the police. I suppose somebody will burn for it sooner or later."

"A pity," grumbled Mr. Julius. "Community better off! But come, come, Storm. I want details."

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss the case, Mr. Julius. You see—"

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Julius. He banged his ear trumpet on the edge of the desk for emphasis. "I don't expect intelligence from the police. Bunch of grafting Harps! Look handsome directing traffic—no brains. But I do expect intelligence from a shrewd, unscrupulous trickster like you!"

"Look, Mr. Julius," Larry began, patiently, "I'm very fond of you and all that, but . . .

"He wasn't killed because he was homely," snapped Mr. Julius. "He wasn't killed because he didn't treat his mother right! He was killed on account of stamps. Who knows about stamps? You do—I do. The police *don't.* Whom had he cheated?"

"About every collector in New York," said Larry.

"Not me," shrilled Mr. Julius. "No one's ever cheated me. I can look 'em in the eye and tell if they're lying. That goes for you, Storm—that goes for you! I can catch you out every time."

"That's why you keep on dealing with me," said Larry. "Because I'm so transparent."

"Humph!" snorted Mr. Julius, his eyes twinkling. "Give me the facts, Storm. I know every collector, every dealer, every dilettante in the stamp world. One of 'em killed him. You can bank on that. Maybe I can help."

Larry's eyes narrowed as he looked past the old man to Ellen. Imperceptibly Ellen nodded her head.

"God knows why," Larry said to Mr. Julius, "but I'm going to tell you about it. Everything."

AND he did. While he talked Mr. Julius listened closely, apparently having no need for the ear trumpet. Now and then he muttered and grunted to himself, but he did not interrupt or make any comment until Larry had finished. Then Mr. Julius delivered himself of an extra large snort.

"Commendable — very commendable, your attitude, Storm. Greater love hath no man than that he give the life of his office boy for a friend!"

"Then you think," Larry began, "that . . ."

"I think we've got to find Bones!" snapped Mr. Julius. "Not sit here gossiping like a bunch of old women. Action, that's what we want!" Mr. Julius again banged the ear trumpet on the edge of the desk.

"It's easy enough to say," said Larry. "But to find Bones we have to find the murderer, it seems."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Julius tartly. "When you find Bones you'll *have* the murderer!"

"And how do we go about it?" Larry asked.

"Great Scott, when I was your age I could *think!*" shouted Mr. Julius. "Someone interested in stamps killed Adrian. I can think of thirty or forty people off hand besides the ones you've mentioned. Eliminate some because they have no guts. Investigate the rest . . . find Bones before we get through."

"You mean make a house-to-house canvass?" Larry laughed.

"Why *not!*" thundered Mr. Julius. "But not you, Storm, good God, not you! You're suspect. You're identified with the murder. And this poor girl here, too. Terrible thing, but I warned her about sticking with you." Mr. Julius reached for his hat. "I shall be a one-man search party," he announced. "No one suspects me. I'm a collector, an eccentric, an old fool. Ha!"

Larry shook his head. "I appreciate your willingness to help," he said, "but I'm afraid it won't do any good. And I don't want the police in on things. If you start asking questions . . ."

"About stamps," said Mr. Julius. "If the boy's anywhere around, I'll know. People can't hide things from me. Read 'em like a book." Then his old voice softened. "Know how you feel, Storm. Fond of the boy myself. We'll find him."

He pulled himself up out of his chair. He put on his hat, gave it a forward tug, jammed the ear trumpet into his pocket, and picked up his umbrella. Larry and Ellen walked into the outer office with him.

Just as they were approaching the counter the main door opened and a familiar, trench-coated figure sauntered in, pipe between his teeth, hands sunk in the pockets of his coat.

"Well, well," murmured Inspector Bradley, "we all seem to have gotten an early start."

"Come in, Bradley," Larry said. "Mr. Julius, this is Inspector Bradley who's in charge of the Adrian case."

Out came the ear trumpet, the horn jutting toward Larry. "*Who?*" shouted Mr. Julius. "For heaven sake, speak up!"

"*Inspector Bradley, in charge of the*

Adrian case!" Larry bellowed into the trumpet.

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. Then he jabbed the point of his umbrella at Bradley so unexpectedly that the inspector stepped backwards. "The police! Phooey!" said Mr. Julius with contempt. "Spending the taxpayer's money to hang a man for doing a public service! What have you done about vegetables?"

"Vegetables?" Bradley muttered.

"Yes, vegetables! Prices ridiculous. Why? Because you let a lot of hoodlums extract tribute money from dealers! What have you done about fish? Look at the Washington Market! Look at the restaurant business—every business. Police! Phooey! Parasites!" Mr. Julius drew himself to his full height and stalked past Bradley to the door. As usual, he slammed it fiercely as he went out.

Bradley, his eyes wide, looked at Larry who was suddenly leaning against the big safe, doubled up with laughter.

"Mercy!" said the inspector. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and gently mopped his forehead.

CHAPTER XVI

RED HERRING

THE inspector had a purpose behind his early morning call, but it was some time before he got around to telling Larry and Ellen what it was. He stood in the outer office, his pipe belching clouds of smoke, looking about him with a curious expression.

"Quite a different type of place from Adrian's," he said. He looked at the battered office furniture, the rusty safe, the unwashed windows. He turned his eyes on Larry questioningly. "I've looked you up," he said, "so I know something about the kind of business you do." He waved at the room. "How come?"

"Real collectors aren't impressed with fancy furnishings," Larry told him. "In fact they'd suspect they were being asked to pay for overhead. Most of my customers know their business, which is stamps. The old gentleman you just met is an example."

Bradley shuddered. "I hope he doesn't turn out to be a suspect."

Larry laughed. "He's quite a guy," he said. "If this is a social call, Bradley, you'd better sit down and make yourself comfortable." Bradley sat down at Bones' desk. Larry perched opposite him. "Anything new?" he asked. "Did you get a report on your fingerprints?"

"The report's in my office now," Bradley said. "I haven't been there yet. Didn't bother because I know what I'll find." He looked up at Larry. "So do you," he added.

Larry fumbled with his cigarette case, his eyes averted. Bradley glanced at Ellen, who was seated at her own desk.

"Too bad you haven't any more influence with this employer of yours," he said.

"What do you want him to do?" Ellen asked.

"I want him to stop playing cops and robbers!" said Bradley, plaintively.

"He's really just a little boy," Ellen said.

"But with a heart of gold," said Larry. "For example, I pay her more than she's worth, Bradley, just to have someone to nag at me. Nagging is very good for a disposition like mine. It keeps me from getting conceited."

"The old army game," sighed Bradley. "I wish you two would stop tossing the ball around and be useful."

"The slogan of Lawrence Storm, Inc. is 'Service', Inspector," said Larry. "Our inexhaustible knowledge of stamps is at your disposal."

"I suppose that's all I can hope for," muttered Bradley. "Well, here goes. I had Adrian's man Louderbach, downtown early this morning. He's made a hasty examination of those stock books of Adrian's, and he's pretty certain nothing is missing."

"That doesn't surprise me," said Larry.

"Why?"

Larry shrugged. "Apparently those books contained Adrian's best and most expensive items. If we go on the theory that the murderer knows stamps, we'd have

to asume that he also knows that it would be hard to get rid of those valuable issues. You see, too many people would know what valuable stamps Adrian had; his clerk, the people who had sold him the stamps, buyers who had looked over his stock."

