JUNE 3

10¢

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ARGOSY

WEEKLY

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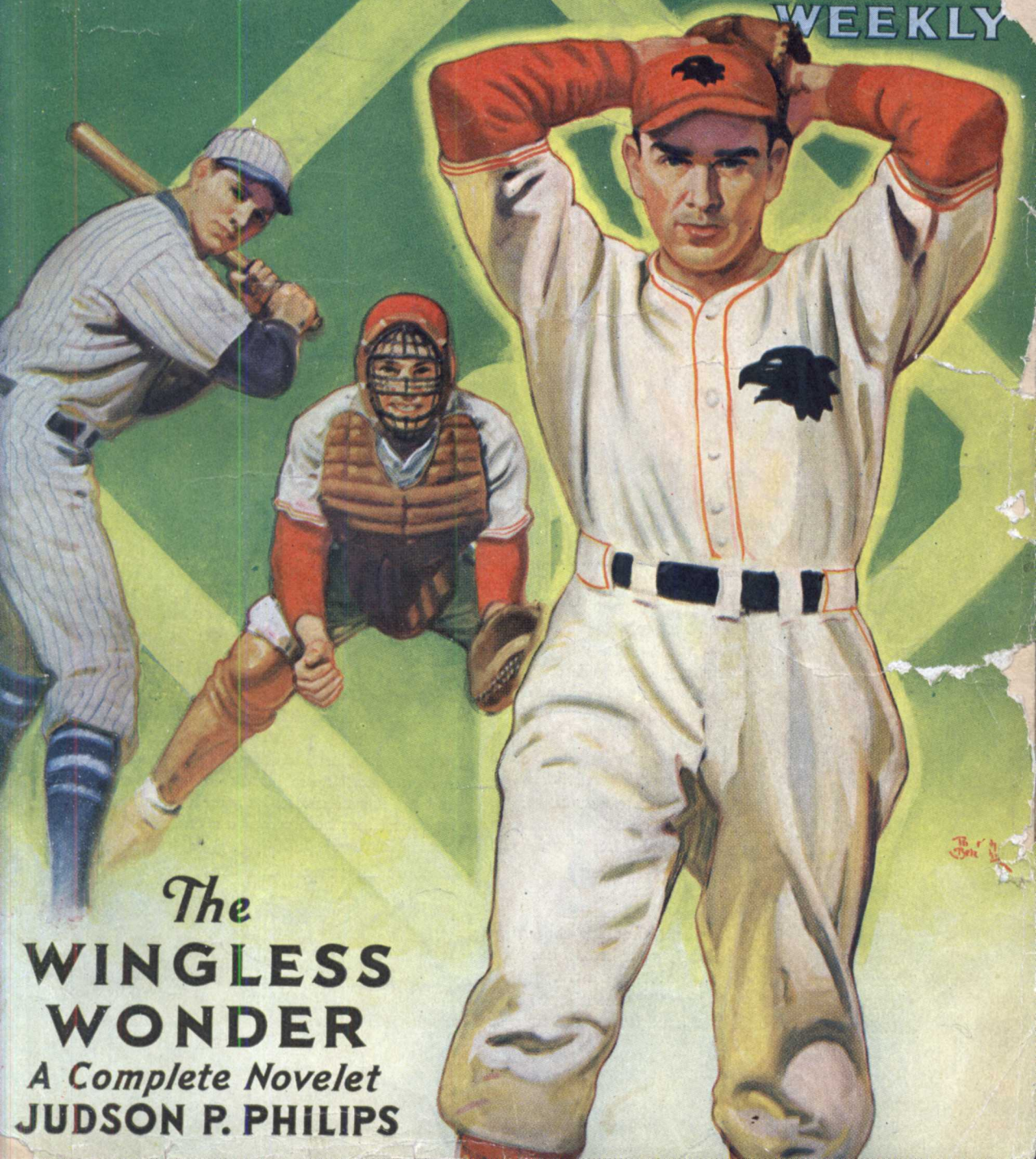
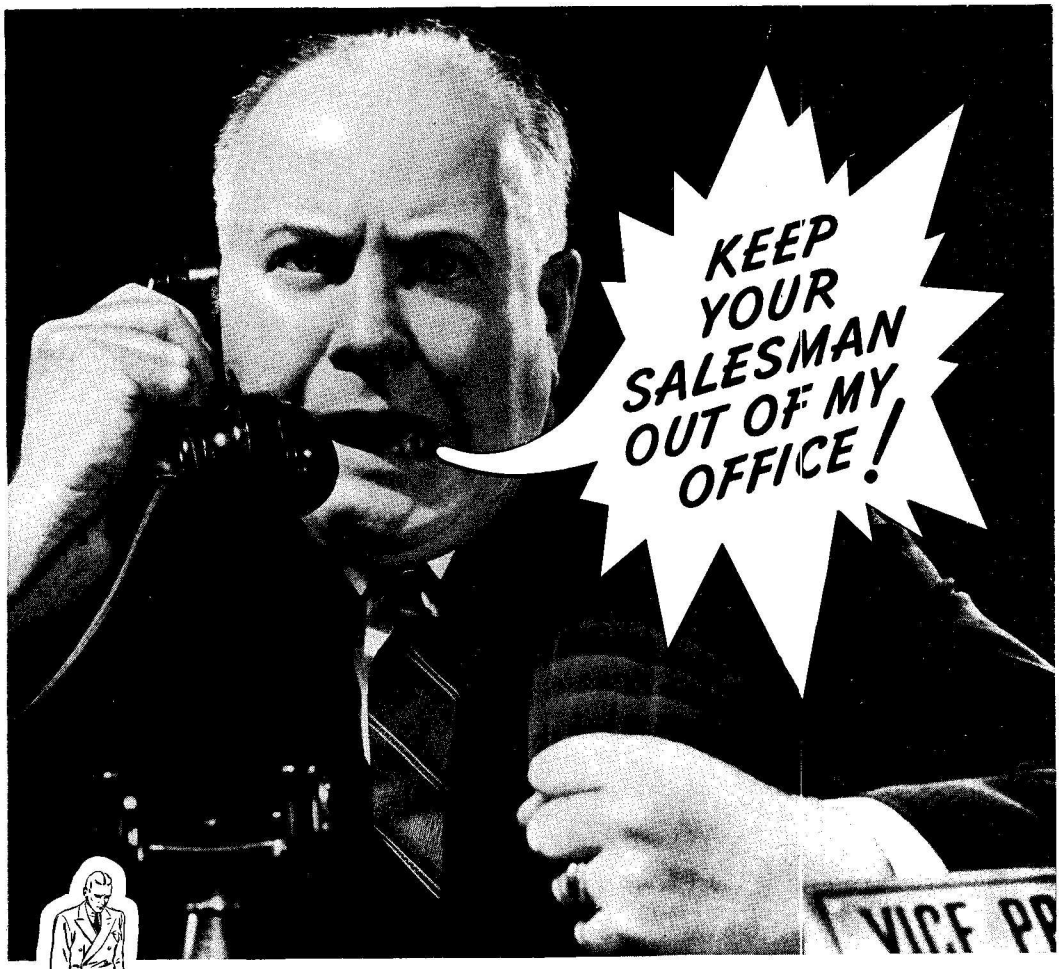


The
WINGLESS WONDER
A Complete Novelet
JUDSON P. PHILIPS



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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Combined with All-American Fiction

Volume 290 CONTENTS FOR JUNE 3, 1939 Number 6

Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating The Wingless Wonder

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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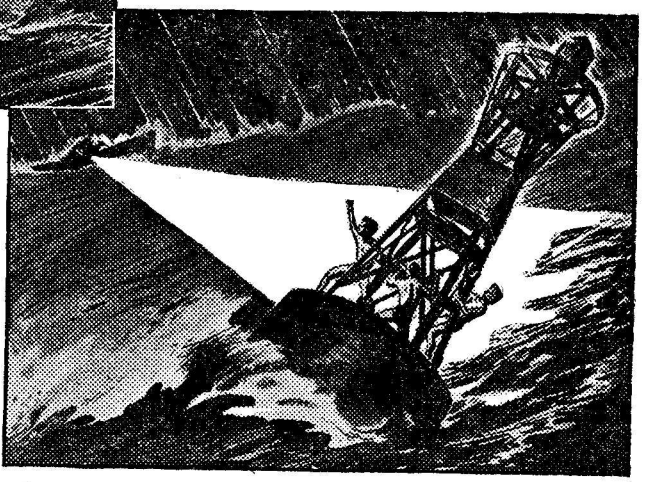
CLINGING FOR THEIR LIVES TO A ROCKING BUOY