Bradley nodded. "But what seemed odd to me was that Louderbach said they had no inventory of their less valuable stamps —that there was no way of telling whether any of the cheaper items had been stolen or not. Isn't that a pretty sloppy way of doing business?"

"Not at all," Larry told him. "I've got thousands of cheap stamps in here that aren't inventoried, Inspector — stamps worth anywhere from a few cents up to ten dollars. We don't take inventory of those and we have no catalogues of them."

"That sounds pretty slipshod to me."

"It isn't," Larry said, "and I'll explain why. In order to catalogue a stamp it has to be handled, appraised—its condition, its color, its defects, whether or not it's cancelled, whether or not it has its original gum, the number of perforations, a dozen different details.

"Now it takes just as much time to examine and catalogue a cheap stamp as it does one worth thousands. It's overhead again, Inspector. If we took inventory of cheap stamps and catalogued them, we'd have to charge more for them than they're worth—or tack the expense onto the more expensive items. Neither one of those systems would please the customers."

"I see."

"That's the reason we have to be so careful about our employees," Larry said. "A dishonest employee could systemically rob a broker of those cheaper items and there'd be no way to check. There was a recent case in the papers.

"A woman clerk was taking cheap stamps home every night from the office where she worked, and her husband had actually set himself up as a broker, using those stolen stamps as the basis of his stock. If they hadn't carried it too far, they'd have gotten away with it."

"Seems simple," said Bradley.

"Some of the houses that deal in very cheap items for kid collectors actually sell stamps by the pound. They couldn't possibly take inventory." Larry grinned. "Any more information, Inspector?"

"Not information, but help," Bradley said. "As a matter of routine I'm questioning everyone whose name has been brought into the case so far. I tried to reach the two gentlemen you were talking about last night — Ezra Luckman and Howard Stevens. I couldn't find either of them at home. But I learned that there is an exhibition going on at the Collectors Club, starting this morning, and I thought we might find them there."

"That's the Crocker collection," Larry said.

"I'd just like to talk to Luckman and Stevens informally," said Bradley. "I've got no evidence that would justify yanking them down to headquarters. If you'd introduce me, they might talk without feeling it was an inquisition."

Larry hesitated a moment, then slipped down off the desk where he'd been sitting. "Why not?" he said. "The exhibition opens at ten o'clock. If Luckman nd Stevens are there for the curtain, we'll find them."

THE Collectors Club was already crowded with stamp-fanciers when Larry and Bradley arrived. The Crocker collection, which was to be auctioned in London a few weeks later, was said to contain some very exceptional items of interest to collectors of United States issues. Brokers and collectors were on hand to examine these items, with a view to bidding on them when the auction took place.

"Too bad your interest in stamps isn't academic," Larry told the inspector. "There's some stuff here really worth looking at. He's got one item you may never see again. It's the only known used block of four of the twenty-four cent purple and green of the 1869 general issue with the center inverted. It's probably worth about ten thousand bucks."

"Mercy!"

"He's also got a mint block of four of the 1893 Columbian four-cent in the error color," said Larry. "This particular sheet was printed in blue instead of ultramarine. Makes it more valuable."

"I'm getting dizzy," said Bradley. "See your friends anywhere?"

Larry had been looking around the crowded room, and just as the inspector spoke he spotted Ezra Luckman across the room, his hawklike profile bent over a glass case. He was holding one of the long thin cigars he smoked in his short, stubby fingers. Larry took Bradley's arm and guided him across the room. As they approached, Luckman looked up and saw them. A sardonic smile twisted his thin lips.

"If it isn't Mr. Storm!" He chuckled. "Our conversation of yesterday seems to have been almost prophetic, eh? Adrian got his come-uppance. Well, the world will be a better place to live in." He turned to a thin, brown-haired man who was standing beside him. "This, by the way, is Stevens, Storm. You—er—missed meeting him yesterday."

Stevens had curious, leathery skin. It looked as if he had spent a great deal of time under a sun lamp to acquire a tan which did not properly conceal the unhealthiness of his normal color. His eyes, bulged slightly, suggesting a thyriod condition.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Storm," he said. "I—I'm sorry I wasn't able to have the pleasure yesterday. Something I'd eaten made me desperately ill. You can thank heaven if you have a sound digestion. My life is hell."

Larry expressed regret. Then he introduced Bradley. Luckman's dark eyes surveyed the inspector coolly.

"I don't envy you your job, Inspector," he drawled. "A lot of people would like to pin a medal on Adrian's murderer." Then he laughed. "But I suppose Adrian's sins will die with him. That's the way it is as a rule. We hear nothing but praise for the dead."

He gestured toward the glass case he had been looking at when they came up. "Nice example here," he said. "Here's a whole batch of forgeries and fakes. Some other examples of skillfully removed pen cancellations. We're told Mr. Crocker collected these simply as curiosities. But you and I know different!" He drooped an eyelid in Larry's direction. "He was suckered, just the way all of us have been."

BRADLEY cleared his throat. "I wonder if I could ask you gentlemen to give me just a minute or two of your time? We're trying to find out all we can about Adrian, and I know that you both had dealings with him."

"Let's go into the smoke-room and talk over a drink," suggested Larry. "Or is it too early in the day for you gentlemen?"

"It's never too early," said Luckman. "I'm interested to hear about the case. Come on, Howard."

Stevens moistened his lips. "I—I don't feel very well," he said. "If—if you'll excuse me, I'll join you the moment I can." He moved away in the direction of the wash room.

Luckman laughed. "I'm afraid you've started him off on another bad day, Inspector. But I guess I can tell you all he knows about Adrian." They went through into the smoke-room, ordered two highballs and a sarsaparilla. The inspector confessed it was too early in the day for him. Luckman bit the end off a fresh cigar and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, Inspector, let's hear the gory details," he said.

"There isn't much to tell beyond what you've already read in the papers," Bradley said. "The police always have a nasty job in a case like this. We have to go painstakingly through the list of people who might have had a motive, no matter how remote, and eliminate them."

Luckman's black eyes narrowed, but he was smiling. "And I'm a suspect?"

Bradley made a deprecating gesture. "You had recently had an unpleasant experience with Adrian," he said.

Luckman flicked the ash from his cigar, and his lips seemed to tighten. "Yes, I

did," he said, with an air of frankness. "I collect Newfoundlands, Inspector. I needed just one stamp to bring that collection up to date. I had placed a standing order with Adrian, in case he got hold of it. Well, he got one and then sold it without giving me a chance to raise my bid."

"Would you have raised your bid over thirty-five hundred?" Bradley asked.

Luckman glanced up. "So you know the details of the deal? Well, no, I wouldn't. It would have been futile to bid against Jasper Hale. Hale wanted the stamp to help put over some kind of a trade with a friend of his. He'd probably have gone higher—more than I could afford."

"All of which wouldn't make you love, Adrian," said the inspector.

LUCKMAN laughed. "Quite right, Inspector. But there was only one satisfactory way to hurt Adrian. Through his pocketbook. I'll admit I was planning a little revenge, but my idea was that sometime I'd sucker him into buying a cripple for a fancy price."

"Then you didn't kill him?" Bradley asked, casually.

"No, Inspector, I didn't." Luckman grinned.

"About Stevens?" Bradley said.

Luckman shook his head. "I'm afraid you've sent him off for the day. But I ask you, Inspector, does he look dangerous?"

Bradley admitted that Stevens looked far from sinister. "I know his story," he said. "I suppose he'll be able to account for his time last night?"

"The washroom attendant should be able to alibi him," Luckman chuckled.

"I suppose you have an alibi, too, Mr. Luckman?" said Bradley.

"Yes, I have," said Luckman, promptly. "I went to an early movie, came back here at about ten minutes past ten, had a snack, and then went home."

Bradley stared at him in silence. Luckman had been very ready to describe his evening's routine. It was at that moment that a boy came through the smoke-room paging the inspector.

"Inspector Bradley! Inspector Bradley!"

Bradley looked embarrassed as he beckoned the boy over to the table.

"Telephone for you, sir. You can take it right over there in the booth."

Bradley left the other two for a moment. When he came back to the table, he said:

"I'm much obliged for your help, Mr. Luckman. Shall we be moving, Storm?"

They went out of the Club and onto the street. Bradley hailed a taxi. "That was my invaluable assistant, Rube Snyder," he said.

"Something turned up?" Larry asked.

"Mercy, yes," muttered Bradley. "He's at Adrian's office. He says he's solved the case!"

CHAPTER XVII

SUICIDE

RUBE SNYDER was sitting in an arm chair in Adrian's waiting room when Larry and the inspector arrived. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, and he was smoking a malodorous cigar with a kind of flourish. As they came in Rube stood, up, beaming from ear to ear.

"Wait till you get a load of this, Red," he said. Then he spoke almost apologetically to Larry. "I want to say I'm sorry for suspectin' you last night, Mr. Storm. But you know how it is! Suspect everyone in this business till you've solved your case."

"My wounds have healed," Larry said.

"So you've washed things up, Rube? Let's have it." Bradley ordered.

"Come this way," said Rube.

To their surprise he led them out of Adrian's waiting room and along the corridor to the door of the adjoining office. The name, *Harold G. Carpenter, Attorney,* was on the door.

"Forget about him," said Rube. "He died about six months ago and the office has been empty ever since—that is, until about a week ago. Then it was rented by a bird named Smith." Rube, who had inserted a key in the lock, turned to give them an exaggerated wink. "Smith! Right

away, when I heard that, I smelled a rat."

"I'm always suspicious of Smiths," said Larry, straight-faced.

"Particularly when there's any crime around," said Rube. He opened the door and they followed him in. The office was bare of furniture. Mr. Carpenter's belongings had evidently been moved away and Mr. Smith had not moved any in. But Mr. Smith had been busy—and in an extraordinary manner.

"Take a gander at that!" said Rube, waving toward the side wall.

The plaster had been ripped off the wall in a space about as big as the lower half of a door. Behind that the lath had all been hacked away. Plaster and boards lay in an untidy heap to one side of the opening.

"Cuttin' his way right into Adrian's office, he was," said Rube. "Plannin' to get in there and clean the place out. Then he got caught; Adrian must of heard him workin', and so he had to plug Adrian. Then he scrams. But that's not the best of it, Red. We know who he is?"

"Mercy!" murmured the inspector.

"Yes, sir. There was prints all over the office so I had Eddie come up and go over the place. They checked on the prints right away. Guy has a record. His name's Slick Williams, and he's a well-known petty thief and small time cracksman. They've sent out a general alarm for him. When they bring him in, boss, the case'll be closed."

Bradley looked at Larry and shook his head sadly. "Doesn't that beat hell?"

Larry was gazing at the damaged wall. "There've been robberies like this before, in our business," he said. "A broker in Philadelphia was cleaned out by someone who took the next office and cut his way through at night."

"Maybe this Willliams has pulled a whole series of jobs like this," suggested Rube. "Well, he's went too far this time!"

The inspector nodded. "It's a fine piece of work, Rube. I admit I never thought to examine the next office. Of course you've told the papers?"

Rube flushed. "Well, Red, the reporters were hangin' around, gettin' in my hair. So I thought, since it was open and shut—"

"QUITE right Rube, quite right," said Bradley. "There are one or two rather upsetting features to this, but I guess Willliams will be able to explain them when he's caught. For instance," and Bradley paused while he held a match to his pipe," did he get tired of trying to carve this hole through the wall and just walk in by the front door and shoot Adrian?"

"No, Red. Adrian must of caught him at it. . . ."

"And invited him in for a drink? And while they're having the drink in comes Gregory and they slug him with the bottle? Then Williams shoots Adrian, opens the safe, and doesn't take anything! This Williams must be quite a character, Rube . . . quite a character."

Rube's face was beginning to get dark red. Bradley reached out and patted him on the shoulder. "Don't get me wrong, Rube. I'm delighted with this. I'm delighted you found it. I'm delighted you told the reporters. That'll get us off the front page, and when we catch Mr. Williams it'll seem that everything's over. But we'll keep right on working. Because Williams didn't do it, Rube, Oh, no! Not a petty little thief who cuts holes in walls. It doesn't tie in with things. But it's a nice coincidence . . . a very nice coincidence. And there's just a chance your Mr. Williams may have seen or heard something that'll help us quite a lot. He might turn out to be our star witness, which'll bring you no end of credit."

A crestfallen Rube led them out of the empty office. In the hall Larry said:

"If you don't want me any more this morning, Bradley, I'd like to get back to work. There's a lot to be done."

"Sure," said Bradley. "I'll go down to the street with you. I'm headed for my office." He gave Larry a faintly malicious smile. "Got to look over the fingerprint evidence."

They rode down in the elevator in silence. When they got out on the sidewalk Bradley checked Larry as he was about to start up the street.

"Ever fooled around with murderers much?" Bradley asked.

"Not much," said Larry, and grinned. "Why?"

"They don't like to get caught," said Bradley. "Sometimes they get pretty tough about it. I was wondering . . ." He stared dreamily at the passing traffic on Nassau Street.

"What were you wondering, professor?" Larry asked.

"I was wondering, since you insist on playing detective, whether I oughtn't to get you a permit to carry a gun," said Bradley.

THE rest of the day dragged interminably. Neither Larry nor Ellen felt like working. They were waiting anxiously to hear from Mickey, but Mickey did not report. There was no word from Mr. Julius, although Larry didn't really expect to hear anything from the old man.

They didn't go out for lunch. Sandwiches and coffee were sent up from the corner delicatessen. There was no further news from Bradley's office.

It was nearly five o'clock when Mickey, looking tired and discouraged, finally put in an appearance.

"Gee, Mr. Storm, I did the best I could," he said, unhappily.

"No leads, Mickey?"

"Bones must of just gone up in smoke!" said Mickey. "A lot of people seen him around durin' the afternoon and up till near six-thirty. After that, nothin'—no one saw him, that's all. He looked up at Larry. "It isn't that any of those monkeys was holdin' out on me, Mr. Storm. If they knew anythin', they'd of talked."

"I'm sure of it, Mickey," Larry said. "I know you did everything you could."

"Gosh, Mr. Storm. If anythin's happened to Bones . . ."

"We just have to keep hoping," Larry said. "You'd better get home and get some supper. Drop around in the morning, in case there's any news."

"Gee, Mr. Storm, would you mind if I telephoned you tonight at your house before I go to bed?" Mickey asked.

"Sure, kid. Call up—only I may not be there."

Mickey shuffled out of the office. Ellen looked at Larry.

"Where do you plan to be?" she asked.

"All right, baby, keep riding that horse if you want to," he said. "I *am* going to see Lucia. Bradley's probably talked to her by now. I want to know how she came out."

Ellen hesitated a moment. "I can't help riding you about Lucia, Larry. You can't take it and that eggs me on. Stop kidding yourself about her. You usually think in a pretty straight line, but now she's got you making excuses for nothing."