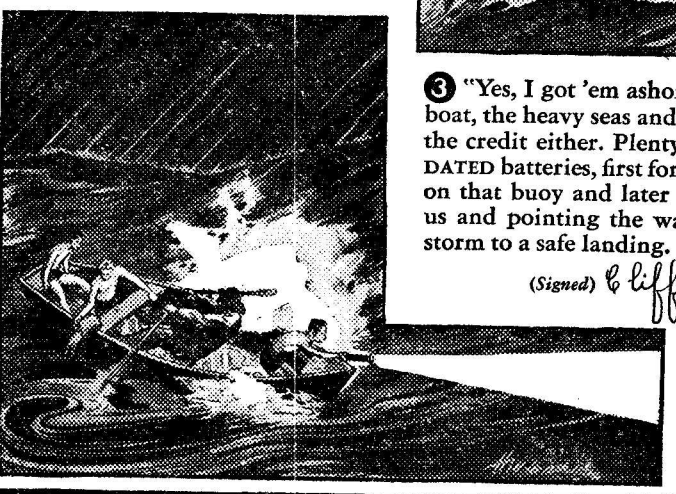
CLIFFORD THORNE, noted Detroit lifeguard, famous for more than 1,000 rescues.

... CLIFFORD THORNE ADDS THREE MORE TO RECORD OF 1000 RESCUES

❶ "I stayed out on Lake St. Claire until well after dark fishing," writes Clifford Thorne of 716 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich. "As I started rowing home a terrific squall hit. Rowing was almost impossible and the rain was so heavy it blotted out lights half a mile away. And then, over the howl of the wind I thought I heard cries for help.

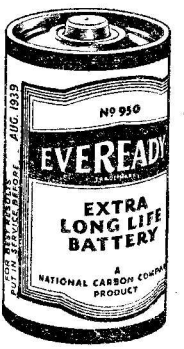


❷ "But I couldn't tell where the sound was coming from. I thought of the powerful, focusing flashlight that lay on the back seat, reached cautiously for it and played it around me... *and there they were!* Three youngsters clinging in terror to a rocking sea buoy. They had tried the usual stunt of swimming out to the buoy and back, but the storm spoiled the plan.



❸ "Yes, I got 'em ashore safely, in spite of an overloaded boat, the heavy seas and the heavy rain, and I can't take all the credit either. Plenty of it belongs to 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, first for finding the lads on that buoy and later for standing by us and pointing the way through that storm to a safe landing.

(Signed) Clifford Thorne"



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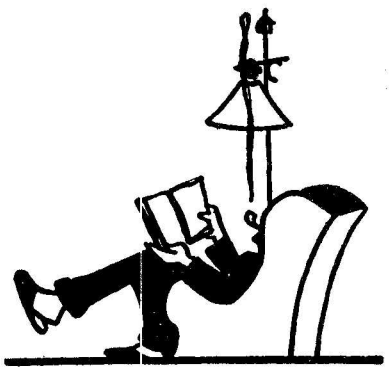

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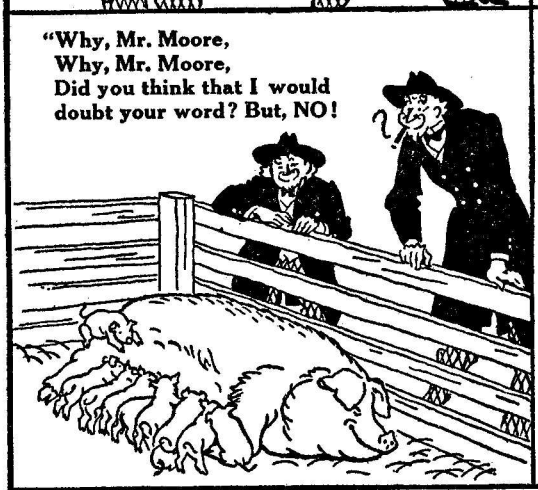

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With its smooth and mellow flavor
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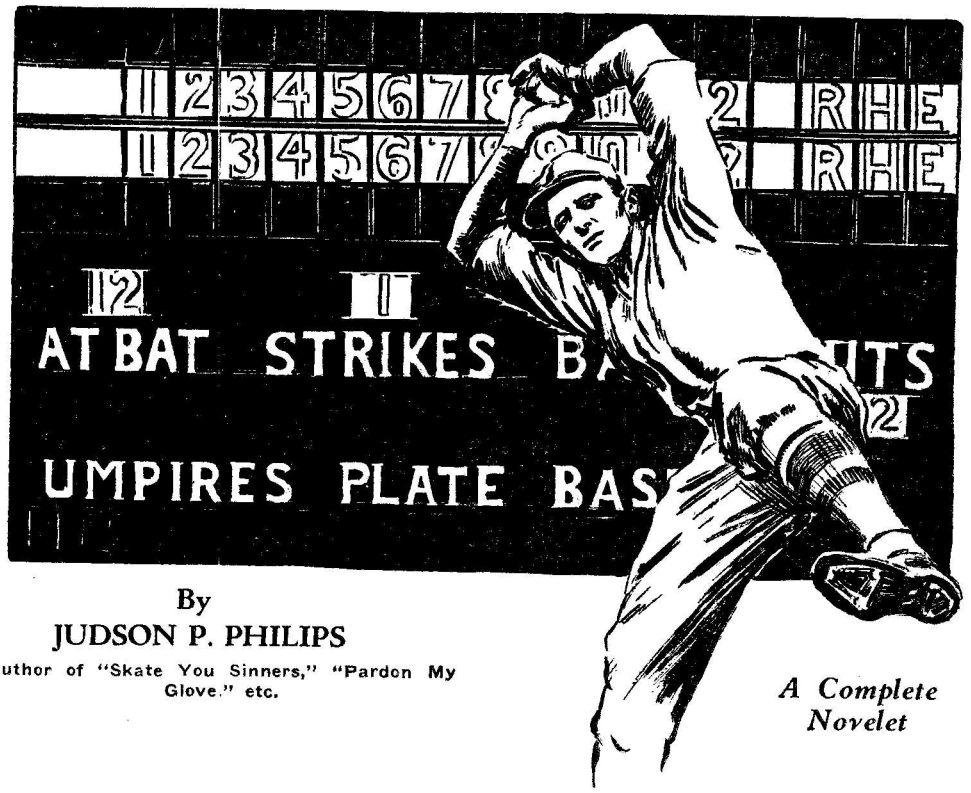

By
JUDSON P. PHILIPS
Author of "Skate You Sinners," "Pardon My Glove," etc.

A Complete Novelet

The Wingless Wonder

So Tex Dillon, the veteran of a thousand tight pinches, took the long walk for the last time—finished. And maybe he was a little dumb, because he didn't know he'd pitched his greatest game with an arm that was useless as a cripple's

I

THE sportswriter from the West was getting drunk. He poured himself a good four fingers of scotch in his glass and splashed it with a little soda from the siphon on the table.

"It's a good thing you don't play the horses," he said.

Raphael Jones, columnist of the *Globe,* regarded the man tolerantly. He glanced at his watch. He would have liked to leave the little gathering of writers seated around the table in Mueller's bar, but the man from the West was giving the party and it was a little early to go politely.

"You'd be coming home each night in a barrel," said the man from the West. He drank half of his drink at a gulp.

"We can't always pick 'em right," said Jones.

"You should have learned your lesson last year," said the man from the West. "You picked the Hawks to win the pennant then, and they blew a six game lead in the last two weeks of the season. That

ought to have taught you something about the club, Raph. They're the champion nose-divers of all time."