"For Pete's sake, Ellen, you're being a harpy about the girl! You've been out to get her ever since this case broke."

"I'm out to get a murderer," said Ellen sharply. "And it just happens that a pair of good-looking legs doesn't spread a fog in front of my eyes.

"I listened to you last night when you were explaining about the missing gun. That was when you thought Lon might be guilty. There had to be some way to explain why the murderer waited so long in the other room. You said it was Lon, mooning over his lost treasures."

"So what?"

"Simply that, teacher, since you no longer believe Lon did it, that explanation doesn't make sense. Why should someone else moon over those stamp books for half an hour? You don't know. And I'll tell you why you don't know. Because there isn't a good explanation and without one, Lucia's story goes to pieces."

"Her story makes perfect sense," Larry said, feebly.

"DOES it? Hasn't it occurred to you it might have been Lucia who arrived at the office while Gregory was talking to Adrian? Hasn't it occurred to you

it would be typical of a half-hysterical woman to slug Gregory with that bottle instead of just hiding until he'd gone? And she had a motive, Larry, as good a motive as anyone. Isn't it quite possible that *she* shot Adrian? Wouldn't *she* have looked over the stock books to see if Adrian had the missing stamps from her father's collection?"

"But why call me in at all, then?"

"Because she got panicky," said Ellen, "and left her fingerprints all over the place. She was afraid to go back so she invented that cock-and-bull story about the gun because she wanted you to think just what you did think—that someone had been there while she was there!"

"And I suppose she knocked Bones over the head and concealed him in her hand bag," Larry growled. "You're rationalizing this, Ellen. Come clear."

"No I'm not, Larry. I'm showing you the simplest and most straightforward explanation of what—"

The phone interrupted her. Larry, who was nearest to it, picked it up.

"Hello."

"I've found him," said a harsh, cracked voice.

"What? Hello, who is this? What did you say?"

"I said I'd found him!" the voice shouted. "This is Julius, you fool. I've found your boy."

"Great God!" Larry cried. "Where is he? Is he all right?" Ellen had come close to him. "Bones!" she whispered. He nodded.

"He's at 921 East 47th Street," said Mr. Julius. "He's been drugged, but he's all right. I've sent for a doctor. You'd better get up here in a hurry. I'm tired—want my supper."

Larry and Ellen fled from the office. In a crazy, hair-raising ride uptown neither one of them spoke. Ellen clung to Larry's arm, and from time to time he reached out and patted her hand. His face was set.

The cab drew up in front of a brownstone house. Ellen ran up the front steps while Larry paid the driver. He was at her heels as they met a plump Irish woman in the foyer.

"And are you lookin' fer the old deaf gentleman?" she asked. "Second floor to your right."

They ran up the stairs. A door at the end of the hall was open and they made for it. Inside was a quietly furnished living room. On a couch in the corner they saw Bones. Mr. Julius was standing over him.

"You took long enough!" said Mr. Julius, petulantly. But there was a light of triumph in his old eyes. "Thought a house-to-house canvass was a joke, eh?"

ELLEN crowded past him and dropped on her knees beside the sofa. Bones was very pale. So pale that the freckles seemed to be painted on his white skin. His eyes were closed.

"Doctor just left," said Mr. Julius. "He's had a severe overdose of some sleeping drug. He'll have to sleep it off, but he'll be sound enough in a day or two."

"Can he be moved?" Ellen asked.

"If you can carry him."

"But how did you find him here? Whose place is this?"

"You fool," said Mr. Julius. "Didn't you see the card on the door? This apartment is inhabited by one Ezra Luckman! I got in through bribery and corruption."

"Luckman! Where is he?"

"I can't be expected to know everything!" snapped Mr. Julius.

Larry sprang to the telephone in the corner of the room and dialed police headquarters. A moment later he had Bradley.

"Well, Inspector, we've got your murderer for you," he said.

"Oh, so you've got him!" Bradley's voice sounded cold and unfriendly.

"Well, not exactly," Larry laughed. "But I know who he is. Luckman. I'm at his apartment now, but I don't know where he is."

"So Luckman's the murderer?" Bradney said, grimly. "You'd better come down and tell me about it."

"I will," said Larry. "Be there in about three-quarters of an hour. I've got to make a stop first. But you'd better have his apartment watched in case he comes back here."

"I'll attend to that," said Bradley.

Larry turned away from the phone. He was laughing. "The inspector's a little miffed because we beat him to the draw."

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. "I'm going. Want my supper!"

They wrapped Bones in a warm blanket and Larry carried him downstairs in his arms. The boy groaned and muttered in his sleep. He called Larry's name once, and Larry's arm tightened around him.

"It's all right, fella," he said. But Bones couldn't hear him.

They took him straight to Larry's apartment. On the way Larry expressed his amazement. "A smooth guy, that Luckman! Cool as a cucumber this morning . . . never batted an eyelash. And all the time he was our man!"

As soon as Bones had been tucked in the guest room bed, Larry left him in charge of Ellen and Lon Nicholas. He took a taxi directly to the inspector's office. Bradley stared at him stonily as he walked in.

"Now don't be sore, Bradley," Larry said, cheerfully. "I don't want any credit for this. As a matter of fact, I don't deserve any. It was that old geezer you met at my office this morning who cracked this case."

"Really!" Bradley's eyes were frosty. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I have to confess now that I was holding back a thing or two," Larry said. "You see, Nicholas *was* at my place until about five yesterday—then he got away—took his gun. He was drunk, and swearing vengeance. I was sure he hadn't killed Adrian, but he'd have made a perfect fall guy for you cops."

"The stupid, stupid police," said Bradley.

"No, Bradley, you're not being a sport. But to get on with it. . . . I put my office boy, a kid named Bones, to watch Lon. Nicholas gave Bones the slip . . . and then Bones disappeared. We were plenty scared. We knew Bones must have stumbled across the murderer and that the murderer had shut him up. It was old Julius who decided the thing to do was to check on everybody who had it in for Adrian. The main object was to find the boy—and of course, incidentally, the murderer."

"Sure—just incidentally," said Bradley. "And you found the kid at Luckman's apartment?"

"Right."

"So Luckman is the murderer?"

"Q.E.D.," said Larry expansively.

Bradley stood up. "Come with me," he said, in the same harsh angry voice.

HE LED Larry along the corridor, down a couple of flights of stairs, and presently flung open a door at the end of a basement passageway. A strong odor of chemicals reached Larry.

"This," said Bradley, "is the morgue! Come on."

Larry's hands tightened at his sides, but he followed. Bodies, covered with sheets, lay on a series of slabs. Bradley stopped beside one of them, and without comment, bent down and pulled the sheet away.

Larry's breath made a whistling sound between his teeth. He was looking at the hawklike face of Ezra Luckman, still smiling sardonically in death. Bradley's voice beat in on his stunned consciousness.

". . . killed with the same gun that was used on Adrian," the inspector was saying. "And it wasn't suicide, Storm. Understand? It wasn't suicide!"

Larry turned to him, dazed. "How do you know that?" he asked.

Bradley's eyes were cold. "Because I'm a trained policeman, that's how I know, Mr. Storm. Because we're equipped to handle murder investigations. Because we have ballistics experts. Because we're not fumbling amateurs. And now, Mr. Storm, we'll stop playing games and *you'll come clean!*"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

No Planes for Pop

By MARTE RICHARDS

Zach Carlin needed an airline about as much as he did a spare neck; he hated anything, except birds, that flew. But Zach's technique for getting rid of a millstone 'round his neck was more spectacular than efficient

A YOUNG man with broad shoulders and a pleasant grin said to the girl at the switchboard, "Good morning, Bessie. Is Pop in?"

"I'll say so," the girl replied. "Listen."

A noise, composed alternately of squeaks and roars, came from an inner office. It sounded, more than anything, like a mouse exchanging in a violent set-to with a bull. A series of dull thuds punctuated the argument.

A girl came flying through the door with a flushed face and tearful eyes. The noise and thuds continued.

The young man emitted a soft whistle, then opened a gate and strolled past the switchboard to the inner room.

It contained a long, broad desk. At this was seated a rotund man, with iron-gray hair cropped close as a shoebrush, and a face as round as a Buddha. A darkly sinister cheroot was clamped between his lips. He looked, in conjunction with the desk, like an idol upon a stand, diffusing incense. However, he was engaged with great concentration in hurling one book after another at the wall opposite him.

"Good morning, Pop," said the young

man. "Don't you know it's dangerous to lose your temper, at your age?"

The Buddha continued to hurl books. His gaze took no cognizance of the visitor, although his voice was heard. "Who asked your advice, squirt?" *Wham.* "I'll show you who's old!" *Wham.* "A fine staff I've got, letting a young squirt into my office to tell me what to do!" *Wham.*

"I told you what not to do," said the young man. "You shouldn't scare Miss Byers half to death."

Pop Carlin's arm shot out, but the supply of books had been exhausted. His desk was bare of them.

"There's a city directory at the switchboard," suggested the young man.

Pop tilted forward in his chair. He looked at the young man, then at some papers on his desk. He sighed and picked one of the papers up. "Love in spring is bad enough," he said conversationally, as though nothing whatever had occurred. "In December it's barbarous."

"I presume," the young man murmured, "Miss Byers is the casualty?"

"You presume, all right," said Pop.

The young man grinned. "I've heard rumors you were once in love yourself. I've heard you even had a son."

"I didn't have him during office hours!" Pop shouted. "It impairs efficiency!"

"Miss Byers has been pretty efficient for five years," said the young man.

"I wouldn't care if it was sixty!" Pop snapped. "She ought to know the difference between a business office and a coral strand! I won't have mooning around this place!" He stabbed a buzzer and seized the office phone. "Jerry, I want Miss Byers sent far, far away. Make it Vancouver. That'll cool her off! Reserve a compartment—"

"Wait a minute," injected the young man. "I can deadhead her to Seattle in one of our planes."

"Find your own boobs to kill!" squeaked Pop. "No, not you, Jerry; not this time. I want you to make the reservations. Plural, yes! She's to take that man of hers along. Of course he's to marry her first. Tell 'em to get out and stay away, at least a month!" He slapped down the receiver.

"You old pirate!" the young man softly observed.

"Don't make calf's eyes at me!" Pop snapped. "She'll get the love bugs out of her system and come back sane. Anyway, it's my business. If you have any, state it. What do *you* want?"

A furrow appeared between the young man's brows. "Money," he said.

"DON'T you know that nobody except the government's got any these days—and it can't keep up with itself?"

The young man nodded. "I'd rather drink poison than hit you up again."

"Why didn't you?" Pop snapped.

"Not because you're my father, I can tell you that! Half the capital tied up in that line is yours, remember?"

"You should come in here and offer me advice! Why don't you take care of your own business properly? If you can't make money in aviation, get out of it!"

"It's too late. The assets of the line have depreciated so much, purely on paper, of course, that I couldn't get fifty thousand for it."

"You paid half a million, and you've nicked me for an extra hundred thousand since. In other words you've kicked away five hundred and fifty thousand in three years. What sort of business is that?"

"The business is all right," said the young man. "General conditions have twisted my tail, but another hundred thousand will see me through. The Arrow Line will repay our investment and then some. It's meeting overhead right now."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"We've carried eighty-nine percent more passengers this year than last."

"That should account for all the sublimated idiots who'll risk their necks in your sky rattletraps! The ground, and cars and trains, are bad enough!" Pop snorted. "I tried to drill sense into your thick skull, but you were progressive, in tune with the age, and I'm only a moth-eared old dodo

with one foot in the grave. Moth-eared, am I? Bill, you don't get another cent from me! I wouldn't give you a Chinese yen with two holes in it!"

"I didn't think you would," sighed Bill. He walked to the door. "Well, I'll fold up inside a month. I had to let you know your money would go too. Personally I don't care very much. In one way it's a relief. I'm fagged."

"That's a fine thing to admit!" Pop squealed. "And you had the nerve to call me old! What's the matter with the way *my* business clicks? I've sold five hundred more Sunray cars this year than last—and I set a new record last year!

"That squawk about conditions gives me a pain. If you've increased the earnings of the Arrow Line and still can't make a net, there's something over-ripe in Denmark, son!"

"Why don't you show me what it is?"

ZACARIAH CARLIN leaned back in his chair. He took a box of matches from his pocket, relit his cheroot, and blew smoke through his nose.

"All right," he said blandly. "On one condition, Bill. You were a good car-salesman. When you jumped the fence I trailed along because you were my son. I didn't throw in with aviation, not on your life! I'd rather wear red flannels than monkey with planes! But that doesn't mean I'm satisfied to lose my money.

"I won't give you another cent, but I'll show you how to get from under with your scalp—that is, provided you take both hands right off the Arrow Line and keep 'em off!"

"Well, I can't keep them in my pockets. I'm down to my last dime."

"You can come back on the Sunray payroll if you're ready to take orders again. How about it?"

The young man nodded gloomily.

"Go to your office," Pop told him, "and make out a power of attorney. Then go home and pack your bag."

"What for? I'm not going anywhere."

"That's what you think! Go pack!"

Bill opened his mouth, closed it again, and grinned. "You win, Wolf of California!"

He walked out of the room.

Pop stabbed a buzzer. "Find me a ship that goes across the ocean, Jerry—clear across—and come in here!"

A short and sturdy man, with a large nose, appeared. "The *Carinthia* calls at San Pedro tomorrow to pick up passengers. She's on a world cruise, twenty countries. The voyage takes four months."

"Just the thing," said Pop. "An admirable opportunity to sell Sunrays to the heathen. Book a passage for Bill."

The office manager looked at him. "You know blamed well he can't sell anything to anyone with export what it is!"

"If you knew as much as I do you'd be hiring me!"

"I wouldn't pay you ten thousand a year," Jerry said, "to generate wild ideas. That's two already today."

"Listen, you fathead, I don't care what Bill sells! He looks tired. A trip will fix him up."

"Oh, well," conceded Jerry, with the familiarity of years, "that's something else again."

"Who asked for your opinion?" Pop cried. "This country is going to the dogs, all right, but conditions haven't anything to do with it! The race is losing stamina! It's decadent! Its youth is either full of love-bugs or a nervous wreck! I'm being turned into a goldanged travel bureau! . . .

"Well, what are you grinning at? Get out of here and book that passage! Don't take all day about it, either! We've inherited a flock of aeroplanes. We've got to figure out a way to make 'em pay!"

"When I recall your views about airplanes," observed his office manager from the safety of the doorway, "and everything concerning them—"

"There you go again!" yelped Pop. "I wouldn't touch the damned things with a bargee's pole! What do you suppose I've been putting up with you for, since you were knee-high to a duck? You're going to handle this!"