"On paper they're the best club in the league," Jones pointed out.

"On paper! On paper the German marks are money," said the man from the West.

"Besides, pennants aren't won in July," continued Jones. "And the Hawk's *are* leading by half a game. It still doesn't look too bad."

"Oh, sure! And three weeks ago they were leading by eight games. It's the old accordion act again. When the Sox get through with them in this series, Raph, they'll be nicely put away in moth-balls for another season. The Sox are hot. They're in." The man from the West was traveling with the Sox.

"They're hot all right," admitted Jones. "And if they knock the Hawks off in this series you may be right. The Hawks might not recover from a blow like that."

"*Might* not!" The man from the West laughed, emptied his glass, and refilled it.

Raphael Jones shrugged. "How was I to figure that the Hawks' star second baseman would break a leg and be out for the season? How was I to figure that Frankie Disalvo and Pat Gore, their two leading hitters, would go into a slump that would last for months? How was I to figure that Tex Dillon, their best pitcher, would come up with a sore arm and be useless at a time when they need him so badly?"

The man from the West frowned. "I'm sorry about Tex," he said. "Is he really washed up?"

"Can't tell," said Jones. "He's a veteran. He hasn't been able to work more than a dozen innings since May. But you'd be a little less cocky, my friend, if Tex was in shape. There never was a better pitcher with the chips down. The Hawks didn't slump when Tex was right. He could always put the brakes on a tailspin."

"Maybe . . . maybe," conceded the man from the West. "But he *is* out. And I hope you aren't going to be so foolish as to back up your prophecy with the coin of the realm, Raph. They call this a crucial series, but it isn't. This is going to be murder—unless your manager, Jerry Connell, can perform a miracle."

"Miracles have happened," said Raphael Jones, but he didn't sound convinced.

THE ashtray on the table in front of Jerry Connell was overflowing with the stubs of half-smoked cigarettes. The table cloth was sprinkled with ash. In the cold dregs of Connell's coffee cup floated the disintegrated remains of another cigarette. Connell's gnarled fingers played restlessly with little round pellets of bread which he flattened out and then carefully reshaped.

Jerry Connell's face was browned to the color of old saddle leather. There were fine wrinkles at the corners of his shrewd brown eyes. His lips were compressed in a straight, hard slit. Jerry's hair was gray at the temples now. When he was in a better temper he sometimes joked about those rapidly increasing gray hairs.

"I got this one the time Jack Cullen crashed into the centerfield fence in St. Louis," he used to say. "Boy, I thought he was done for that time. I got this one the day Rube Williams stole second with the bases full. I got this one the time Eddie Knowles lost Greenberg's fly in the sun in the World Series and cost us the third game."

He had a whole set of reminiscences which explained his graying thatch because he had been managing the Hawks for six years. This morning he wasn't in a joking mood.

"You see these gray hairs?" he asked the man who sat across the table from him. "I got them that day last May when Tex Dillon walked in off the mound with his arm hanging useless at his side."

"What's come over pitchers these days?" Connell's friend asked. "Half the top-flight pitchers in the business get sore arms. Look at last year! Grove, Hubbell, Schumacher, Dean, Ferrell, Mungo, Allen, Rowe—Lord knows how many others. Can't the boys take it any more?"

Jerry Connell flattened out a bread pellet. "The only one I care about is Tex," he said. "Hell, with Tex out there ready to fight we'd knock these guys off over the weekend. We didn't get into slumps when Tex was able to work regularly."

"What's the matter with his arm?"

Connell lit a fresh cigarette and his fingers trembled slightly. "Nobody seems to know. He's been to half a dozen specialists. The point is he can't lift it up over his head without suffering the tortures of the damned."

"Say, Jerry, he may mean the difference of the pennant to you!"

"Pennant!" Connell's voice was harsh, and there was a strange frightened look in his eyes. "Pennant! What I'm thinking about is my job! Do you know what happens when a club goes on the rocks? Do they buy new players to replace the worn-out parts? Do they pick up minor league stars for you to plug the gaps with? The hell they do. The first thing that happens is they fire the manager. It doesn't matter how long he's been around."

"You'll never have to worry about a job, Jerry."

"No?" asked Connell bitterly. "That's what you say. But a lot of guys with bigger reputations than mine have been fired and where are they? Mickey Cochrane could have been Mayor of Detroit a couple of years ago, but he got fired in the middle of the season when the Tigers weren't going good and he's not got another job. Everyone says that Frankie Frisch was one of the best managers in the game, but when he couldn't win a pennant in St. Louis with a lot of half-baked minor leaguers and wornout pitchers, he got the axe. Where's Rogers Hornsby? Houdini couldn't have got anywhere with the Browns. Did they buy new players? They did not. They fired the Rajah!"

"Well, after all, Jerry, this series isn't the end of the pennant race."

Connell shook his head grimly. "Maybe not. But if we lose these games now, I may not be around to see how the race comes out. After the dive we took last year the front office will have to do something to keep in with the fans. It'll be cheaper to fire me than to buy a couple of pitchers."

"Maybe the boys will snap out of it and whip the Sox."

"Maybe," said Connell, dubiously.

•

"Boss wants to see you, Johnny," said the office boy.

Johnny Haley, a third-string announcer at the Union Broadcasting Company, gave his hat a little downward tug. There had been a lot of pink slips floating around lately. He wondered if his turn had come. He wondered just what he would do if he found himself without a job right now.

Mr. Bennison, vice president in charge of announcers at UB, looked up as Johnny came in. Johnny tried to read the bad news in Bennison's face.

"You've been wanting a chance to get into sports broadcasting, Haley," said the vice president, crisply.

Johnny's heart pounded against his ribs. "Yes, sir," he said.

Bennison tapped a pencil against the edge of his desk. "Barry Dunne's sick," he said. "Scarlet fever, of all things. Carver's out at Meadowbrook getting set to do the International polo matches. That means you get your chance, Haley. You'll cover the ball games until Dunne gets back on the job. Several weeks, probably. You'll start this afternoon with the game between the Hawks and the Sox. It's a tough spot for you to break in, because this is not just an ordinary mid-season series. You'll probably have more listeners than at any other time except a World Series. You've got a chance to make good in a big way—or flop in a big way."

"I won't flop," said Johnny, his eyes very bright. "You can count on that."

"I *am* counting on it," said Bennison

DR. GEORGE KEEFE turned out all the lights in his consulting room except the lamp with the flexible neck on his

desk. This he turned up and twisted the shade so that for a moment the light shone full in his face and on the face of his patient.

"You can see for yourself," said Dr. Keefe gently. He picked up an x-ray negative from his desk and held it in front of the light.

The patient was a tall, lean man with a tanned face and very clear blue eyes. At the moment his face was expressionless, but Dr. Keefe knew that his patient was steeling himself to receive a jolt. There was a slight contraction at the corners of his blue eyes, and Dr. Keefe noticed that his hands, hanging at his sides, were tightly clenched.

"You mean you can actually see what's wrong on this plate?" asked Tex Dillon.

"You can see it right enough," said Dr. Keefe.

The light, shining through the negative, showed a picture of an elbow joint. It was Greek to Tex Dillon. He couldn't see what was so plain to Dr. Keefe.

"All that fuzzy-looking shadow in there is inflammation, Tex," said Dr. Keefe. "The damned thing must feel like a toothache."

"Yeah," said Tex Dillon non-committally.

"See that little spot there? And that . . . and that . . . and that? Those are bone chips, Tex. You've overworked that arm till bits of calcium have actually chipped off, and are floating in the elbow cartilage. There's no chance of getting rid of that inflammation and stopping the pain until those chips are removed."

"And then?" Tex Dillon's voice was perfectly steady.

Dr. Keefe shrugged. "Who knows? It's a gamble at best. You can't pitch the way it is, that's certain. We can't guarantee in removing those chips that the tendons and muscles will return to normal. But an operation is your only chance of regaining use of the arm." He twisted down the neck of the lamp and switched on the other lights.