ONE day some two months later Jerry entered Pop's office, a tall and sallow stranger at his side. "This is Mr. G. B. Mackey, representing the National Air Corporation, of New York City. He has a proposition which may interest you."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say a proposition," smiled the sallow man. "I am, however, anxious to discuss certain phases of the air industry with you gentlemen."

Pop waved him to a chair. "Cigar?"

Mr. Mackey examined his offering. "East Indian?"

"First-class Manila!" cried Pop indignantly. "How are we ever going to help the Philippines get rid of us if we don't buy their stuff?"

"My company, like all far-sighted organizations, is interested in the broader aspects of aviation," said Mr. Mackey, lighting the cheroot uneasily. "While our activities, so far, have been confined to the Atlantic seaboard, it is our policy, wherever possible, to lend all others a helping hand."

"Well, now, that's mighty white of you," said Pop.

"We understand that aviation is, in effect, your sideline," Mr. Mackey continued, "and, furthermore, that you are not altogether satisfied with the progress of your Arrow Line, so we thought it might prove to our mutual advantage to have a little chat."

"I'm not dissatisfied with the line's progress," said Pop. "Passenger traffic between Los Angeles and Seattle has doubled in the last two months. That is progress enough for anyone. Our main line, between San Diego and Seattle, has six Lancer transports, four Sutton open cockpit jobs, completely equipped landing terminals, and leases on two intermediate fields. That's the story in a nutshell."

"There is also your San Francisco-Salt Lake run."

"Merely a feeder line."

"The runs don't interest us much," said Mr. Mackey crisply. "They are too far outside our present operations zones. Of course we might be able to use an item of your equipment here and there."

"Our ports and landing fields aren't portable, you know."

"I was referring to the planes," said Mr. Mackey quickly.

"Oh, then I'll tell you what I'll do." Pop lit another cigar. "I'll sell you the Seattle run, lock, stock, and barrel, for a million cash."

Mr. Mackey removed his cheroot from his mouth and looked at it unhappily. "We couldn't use so much equipment, not possibly. The San Francisco-Salt Lake run—"

"Four transports and two small planes? It's not worth talking about!"

"But, Mr. Carlin—"

"It's so trivial," Pop said, "I wouldn't think of selling it. If I sold the main line at my figure, I'd simply throw it in."

Mr. Mackey, after regarding his cheroot once more, dropped it furtively beside his chair. "There is another factor to be pointed out. We are quite willing to give others the benefit of our experience, but it is only logical that we should ask some reciprocity, at least an expression of confidence in the holding company. For that reason cash deals are not favored."

"All right," said Pop. "A million worth of National Air Corporation stock at today's quotation is a hundred and forty thousand shares. Deliver them by five o'clock and it's a deal."

"That's only seven hours!" gasped Mr. Mackey. "I'm afraid it's impossible. Won't you leave the offer open a few days?"

"Why, sure. Of course," Pop added, "I'm a moody cuss. I never know exactly how I'm going to feel from day to day. It must be my dyspepsia."

"Or sheer cussedness," Jerry said.

Pop glared at him.

"I can't commit myself, you understand," said Mr. Mackey, glancing at his watch. "I will, however, transmit your offer to New York. Good morning, gentlemen."

AFTER he had departed Jerry chided Pop. "You don't believe in putting on the screws, do you? Not much! They can't possibly inventory us and verify our statements in a day!"

"They can do it in a month, can't they?"

"Why didn't you give it to them, then?"

"Because they've spent the last month doing it!" Pop snapped. "He has that stock right in his pocket. I'll bet you twenty cents against a nickel he goes to a movie, stalling until five o'clock!"

"Well, anyway," Jerry muttered, "why did you throw away Salt Lake? It's the only run making real money, and they didn't give a whoop for it."

"Are you stone blind as well as dumb?" Pop yelped. "The Salt Lake run is all that they *do* want! The highbinders are slapping together a transcontinental system. Don't you even read the papers any more?

"They're got to span the country, to dig their claws into the post-office treasury in a big and handsome way. Our Salt Lake mail contract would be the final link. It's worth a million bucks to them! Our main line is what I'm really tossing in."

"Why did you squander all that money on it?" wailed the office manager. "You've spent fifty thousand just in advertising, in the last two months!"

Pop flung his cheroot on the floor and stamped on it. "To think I raised you practically by hand! We built up the traffic report to arouse comment! Step into my parlor said the spider to the fly!"

"You being the spider, I suppose. Well, I'm still unconvinced," said Jerry hotly. "Your object, as I comprehended it, was to unload. Huh! All you've accomplished, if your judgment proves infallible—as usual—is to swap your planes and airports for someone else's stock!"

Pop took another cheroot from his pocket, and chewed at it so viciously the tip described weird arcs. "I've noticed that when numbskulls start pawing air, they almost always toss three-cent words around! Pul-lease open those big, blue eyes, and keep those big, brown ears from flapping while I explain.

"The hundred and forty thousand shares of stock they're going to offer me are small pumpkins in the affairs of a corporation like National Air, which has a million outstanding. But that's almost half of three hundred thousand, Jerry, and three hundred thousand shares can be a troublesome minority. Oh, my, yes, indeed! . . . Good land of Goshen, don't you get it yet? Jerry, for the love of Beelzebub, get out of here and start our brokers buying N.A.C., before I trim your salary to fit your head!"

FOUR men sat around a polished table in New York. All were garbed impeccably. All were first-class business men. All were reminiscent of buzzards, somehow.

One of them, peering through glasses attached by a black ribbon to his silk waistcoat, asked, "Who is this Carlin, anyway? Who closed the deal with him?"

Mr. Mackey responded, "I did. He's just a cantankerous old mossback who sells automobiles. He went into aviation as a sideline. It cost him plenty, so he was ready to unload."

"He was, was he?" drawled the third man. "Then why has he been buying in our stock?"

"I didn't know he had been, Mr. Stern."

"One way or another," drawled Mr. Stern, "he has annexed about a third of it. It looks as though he'd like to get control."

"There isn't enough stock on the market for that," said Mr. Mackey soothingly.

"And he ought to know it," retorted Mr. Stern. "That's why I can't figure him."

The man with the glasses said, "He's either a born pest or a plain nut. We gave him three directors, but that hasn't shut him up. I get a long-winded letter from him every other day. He wants to run the show. I'm good and sick of it."

"There's an easy solution," drawled Mr. Stern. "Atlantic Transport is all ready to fall off the tree. Let's catch it. That will take care of Carlin automatically. Call a special meeting. We can put the deal through in ten minutes."

"All very fine," the man with the glasses said, "except that we'd leave ourselves wide

open if at least one Carlin director wasn't there."

"That's right, Jim," Mr. Stern assented. "It won't work, after all, I guess."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Mr. Mackey suddenly. "Isn't this fellow Brant—Jerry Brant—Carlin's head man on the board? I think I'll hop out to the coast?"

"You think he may be—uh—susceptible?" inquired Mr. Stern.

Mr. Mackey shook his head.

"Then what's your point?"

"Our acquisition of Atlantic Transport would be a good thing for the stockholders, wouldn't it?"

"Stupendous and colossal!" chortled Mr. Stern. "The stock would jump at least two points."

"Loyalty," said Mr. Mackey, "is Jerry Brant's first name. His devotion to old Pop Carlin is positively inspiring. Well, now, if you were genuinely devoted to your employer, you wouldn't spoil a deal like that, would you?"

Mr. Stern regarded him approvingly.

"I'll call the meeting for the twenty-fifth," asserted the board president instantly. "Mackey, my *dear* boy! Keep in touch with me."

POP CARLIN crumpled the newspaper into a ball, hurled it to the floor, and jumped up and down on it. He reseated himself at his desk, lit a cheroot, and, presently, picked up the office phone. "Jerry, come in here."

Jerry Brant strolled in.

"I should think," Pop said, "you'd manage to learn what N.A.C. is smoking up before it gets into the papers, at any rate."

"If you're referring to the Atlantic Transport deal," returned his office manager, "that isn't smoke. N.A.C. is taking over."

"It only thinks it is."

"It is. The directors have voted to do so. A special meeting was held yesterday."

Pop looked at Jerry intently. "They've left themselves wide open, if they did. I wasn't represented."

"Oh, yes, you were. I voted for the merger, Pop."

"Are you crazy? You haven't been out of town!"

"They came to Los Angeles," Jerry told him. "In fact, I think they held the meeting here on my account."

Pop took the cheroot from his mouth. He broke it in two, dropped the pieces in a basket, and lit another one. "I had you appointed to the N.A.C. board because I trusted you," he said.

"That's why I voted for the deal."

"Without telling me?"

"It is a first-rate deal," said Jerry calmly. "Atlantic Transport operates from Miami to Montreal. It gives N.A.C. the largest air system in the world. What's more, it doesn't cost the corporation one penny in cash. We simply give Atlantic Transport a million shares of our unissued stock."

"Without telling me?" reiterated Pop.

Jerry smiled patiently. "I wanted to put something over by myself, for once."

Pop broke his cheroot into four pieces and lit another one. His hand edged towards the books upon his desk. "Isiah, Ezekiah, and Jeremiah! I'll say you did!"

"Why ring in the prophets?" Jerry demanded. "You've told me to use more initiative a hundred times! This deal doubles the size of N. A. C. That doubles the value of your stock. What's wrong with that? The stock is up an eighth on pure rumor. It will sail up two points, Thursday, when the merger is announced."

"It will not!" Pop screamed. "There won't be a merger Thursday or any other day! I'll spike their little game! I'll get a Delaware injunction! That'll hold 'em until I really bring my guns in line!"

"You keep howling for initiative," Jerry grumbled. "When you get it you explode all over the place! You wanted to sell out at a profit, didn't you? I've sent the stock up two whole points!"

"Who in tarnation do you think is going to buy the stuff?"

"Who was going to buy it to begin with?"

"The directors!" Pop yelped. "That crew of New York pirates who run the show and want to keep on running it! Why do you think I bothered climbing into their hair, all the time? So they'd be so sick of me they'd buy me out. Now I haven't got a big enough percentage of stock to bother them, you idiot! So you've doubled my interest, have you? Say, do you remember how hard we worked to corral that stock? We can't get any more of it! Thirty percent isn't control, but I was doing tolerably well.

"A few more weeks and I'd have had those Piutes so dratted uncomfortable they would have had to buy me out! They knew it, too!"

"I don't see how the situation has changed."

"I know you don't! You can't see through a glass wall, and they got wise to you! I'll bet a cattle ranch against a toothpick they worked on your loyalty and vanity to keep their scheme from me! Maybe you can grasp a little plain arithmetic. If you have thirty percent of a million stock shares, and a million more shares are issued, what does that do to your percentage?"

Jerry said glumly, "It cuts it to fifteen."

"MARVELOUS! You certainly catch on, after you've upset the apple-cart! A way to clap the lid on a troublesome stockholder is to cut him in two! He can only raise half the hell on fifteen percent he could with thirty—or is that too much for you? They thought it out by themselves, Jerry, but they had to have a brilliant young Carlin director to jam it home!

"Do you know how much stock those buzzards own themselves? Eight percent would blanket 'em! You send the stock up, being slick. They can slide without flooding the market, but I can't! And why should they buy my stock now? Oh, it's just fine! I can't buy and I can't sell and my fifteen percent say-so isn't worth a whoop!

"You fixed it, all right, Jerry. At least you tried to hard enough. But they're not going to get away with it. You scramble for the law-sharks! If you don't get that Delaware injunction I'll fry your hide!"

"It won't work," said Jerry sadly. "I attended that meeting as your representative."

"You're a liar!" Pop shrieked. "I didn't know a thing about it! I disown you and all your halfwit acts! If you stand there another second, gawking, you're fired, too! Go get that injunction, do you hear? We'll show those dadbusted highbinders we have something out here besides football, a fair, and Hollywood!"

MOST of the passengers had deserted the *Carinthia* for the fleshpots of Honolulu, but Bill Carlin lingered in the smoking-room.

A fat man entered and eased into the chair beside him, by degrees. "Well, well, news from God's country. California papers, too! Don't tell me we're both Angelenos!"

"Sit in," smiled Bill.

The fat man reached for the financial sheet. "What's your line?"

"Cars." Bill sighed. "I once was interested in aviation, but papa didn't approve."

The fat man chuckled, "I'm on."

Bill turned a page. An eight column advertisement glared up at him: *"Attention Stockholders National Air Corporation!"* He scanned the bold, black type, and whistled softly. "My, oh my!"

"What is it?" asked the fat man.

"I guess I'm still interested in aviation." Bill arose.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," said Bill.

He transferred his person and his baggage to a Dollar liner which sailed east that afternoon. The sixth day following he strolled into his father's office in Los Angeles.

"Hello," he said.

Pop glanced up casually, and down again. "Did you sell some cars?"

"Three," Bill replied.

"So you came back a month ahead of time?"

"You said," Bill told him in a honeyed tone, "you would protect our mutual interests. You also stated, forcefully, that you would show me how to save my hair."

"I did, confound you! I swapped the Arrow Line for a million's worth of N. A. C.!"

"Excellent! I admit you are a marvel," beamed the marvel's son. "Five hundred thousand dollars for each of us. That's very good. I'll thank you for my check."

"I haven't sold the N.A.C.!" Pop snapped.

"Why not?"

"Uh—hang it, the market isn't right!"

Bill nodded and sat down. "So I gathered, from your broadsides to the stockholders. Of course you had to run those ads in lots of papers, and pay for them. They must have cost a pretty penny, Pop."

"What do you care?"

"Oh, I'm not a spoil-sport. No, indeed. But isn't it a little inconsistent to buy into a corporation and then start throwing mud at it? Let's see, you charged a loss of twenty million dollars to mismanagement, stupidity, ignorance, arson, mayhem, and associated brands of crookedness. There wasn't much about the outfit, one gathers, that did appeal to you."

Pop bit his cheroot in two. He drove another into his mouth, and tilted back his chair. "Bill, you are a fresh young squirt."

"It would seem," the fresh young squirt continued, "that the board especially stirred your spleen."

"It was a nest of weasels," Pop agreed. "It paid me twice the value of the Arrow Line in stock, which I thought eminently reasonable, but afterward it tried to mow me down. And, Bill, it used a dodge that was sprouting whiskers before your granddad breezed west on a borrowed horse!"

"Tsk-tsk. The matter involved purchase of Atlantic Transport, did it not? So you decided to talk turkey to the stockholders, not to mention all the world at large. Your purpose, obviously, was to gather voting proxies. Did your pearls of wisdom get results?"

"Well, Bill," purred his father blandly, "I will be absolutely frank with you. I got out an injunction against the Atlantic Transport deal, which forced a special meeting. Meanwhile I set off my fireworks. Those ads were only penny squibs. They didn't really make much noise. I knew they wouldn't. But the board pirates didn't. That is the curse of a guilty conscience, Bill.