Tex Dillon looked down at the tips of his black and white sport shoes. "If you operated now would there be a chance of my getting into shape in time for the World Series—if we make it?"

"Good heavens no!" said Dr. Keefe explosively. "In the first place, I couldn't operate now. We'll have to reduce that inflamation first. You should have that arm in a sling, keep it that way for several months. Absolute rest. Then, when we've done that, we can try to remove the chips."

"I see," said Tex slowly. He took a crumpled package of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one. "What would happen if I were to go ahead and pitch with the arm the way it is?"

"Don't talk like a lunatic," said Dr. Keefe. "In the first place you couldn't stand the pain."

"I don't know," said Tex. "Suppose I could?"

"By carrying on as long as you have you've come dangerously close to making a successful operation impossible," Keefe said. "If you try to pitch again you'll be writing finis to your career. It may be too late as it is. I'm sorry, Tex, but I have to be brutally frank. You're thinking about this series with the Sox, aren't you?"

"Well . . . yes," said Tex.

"It would be suicide," said Keefe emphatically. "You shouldn't throw a ball again this year. You shouldn't even lift that arm from your side for weeks if you hope for a successful operation."

"I SEE," said Tex. He sat regarding the end of his cigarette for a long time. "It's tough to have to let the club down at a time like this," he said finally. "Everything I am I owe to them. Hell, doc, I was just a green kid off a Texas ranch when they picked me up. I'd still be earning cowpuncher's wages if it hadn't been for them. Instead I've been in the dough. I hate to let 'em down."

"You've got your own future to think of," said Keefe. "And there's your wife."

"Yeah, yeah," said Tex, slowly. "There's Connie. I—well, thanks for the bad news anyhow, doc."

"Put that arm in a sling so there's no strain on it at all," said Keefe. "Then in the fall we'll operate. Next spring you'll know the answer. It's your only chance, Tex."

"Yeah. Well, thanks again."

Outside the doctor's office a gray sports roadster was pulled up at the curb. A dark, pretty girl sat to the right of the wheel. As Tex Dillon came out of the building she turned to greet him anxiously. Her bright red lips were parted to ask a question that somehow she could not voice. She stared into the tanned face of her husband, hoping to read the answer there. But Tex Dillon's face was inscrutable.

"Well, we looked at pictures," he said and grinned.

"Pictures?"

"Yeah." He slid in behind the wheel, closed the door, and stepped on the starter. "There's a little fuzz—that's inflammation. There are a couple of black specks. Those are chips of some kind."

"And?" Connie Dillon's voice was tense.

Tex flexed his fingers and studied them with apparent interest.

"We operate in the fall," said Tex. "Good as new in the spring."

"And for now? Voluntary retirement?"

Tex kept his eyes fixed on the traffic ahead of him. "He didn't mention voluntary retirement," he said.

"Tex!"

Tex looked at her and smiled reassuringly. "Next spring I'll be as good as new."

"And are you going to try to work this series against the Sox?"

A little nerve twitched under the skin along Tex Dillon's jaw. "If they need me," he said. "I—hell, Connie, it can't do any harm. Keefe says once those chips are out, why, I've probably got four or five good years left."

"Why doesn't he operate now? Why wait?" Connie asked.

"Why, I guess he figured I might still be of some use to the club," Tex said. Then he shouted at a taxi driver who had cut in in front of him. "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

II

MORAN, a stubby black pipe clenched between his teeth and clad only in a union suit, opened the locker door. Tough Mickey Moran was manager of the Sox.

"Hey, Luke!" he shouted. "Those stockin's!"

Luke Hooper, slugging right fielder of the Sox, was hanging his clothes on a hook in the corner. He looked at his manager and grinned.

"Ain't washin' 'em till we move into first place," he said. "Superstitious."

"We better make it quick!" Moran chuckled. "I'm movin' in with someone else if we don't."

"Tonight I'll be buyin' myself a box of Lux," said Hooper.

A big broad-shouldered fellow, already dressed in his gray road uniform, came over to Moran. One side of his face bulged out to the size of an egg as a result of a huge wad of chewing tobacco.

"I suppose I'm workin' this afternoon, Mickey," he said.

"You're damn right you're workin'," said Moran. "And there's a hundred bucks bonus in it for you if you take us into first place tonight."

"It's a cinch," said Rube Jenson. "I was just leanin' out the window. Them guys over there act like they was in a morgue." He jerked his head in the direction of the Hawk dressing room.

"The prisoner ate a hearty breakfast," Hooper said.

There was nothing subdued about the Sox quarters. They were all there, getting ready to take the field, laughing, joking, indulging in horseplay. Shrewd Mickey Moran set the keynote of swashbuckling confidence. They were on their way and they knew it.

When they were all dressed Moran stood up on one of the benches and addressed them. Sweat glistened on the top of his shiny bald head, and he mopped at it with the sleeve of his shirt.

"We go out there roarin'," he told his

men. "Keep chatterin' . . . keep up your pep. Pep and more pep. Ride them other guys every chance you get. Keep slammin' your bats around in the rack and yellin' for blood. Start out every innin' as though you figured on makin' fifteen runs. Get in there and sock . . . and keep sockin'."

"Don't worry, Mickey," someone said.

"We'll pull the old dodge in batting practice. Doug, you'll pitch in practice. Lay 'em right through the heart of the pan easy. I'll pay a buck for every ball that's knocked out of the park in fair territory. They'll know what's happenin', but every time they see you crash one over the wall they'll feel cold down in their toes. Jockey 'em, kid 'em, wisecrack at 'em. Their nerves is worn down to the raw and it won't hurt none to rub a little salt into 'em. Okay, let's go!"

They swarmed out onto the field like a college football team, with Tough Mickey leading the way. . . .

Tex Dillon sat in the corner of the Hawk dugout. He was laughing. Frankie Disalvo, the Hawk's slumping left fielder, sat next to him, wiping his hands on a towel. Frankie didn't seem to be amused.

"Boy, they're certainly crashing that apple around," he said.

"It's a swell vaudeville act," said Tex. "A high school kid could park that kind of throwing out of the lot."

"I guess you're right," said Frankie Disalvo. But his lips tightened as he saw Hack Barnhardt of the Sox smash three terrific drives in succession far over the left-field fence. As Hack trotted down the first-base line after his last out at the ball he cupped his hands and shouted to Frankie Disalvo.

"Maybe you better lay outside the park this afternoon, Frankie."

"Nuts!" said Disalvo, but not loud enough to be heard.

Other players on the Hawk bench were watching somberly, nervously. Of course this was only batting practice; but, boy, those Sox were certainly hot. It's hard to stop any team when they're that hot.

"The Yanks pulled an act like this before the first game of the World Series in '27," said Tex. "Scared the Pirates right out of the Series. It's old stuff, kid stuff."

"Yeah, but it's power, no matter what kind of pitching it is," muttered Gore, the first baseman. "You don't want to give 'em anything good to hit at."

"I seem to remember," said Tex Dillon, still grinning, "that that's the whole theory of pitching." And when there was no response to this he added: "They're wasting an awful lot of steam before the game. Boy, I'd like to have a crack at 'em." Instinctively the fingers of his left hand caressed the sore elbow of his pitching arm.

Nor did that seem to cheer the silent watchful group of Hawks on the bench. They, too, wished that Tex was in shape to take a crack at the Sox, wished it from the bottoms of their hearts. Old Tex was just the man to take some of the starch out of a cocky outfit when he was right.

THE sun was bright and very hot as it blazed down on the boxes along the third-base line. Connie Dillon sat alone in one which was reserved for the wives of players. The other seats would be taken presently by Frankie Disalvo's wife, and Mrs. Pat Gore, and the pretty little girl who was engaged to Tuck Hellman, the shortstop. Connie wished she could stay alone. She didn't want to talk. She didn't want to have to be polite, or commiserate with the other women if one of their men made an error or failed in the pinch. She wished she weren't in the ball park at all.