"THOSE board buzzards can't vote more than forty percent of the stock between them. I had fifteen. If I could scare up thirty more, in voting proxies, I could hogtie the board. I knew I couldn't do it, Bill. The stock is too scattered.

"But all the same I scared the directors out of a year's growth. It wasn't only the voting proxies, you see. My ads told the world the corporation had worms in its tum-tum. That could affect the value of the stock. I didn't care. I couldn't sell it anyway. But the directors realized that if the stock went down, every stockholder in the country really would start raising hell!"

"And so," Bill murmured, "to make a long story less painful—the Atlantic buy went through."

The corners of Pop's lips quirked upward. "It certainly did, my boy. The special meeting was a honey, all sweetness and light. Of course the board had settled with me first. That may have had something to do with it. My directors had been increased from three to six, and the boys had positively insisted on my taking the board chairmanship."

"My, my," Bill said, very gently. "And I harbored an impression that you scorned aeroplanes."

"Wouldn't touch one with a bargee's pole!" Pop yelped.

"At least you wouldn't lend me another cent, to play with them. How much has this cost you?"

"None of your dadblamed business!"

"Until you've given me my check," Bill said, "it is."

"Well, did you expect me to let a bunch of New York Piutes draw the eye-teeth of a Native Son?" Pop screamed. Then his voice suddenly became a coo. "There is one other thing. Of course I couldn't be expected to take a hard job like the N.A.C. board chairmanship for nothing. They voted me a little bonus, Bill."

Bill stared.

"How much?"

"Oh—ah—just a million, half cash, half stock. I'm just mentioning it to—er—clear the air. You aren't, by any stretch of the imagination, entitled to a cut of that!"

There was a moment of silence. Then Bill said slowly, "You undertook to clear our scalps of air. You appeared to be firm and fervent on the subject. I left you nursing one small line. You swapped the small line for a bigger one, then made the big one bigger still. I come home to find you running the largest air system there is on this earth."

"Your grammar is awful!" Pop yelped. "Why don't you tell me something I don't know? Anyway, I'm not running it! Why don't *you* make yourself useful? Get going, Bill! Get out and run the dratted thing!"

Looking Ahead!

TOMORROW

High on a lonely mountain they will live—these Lost Children of Tomorrow, survivors of Armageddon. They will speak in the language of the very young, since there will be no adults to teach them; and their code will be the code of boys playing Cops and Robbers. But from them must come all our hope for the Day After Tomorrow, for they are the Future. Only Dikar, their Boss, realized that, for only Dikar remembered the flaming night when the world perished. And Dikar was sent to live in exile, a young hunted animal. . . . Presenting the most exciting new fiction-hero since Tarzan in a brilliant and compelling short novel by

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

GLORY HILL

The ramshackle, forgotten hotel was the fortress of a handful of creaking ancients, the die-hards. There a few frail Britishers, dressed in obsolete uniforms, flaunted their banner in the face of the Army of Nippon—and the Japanese guns fell silent. A stirring story by

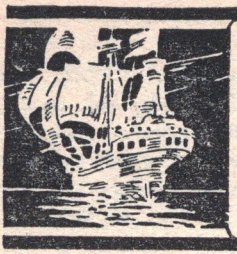
ALFRED BATSON

FISH AIN'T GOT NO BRAINS

With considerable pleasure we introduce Matilda the porpoise, who proved dramatically that her snout was both mighty and grateful . . . and her heart belonged to Daddy. An engaging story by

RICHARD SALE

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—MAY 27th



Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IT IS interesting (we hope) to note the behavior of the man who suffers from Sporadic or Recurrent Obsession with Trifles. Of course some people go through an entire lifetime unable to see the forest for the pine needles. There's nothing anyone can do about them. The type we refer to is normal most of the time. Until comes The Day.

On this occasion—no matter if the world is quietly dropping to bits, if Europe is blowing itself off the map, if calamity, cataclysm and death by fire and sword are screaming from his morning paper's front page—this unfortunate will see holocaust exclusively in little.

To the commuter a lost collar-button becomes débâcle. To the city dweller a missed traffic-light is the complete blight of Fate. To the editorial worker a misguided comma is the ultimate disaster of a life already overflowing with an intolerable burden of small but certainly hideous grief.

Let the artist shuffle the pages of a manuscript, and the world has turned sour. Split an infinitive and you are plotting deliberately against the victim's tottering sanity. A crooked cut (illustration to you) is sheer persecution.

Usually at times like this everybody else runs for the nearest shelter. Not us. We hang around and study him. And we know him pretty well by this time. And so we ought, for we are the guy.

And today is one of the Days. Gnats becloud our vision. We are a hopeless prey to miniscule-o-phobia. So, carping bitterly at the least important thing in sight, we leave the column to the saner minds of our readers. . . .

NATURALLY, it is a comfort at a time like this to listen to the encouraging words of a man who, obviously, takes the large-minded point of view. Such a one, you see, is

JAMES A. MONTGOMERY

Some of the criticism of ARGOSY that I read in Argonotes, both of the magazine and its writers, give me a pain in the neck. The howling that some people do over some trivial thing is simply disgusting to me, and, I imagine, to most readers of ARGOSY. The reason that I buy any magazine is to get entertainment from reading it, not to pick flaws and dispute the accuracy of something that is supposed to be fiction anyway.

I have been reading ARGOSY for more years, I imagine, than most of the fellows that are always crabbing about something. I don't claim to read all the stories, but when, as I sometimes do, I find a story that does not interest me I simply pass it by and read others that do. I have always got *my* ten cents worth.

Now, Mr. Editor, you may not care for this sort of criticism, but whether you do or not it's just the way I feel about it. When I buy a magazine I don't like to have it messed up by the kind of rot that some of these would-be critics indulge in.

PARADISE, CALIFORNIA.

HERE'S a word of praise for a short story that we considered to be of unusual merit. We are, naturally, pleased as Punch that Mr. Lieperman seconds our opinion.

DAVID M. LIEPERMAN

Mr. Leinster's "Pebble of Justice" in the April 1st ARGOSY will certainly receive at least honorable mention in the awards for the outstanding short stories of the year. It was a fine bit of writing.

BROOKLYN, N. Y.

"A mighty good sign, Son ...your liking Union Leader!"

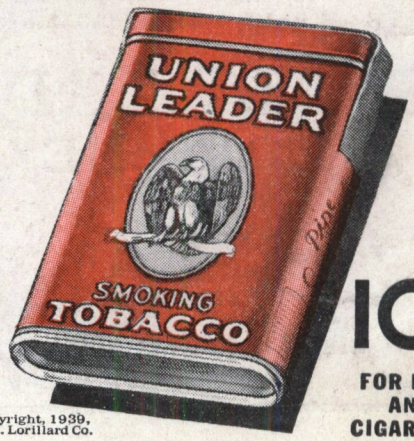
IT'S A TRIBUTE to any young man's judgment, when he selects Union Leader as his steady brand of tobacco. For Union Leader has been giving men the biggest tobacco value a dime can buy, for more than 30 years.

The rich hill-grown Kentucky Burley that goes into Union Leader is specially aged to add greater mellowness, specially processed to increase mildness and freedom from bite.

Yes, sir! When a young man chooses Union Leader for either pipe or cigarette, he's wise beyond his years! And, in the years to come, this kindly flavorful tobacco will repay his choice by making his bad times good and his good times better!

Union Leader

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE



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