It had been grand in the days when Tex was riding the crest, when the park swelled with cheers for him, when he stood out there, cool, and calm and assured, master of the situation. Of course he didn't always win, but Tex never pitched a bad game.

But now it was more than she could face. She had seen Tex take that long walk across the outfield to the club house too many times this season. The droop of his shoulders, the slow, shuffling walk, brought her agony.

She was only subconsciously watching the Sox at infield practice. They were chattering like a cage of monkeys, slamming the ball at each other as if they hoped to tear their gloves off. Bob Steele, their first baseman, was making miraculous one-handed and back-handed catches of wild throws. He was making them look harder than they were.

Connie hated them. She knew it wasn't reasonable. They, like Tex and the Hawks, were playing ball for a living; victories and high batting averages and smart fielding meant money in the bank to them, too; and across the way their wives sat, anxious for success, tense and nervous. But it was no use trying to be reasonable. Every time Tex was hammered off the hill it brought him one game nearer the end of the career he loved. You couldn't be reasonable about that.

Connie wore a cool red and white print dress. Her fingers clung to a little red purse. In a minute or two now the starting pitchers would come out to warm up while the Hawks had their fielding practice and the ground crew smoothed over the diamond. Would it be Tex? This was the kind of spot they'd always put him in. The tough spots—the spots where they had to win.

Would they call on him now? If they did, Connie felt she couldn't stand it. She knew how sore that arm was; knew, despite his efforts to conceal it from her, that it was agony for Tex to throw a ball at all. Yet, if they didn't call on him, it meant they guessed he didn't have it any longer, couldn't be counted on. There would be more pain in that for Tex than anything his aching elbow could produce.

The electric bell in the dugout rang. The Hawks came up for their fielding practice. Connie saw Lefty Rube Jenson, his jaw bulging with a wad of tobacco, amble out to warm up for the Sox. Her eyes were fixed on the Hawk bench. She saw Tex. He came slowly up out of the dugout and began to pull off his windbreaker. Connie held her breath. Then Tex bent down, took a bat out of the rack, and moved out toward the first-base line. His shoulders had that drooping look to them. He was not going to pitch. He was just going to knock flies to the outfielders.

Connie's fingers tightened on her purse, and there were tears in her eyes. "I ought to be glad, *glad!*" she said fiercely.

A couple of shirt-sleeved fans turned to look at her.

HIGH up along the rim of the second tier of seats Johnny Haley sat, his hand gripping the microphone in front of him. Just to the right of him was his sound man, earphones clamped to his head. The sound man glanced at Johnny and nodded.

"Okay, kid, you're on the air," he said.

Johnny swallowed hard and began. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is Johnny Haley, speaking to you from the Hawk Stadium where fifty-five thousand fans have jammed their way in to watch the first of three classic struggles between Manager Jerry Connell's first-place Hawks and the visiting Sox who are snapping at their heels. I regret to tell you that your regular announcer, Barry Dunne, is ill with scarlet fever. I don't know whether I feel sorrier for Barry because he's sick or because he's going to miss this great series.

"The Hawks go into the encounter today, leading by only half a game. They have been in a slump for weeks. Unless they can pull themselves together this afternoon there will be a new name at the head of the standings tonight.

"There is a touch of tragedy here this afternoon. As I look down at the field I see a tall lean figure of a man knocking flies to the Hawks' outfielders. This is the man who for years has been selected to handle the tough spots for the Hawks. I refer, of course to, that grand old veteran, Tex Dillon. Unfortunately, Tex has a bad arm and no one knows whether or not he will get into this series at all. Certainly he will not work this afternoon although the Hawks could use the Dillon of old. They need his crafty head, his rubber arm in shape, his indomitable courage.

"The burden of staving off the Sox will rest on the shoulders of big Ace Cunningham, the Hawk's leading pitcher this season. And the Ace is out there, warming up now. He will be opposed by Rube Jenson, the Sox' flashy left-hander. The Rube will be either very hot or very cold. When he has his control he's as good a left-hander as there is in the business. If he's hot this afternoon, Ace Cunningham will have to be good. The question is, can Cunningham be expected to pitch a top game?

"Only three days ago he lost a heart-breaking thirteen inning game in Boston. Has he had rest enough to come back from that grueling encounter and be at his best? With Dillon out, Manager Connell has no alternative. It has to be Cunningham, today, Lefty Parker tomorrow, and then Mr. Connell will have to pull something out of his hat for the third game.

"Well, the captains of the two teams are conferring with the umpires out at home plate, and in a moment this vital ball game will be under way. Will the slipping Hawks cling to their slender hold on first place, or will the thundering herd from the West crush them underfoot as they have all other opposition during the last few weeks? Two hours from now we'll all know the answer."

THE Hawk dressing room was quiet except for the sound of water running in the showers and the thud of cleated shoes on the concrete floor as the weary players got out of their uniforms. Big Ace Cunningham sat in front of his locker. He hadn't even started to undress. He sat with his face buried in his hands.

Raphael Jones, the sports columnist of the *Globe,* walked over to Tex Dillon who was quietly getting into his street clothes.

"A tough one to lose," Jones said.

"Yeah." Tex faced the mirror in his locker door and carefully knotted his tie.

It had been tough . . . too damned tough. Yet deep in his heart Tex had expected it from the very start of the game. Anyone could see it. The Sox were fighting to win a ball game. The Hawks were fighting to hold off the Sox. There was a subtle difference there. It seemed to be just a question of when the Sox would break through. But the way it had happened was enough to take it out of any club.

Rube Jenson, the Sox lefty, had had a good afternoon, but not too good. The Hawks, in a hitting slump for weeks, had managed to make ten hits off him, which was a better afternoon than they'd had in some time. Frankie Disalvo had come to life. He had stung a single to left in the first and in the fifth he had parked a tremendous homer over the left-field wall, and had had the satisfaction of suggesting to Hack Barnhardt, as he jogged around third, that maybe *he* was the one who should lay outside the park.

Though they were hitting Jenson, that homer of Disalvo's was the only score the Hawks were able to pry loose from his delivery. When Jenson got in a jam some member of the Sox cast came up with a sparkling play. Devine had made a sensational catch with his back to the wall in the sixth—a catch that ended the inning with the bases full. Selway, their shortstop, had made a horizontal diving catch of a liner off Gore's bat in the seventh and doubled a potential scorer off third.

But that homer loomed larger and larger as the game went on, because big Ace Cunningham was pitching his heart out. Each inning the Sox came up, snarling and snapping at him. Each inning they pounded their bats on the rack and shouted for a rally. And each inning Ace Cunningham turned them back. While the Hawks were at bat Cunningham sat beside Tex Dillon on the bench and talked over the hitters he would have to face in the next inning. Tex knew them all inside out, their strengths and their weaknesses.

But Tex was on the bench. . . .

It began to look as though Cunningham might pull the Hawks through. For all their noise and bluster the Sox had made just two hits off him as he went out to face them in the eighth inning. Then came the payoff.

SLUGGING Luke Hooper was the first Sox hitter of the inning, and Cunningham, working smoothly, got him to bite at a low-outside pitch and Hooper grounded feebly to Hellman who tossed him out. The next hitter was Steele, big first baseman. Still Cunningham was the master. He forced Steele also to hit an easy hopper to Hellman. But this time Hellman bobbled. He tried to hurry his pickup and messed the play entirely.

This was a signal for an explosion on the Sox bench. They all seemed to come out at once, shouting, pounding bats, yelling for a killing. Mickey Moran's voice from the third-base coaching box sounded like a foghorn as he shouted at Barnhardt to deliver.

From the Hawk bench Tex Dillon's keen blue eyes had caught a faint sag in Cunningham's shoulders. He knew what had been going on in a big pitcher's mind all afternoon. There'd be a bad break at some point—a break that would undo all his great work. This was it.

For the first time Cunningham pitched with desperation rather than cunning. He tried to send a blazing fast ball past Barnhardt instead of pitching to weakness, and Barnhardt slammed it off the left field wall for a double. Men or second and third.

Jerry Connell hopped out of the dugout to confer with his pitcher. Sound baseball called for an intentional walk to Devine, filling the bases, and a gamble on a double play. The Sox hooted as Cunningham pitched four wide ones. Selway, their shortstop, came up, swinging a couple of bats.

Cunningham took a hitch in his belt, rubbed his fingers on the resin bag, and faced the hitter. Tex Dillon leaned back against the wall of the dugout. Cunningham had his nerve back. It was in the lap of the gods now.

Cunningham worked cautiously and beautifully on Selway—and he got his break. Selway dribbled a grounder back toward the box. Coburn, the catcher, jumped up to the plate. An easy double play was in view. Cunningham lunged for the ball, picked it up—dropped it!

Tex Dillon was on his feet shouting: "Hold it! Hold it!" Better to let the tying run score than toss the game away with a hurried play.

But Cunningham, off balance, heaved the ball toward the plate, heaved it past Coburn all the way to the wire screen. Two runs scored and Selway galloped all the way to third.

Cunningham looked like a man who had been hit over the head. He stood in the center of the diamond, staring dully at the glove on his hand. That was the ball game. He knew it. Everyone knew it.

It didn't matter that Selway scored the third run on a long fly to Frankie Disalvo. The Sox had the game in their hands and they weren't going to let it go. Their bullpen bustled with activity. There were strong, fresh pitchers out there to relieve Rube Jenson if he faltered. But the Rube didn't falter. The Sox rollicked to their dressing room, leading the league by half a game.

Yes, it had been a tough one to lose. A three hitter!

"Any chance of your working this series?" Raphael Jones asked Tex.

Tex shrugged. "You'll have to ask Connell."

"I did. He said I'd have to ask you. How is your arm, Tex?"

"So-so," said Tex, not looking at the reporter.

"Then if Connell calls on you, you'll take a shot at it?"

"I guess you know I will," said Tex. "But it'll be Parker tomorrow. He'll knock 'em off."

"You really think so?"

Tex laughed. "Why darn it, Raph, I'm always surprised when we lose!"

III

PARKER didn't win the second game. The Hawks had put all they had of tight baseball into that first encounter—a little too tight baseball. On Saturday afternoon, before a wildly partisan crowd of sixty thousand, they blew higher than

a kite. Parker breezed along for four innings, matching strides with Wally Horton of the Sox. Then the Sox hit on him with everything except the bricks out the clubhouse wall. Six runs in the fifth inning, and long before it was finished Parker was out of there and Tommy Vincent had taken over. But there was no stopping the runaway Sox.

They continued to hammer the Hawk pitching to all corners of the lot. Leemans and Cooper and old Pop Swann followed Vincent on the mound, but Mickey Moran's boys took to them all like long-lost cousins. It was no contest. Wally Horton eased up in the late innings and the Hawks pried loose four runs, but the final score was 16-4 and the Sox had riveted their hold on first place.

After that game the Hawk dressing room would have made a morgue look cheerful. To a man the players knew they were through. They had hit the skids once more. The third game would go like the other two. There was no one to pitch! Cunningham couldn't come back with only one day's rest. The rest of the staff had been pounded to shreds.

Jerry Connell, sitting in his office off the dressing room, spoke ironically to the locker boy who brought him a bottle of beer according to custom.

"Know where I can buy a good pair of mules cheap, Mac? Because I've got a hunch I'll be back working on the farm in a few days."

He had just uncapped the beer and was letting the cool liquid trickle down his parched throat when Mr. Butterworth, the business manager of the Hawks, appeared. Mr. Butterworth looked worried.

"What about tomorrow?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," said Connell dryly, "is Sunday. The Hawks play the Sox in the third of what has been laughingly referred to as a 'crucial series'."

"That was bad out there this afternoon," said Butterworth, mopping his perspiring face.

"That is a masterpiece of understatement," said Connell.

"But what about tomorrow?" Butterworth demanded.

"You tell me. What about it?" Connell sipped more beer and reached for a cigar. He wondered if this was the time to tell Butterworth what he thought of him. He'd always wanted to. Since he was almost certainly going to be fired, why not?

"Fans are funny," said Butterworth. "We figured on a sellout tomorrow. But with things the way they are—two straight lickings and an almost certain third one tomorrow—they'll stay away in droves."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"If we could dish out something to the press . . ." Butterworth sounded hopeful.

"What, for instance?"

"Dillon!" said Butterworth, eagerly. "That would make a story—a story that would drag 'em out here tomorrow. Dillon, coming out of virtual retirement, to hold up his faltering mates."

"You've been reading Horatio Alger," said Connell.

"What about it?" Butterworth persisted.

"Dillon," said Connell, slowly, "has a sore arm. A hell of a sore arm!"

"Maybe he'd be willing to try," pleaded Butterworth.

Connell lit his cigar with great care. The truth was he'd been dreaming of that possibility, too. Tex had done miracles in the past. Maybe—maybe just once more . . .

"Mac!" he called to the locker boy. "Ask Tex to come in here."

Tex was already in his street clothes. He must have guessed what was coming, because his mouth was set hard at the corners.

"You wanted to see me, Jerry?"

Connell nodded. "How's your arm?"

Tex shrugged. "About the same."

Connell rolled his cigar over his lower lip. "I—er—I was wondering . . ."

"If I'd take a crack at the Sox tomorrow? Sure I will, Jerry. But I can't promise . . ."

"I know," said Connell, hastily. "But if you could stand 'em off a few innings . . .

Cunningham could go a frame or two, and Parker only worked four rounds this afternoon."

"He pitched a whole ball game in those four innings," said Tex.

Connell nodded. "That's the situation."

"If we can tell the press you'll work," Butterworth cut in, "it'll bring us a sellout crowd tomorrow."

Tex drew a deep breath. "You can tell 'em I'll work," he said.

CONNIE was waiting outside the club house in the roadster. "You drive," said Tex, as he slid in beside her.

They went quite a few blocks before Connie said anything. "I'm sorry about this afternoon," she said finally.

"That's the way it goes."

"If the boys would only relax and play the kind of ball they can play!"

"Yeah," said Tex absently.

Connie kept her eyes straight ahead. "Who will Connell work tomorrow?"

Tex looked at her, and a faint smile played on his lips. "Why, your old man is going to start tomorrow," he said.

"Tex!"

"Why not? I can't be much worse than the rest of the boys were this afternoon."

"Oh, Tex!"

"It would be more fun if I was right," he conceded. "But maybe there's enough in the old bean to stand 'em off for a while."

Connie's hands gripped the wheel. She didn't speak till after a traffic light had changed and they were rolling downtown again.

"Tex, you acted so queer after you'd seen Dr. Keefe the other day. I—I had to know, Tex. Please don't be cross, or think I was prying. But I *had* to know."

"Oh," said Tex.

"Tex, you can't do this! You can't!"

Tex reached out and put his hand on her arm. "You don't want to believe everything you hear, baby. Keefe is just an alarmist. Suppose I'd waited to see him till after I'd pitched tomorrow? He'd have said the same thing, wouldn't he? He'd have still said there was a chance, wouldn't lie? So help me, after tomorrow I'll follow his instructions to the letter."

"That may be too late."

Tex looked down at the fingers of his pitching hand. "I'm sorry, Connie. But this game tomorrow might be more important to the club than all the games I could pitch next year, or the year after that. If we can stop the Sox tomorrow, we might pull ourselves together and go on to win. I've got to try it."

Connie was silent.

"I guess," said Tex huskily, "I'd rather win that game tomorrow than any game I ever pitched."

JOHNNY HALEY, sitting in his broadcasting booth, opened the note he found waiting for him with unsteady fingers. It was on the UB stationary. It would be some kind of a message from Bennison, the vice president. He pulled the sheet of paper out of the envelope and read. His eyes brightened.

Dear Haley:

Just a line to tell you I'm very pleased with the way you've been handling these games. You have proved yourself thoroughly competent at this type of broadcast, and I am glad to assure you that you may consider yourself permanently added to our staff of sports announcers.

Nice going, fella.

Bennison.

The sound man looked up at him. "You're on the air, kid!"

"And how!" said Johnny Haley. He pulled the microphone close to him. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is Johnny Haley again, talking to you from Hawk Stadium. This series has, unfortunately, turned into a rout for the local team. The Hawks seem to have fallen apart.

"But while the outcome of the final clash this afternoon seems to be a foregone conclusion, I suspect there is more drama in this game than in either of the other two. For one man is going to make a do-or-die attempt to put his team back in the running.

"He's down there near home plate now, ladies and gentlemen, gently lobbing the ball up to Bergen, the bullpen catcher. A man who has stood between the Hawks and defeat on many occasions—Tex Dillon, one of the grandest pitchers who ever toed the rubber on a big-league diamond. But this is not the great right-handed with the rubber arm, who could take his regular turn in the box or mop up for the other pitchers on off days. This is not the man who had the jump on enemy clubs simply by tossing his glove out onto the pitching mound.

"This is a man whose fast ball is gone, whose sharp breaking curves no longer duck past the batter with miraculous precision. This is a man with nothing but nerve and a keen baseball brain.

"I think all of us are dreading the moment which seems inevitable, when Tex will take that long walk to the club house. It is hardly possible that, for all his courage, he can turn back Mickey Moran's thundering ball club."

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Mickey Moran said: "So they've had to fall back on you, Tex."

"Yeah," said Tex laconically.

Moran's shrewd eyes watched the pitcher lobbing the ball back and forth. Tex wasn't putting anything on the ball. He had to save every ounce of strength in that arm for the game itself. Even this mild warmup sent the pain shooting into his shoulder. Moran guessed the truth.

"Arm still bother you?"

"Not too much." Tex grinned at him.

"Well, I'd get more of a kick out of lickin' you if you were sound," said Moran.

Tex still grinned. "It's a funny thing, Mickey, but I don't like to get licked under any circumstances."

Moran went on to the Sox bench. "Dillon's got nothin' but a prayer," he told his players. "You can get him out of there quick, and when you do, you can start spendin' your World Series dough. They've got some kind of a pipe dream he can set you back. When you explode that idea, you're in. Give him hell, and give it to him quick!" . . .

Tex nodded to Barney Bergen that he'd had enough. He started for the dugout and then turned to look at a box over behind third. He saw Connie and waved. He waved with his left hand, because it hurt him to lift his right arm from his side.

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In his office downtown Dr. George Keefe leaned back in his swivel chair and switched on the radio. The crisp, excited voice of Johnny Haley came to him.

"Well, this dramatic encounter is about to begin. The announcer is calling out the batteries to the fans. The umpire is dusting off the plate. We'll be under way in a second. There's the announcer. Batteries for the Sox: Hutchinson pitching, Delancey catching. For the Hawks: Dillon pitching, Coburn catching."

Dr. Keefe's feet hit the floor with a bang.

"Good God!" he switched off the radio and jumped up. He snatched his hat from the rack in the corner and hurried out of his office and onto the street where he hailed a taxi.

"The Hawk Stadium," he said. "And step on it."

"Maybe you can get the first part of the game on the radio," said the driver. "Want I should turn it on?"

"Yes," said Dr. Keefe. "The fool—the utter, blasted fool!"

IV

IT WAS hot out on the mound. Tex Dillon was glad of that because heat might help to keep his aching arm going. It was funny how different this was from the hundreds of other times he had prepared to face the first batter in a ball game. His own thoughts were different. Usually he was concerned only with that particular hitter, his whole concentration centered on how to pitch to the man.

But he was thinking ahead now. How long would he last? Would he be able to pull it off?

The sounds were different, too. He detected a new note in the voice of the crowd. They were encouraging him today, instead of bellowing their usual confident cheers. George Devon, the Hawk third baseman and chatterbox of the infield, sounded strange. He was saying the same old words, but he was anxious, uncertain. Cy Coburn, squatting behind the plate to give his signal, looked tense

Tex rubbed his fingers on the resin bag, tugged the peak of his cap downward, toed the rubber, and studied Eddie Morgan, the Sox' leadoff man. Well, here it was. He nodded slowly at Coburn's signal and started to lift his arm in a slow wind-up. Quick, sharp, and stabbing was the pain that ran all the way up to his shoulder and across his back.

A slow sweeping curve ball just missed the outside corner. Morgan leaned forward watching it. He didn't bite and it was ball one. The only thing that sounded natural was the babble from the Sox bench. They were out to take him to the cleaners.

Tex knew just how to pitch to Morgan. A high hard one across the chest that would drive him back from the plate; then a sharp breaking curve on the outside. Morgan always went fishing for an outside curve, particularly after he'd been pushed back from his natural stance crowding the plate. But there was no high hard one left in that pain-ridden arm, no sharp breaking curve. Just slow ones, with no noticeable break; just control, drawn fine. All he could do was to keep them from being too good—to sucker the hitter into going after the balls that weren't in the groove because they looked so soft and easy.

That whole game was a nightmare to Tex after the first few minutes. Morgan wouldn't bite. He had to lay one across the middle and the crack of wood against leather sent a cold chill up Tex's spine. It was no fly ball that Morgan hit. It was a screaming liner to right center—ticketed for extra bases. But Jack Cullen had been playing Morgan smartly. Two quick strides, a leaping catch, and there was one gone.

Jenkins was next—a sucker for a curve breaking in toward his knees. But Tex had no such curve left. Jenkins singled the second pitch to center, and the rattle of Sox bats on the rack sounded like machine-gun fire. They were off, shouting and cheering. Big Luke Hooper slouched to the plate, relaxed, confident. Hooper was tough even when you had everything. He was an old-fashioned hitter; he didn't take a set position in the box but shifted to meet each pitch. A slow floater high and outside. He pulled it savagely down the right-field foul line.

Tex closed his eyes for an instant and then opened them quickly as a roar of excitement went up from the crowd. By some miracle Pat Gore, making a back-handed stab at the ball, had caught it. He was so astounded that he almost failed to step on the bag to double Jenkins who had set sail for second, sure that Hooper had hit safely.

Very slowly Tex walked in toward the bench. He was out of that inning. But he knew that everyone of those drives had been labeled *hit*. He'd been lucky, and he knew the rest of the people in the park knew it too.

Jerry Connell came over to him, worried. "How does it feel, Tex?"

"It'll loosen up as I go along," said Tex. He grinned. "Maybe God is with me!"

HE SAT in the corner of the dugout, a windbreaker over his arm. The boys were very carefully avoiding any comment on the inning. They were watching Hutchinson, the Sox pitcher. Tex watched too, with a touch of bitterness. Hutchinson was young and strong. His fast ball smoked, his curve was good. He turned back Cullen and George Devon and Frankie Disalvo in quick order.

Tex got up slowly from his corner. He had hoped for more rest than that. He wondered vaguely what would happen if

he got out there on the hill and just couldn't lift his arm. He kept his eyes on the green turf as he walked out to the mound, because he didn't want to look over third-base way—to see the white, pinched face of the girl in the box.

He had a moment of hope at the start of that inning. Big Bob Steele was the Sox' first hitter, and he dug himself into the batter's box. He made a gesture toward the right field stands.

"Get ready to duck, Tex!"

Steele was aiming for the next county, and the slow, tantalizing stuff Tex gave him threw him off balance. He took three terrific spin-around cuts at the ball, and went back to the bench with a sheepish grin on his face while the crowd gave Tex an ovation. That was what they wanted! They wanted to see him outsmart this gang.

But when Tex came into the bench at the end of the inning he was pale, and a muscle twitched along the line of his jaw.

"How many did they get?" he asked Connell, vaguely.

"Just the one, Tex. Just the one. You're all right. How does it feel?"

"Okay," Tex muttered.

If the Sox hadn't been over-eager, they might have finished him that frame, for after Steele had fanned they made four straight hits but scored only one run. A wonderful throw from right field to third base had caught Hack Barnhardt when he tried to make the far corner after Devine's single followed his. Selway had dumped a short single to left. Then Delancey had pumped a double to center. Again a brilliant throw, this one from Jackie Cullen to Coburn, cut down Selway at the plate after Devine had scored, and ended the inning.

It couldn't go on much longer. Tex knew that. He had less than even he had thought. It took sheer raw courage to lift his arm and throw the ball to the plate. But he went out for the third round.

Tex felt as though he were in a dream, watching from a distance the spectacle of his own finish. The Sox bats rang in a cannonade of hits. He did get rid of Hutchinson, the pitcher; but Morgan, Jenkins, and Hooper singled in succession scoring one run. Jerry Connell came out of the dugout and called time. Reluctantly Tex walked to the sideline to meet him.

"Well, Tex?" said Jerry gently.

Tex scuffed with the toe of his shoe at the grass. "Maybe I'll get going. Steele's next. I got him before."

"Okay," said Jerry. When Tex turned back toward the mound the manager made a throwing motion toward the men in the bullpen.

Out of the corner of his eye Tex saw Barney Bergen take off his breaker and start to warm up two pitchers.

He faced Steele—a grinning Steele.

"Not this time, Josephine," said the Sox first baseman. "This time it's curtains."

Wearily Tex raised his arm in a wind-up. He threw. It was like some protracted slow-motion picture that he watched. He had meant to cut the outside corner with that one, but instead the ball was floating straight up through the middle. It looked big as a watermelon; it seemed to Tex he could count the stitches on the slowly revolving ball. Then a sharp, clear crack.

Tex knew that sound. He didn't look. The groan from the crowd told him all he needed to know. The shouts of glee from the Sox bench confirmed it. He stood where he was, shoulders sagging, watching three runners jog over the plate.

A dejected Jerry Connell came out of the dugout once more. Tex looked at him, and made a little gesture with his left hand, waving him back. He took off his glove and stuffed it in his hip pocket. He turned and started the long walk.

TEX had taken that walk before, but like everything else this afternoon, it was different. However, he was unaware of the factors that made it different to everyone else. He was unaware that some spontaneous urge brought seventy thousand people to their feet as he trudged across the grass. They didn't cheer. They

were curiously silent, yet by standing they were paying tribute to him. He purposely avoided looking at Connie.

He didn't know that a promising young radio announcer came close to losing his job in that moment. Johnny Haley wasn't hard-boiled about his sport yet. As he watched Tex Dillon walk slowly across the outfield he felt a hot, stinging sensation behind in his eyes. And then he heard one of the out-of-town newspaper men laugh.

"Well, they got rid of that old has-been in quick order!"

Something flared up inside Johnny Haley. "Shut your damn loud mouth!" he said sharply, and the United States of America heard him.

Nor did Tex see a man come through the back entrance to the Hawk dugout, disheveled and sweating. Dr. Keefe had arrived too late to see the clinching blow.

The walk was different to Tex because he knew it was the last time he would ever take it. He had faced his last batter, heard the crowd's last cheer for him. And he had failed. Of course, that was the way you ended in baseball—with failure. It had to be that way. Yet, if he could just have pulled the Hawks together once more, just once more applied the brakes and started them on their way . . .

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"I don't know what kind of guys you are," Dr. Keefe said in a rasping voice. His black eyes snapped as he looked up and down the bench at the dispirited Hawk players. "I know you've been playing as if you had no guts for a month. There was just one of you had any real nerve, any real fighting spirit. Dillon! Do you know what he did this afternoon? He tossed away the only chance he had of ever pitching again. Why? Because he was willing to give all he had to pull you together—to get you into the pennant fight again. That's the way he felt about you and this club! All right, you heels, I hope you wind up in the cellar. I hope they sell the lot of you to the Three-I-League where you belong. I'd have stopped him if I'd known. I'd have convinced him you weren't worth any sacrifice from him."

Dr. Keefe gave one more cold angry look at the players on the bench and then he turned and left.

TEX DILLON had been standing under the hot shower for a long time. The steaming water felt good on his arm that throbbed with pain. He'd miss this dressing room—the celebrations after victory, the grumbling and growling when they dropped a close one.

"Hey, Tex!" It was Mac, the locker boy, his voice excited.

"What is it, kid?"

"They're knocking hell out of Hutchinson!" the boy cried. "Disalvo just powdered him for a three bagger with the bags loaded. The score's tied and there's nobody out."

Naked, water still dripping from his lean, hard body, Tex walked to the open window of the club house which overlooked the field. He couldn't see the scoreboard.

"They tied it up, eh?"

"They've all hit him," Mac said. "Six in a row and nobody down. They ain't staged a rally like this in weeks, Tex."

Tex watched, and felt a faint thrill of excitement. It was crazy, but after ten years of this he still got the same kick out of victory he'd had in the beginning. Hutchinson was walking disgustedly off the mound, kicking at the dirt. The big strong youngster had failed, too.

Disalvo was dancing off third and Pat Gore, waving a big black bat, faced Barnes, the Sox relief hurler. On the first pitch Pat took a sharp cut at the ball. For an instant it looked like another hit. Tex saw dirt fly to the left of the Sox third baseman. But Morgan stabbed at it and had it. He turned and made a snap throw to the plate to catch Disalvo. The throw had Frankie beaten by ten feet, but Disalvo went into Delancey, the Sox catcher, like a Notre Dame blocking back. Delancey went down; Gore was racing for second.

Disalvo had knocked the ball out of the catcher's hand.

Up came Delancey, grabbed the ball, and threw it out to the pitcher. Then he dropped his glove and took a swing at Frankie Disalvo. Frankie swung back and Delancey landed in the dust again.

Out from their dugout swarmed the Sox. And as if controlled by some unseen switch, out came the Hawks. There'd been no fight in them for weeks.

Somehow the umpires checked a free-for-all; somehow they separated Frankie Disalvo and the Sox catcher. Tex, watching, saw the two men starting for the club house, banished from the game.

And then Barnes faced the next hitter, Ray Cleaves, and Ray promptly pumped the first pitch over the right field wall.

Tex turned away from the window, smiling. Well, something had brought the boys to life. It didn't matter what it had been. He had failed, but something else had worked. That was all he had hoped for.

JOHNNY HALEY was still talking excitedly into his microphone as the game ended. "This is a game I'll never forget," he said. "The amazing comeback of the Hawks, apparently on the way to a third defeat was exciting enough for anyone. But a really dramatic story has just come up to us from the press box—the story of what brought about that comeback.

"Those fans who saw Tex Dillon walk off the field this afternoon did not realize they were seeing his tall, angular figure for the last time. The story comes from Dillon's doctor. Tex had been warned that if he tried to pitch again his arm would be permanently injured. But Dillon kept that to himself; he went out there and pitched—for the last time.

"Tex Dillon failed as a pitcher this afternoon, but as the inspiration of a great victory he achieved his purpose. I look for the Hawks to go into a spurt from now on. . . ."

In the pressbox the official scorer's voice droned monotonously:

"For the Sox: Six runs, ten hits, two errors. For the Hawks: fourteen runs, eighteen hits, no errors. Losing pitcher: Hutchinson. Winning pitcher: Vincent."

Raphael Jones smiled faintly. "Winning pitcher, my foot!" he said. . . .

Tex Dillon settled down in the seat of the roadster beside his wife.

"Sorry to be so long," he said. "The boys were celebrating a bit. I—I kind of wanted to be in on it. We're starting on a vacation tomorrow. On full pay. Nice of Butterworth. Then in the fall—who knows, maybe Doc Keefe was wrong."

Connie Dillon drove on.

Tex laughed, ruefully. "Boy, was I lousy out there this afternoon!"

"Oh, Tex, I love you so darn much!" said Connie unsteadily.

"Hey, what's eating you?" Tex asked, in a surprised voice.

MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

SKI WIZARD

THE POPULARITY OF SKIING IS DUE PRIMARILY TO HANNES SCHNEIDER, SKIMEISTER AND FOUNDER OF THE FAMOUS ARLBERG SCHOOL IN THE AUSTRIAN TYROL WHERE KING ALBERT AND LEOPOLD OF BELGIUM, KING ALPHONSO AND OTHER ROYALTY LEARNED THE SPORT.

Hannes Schneider

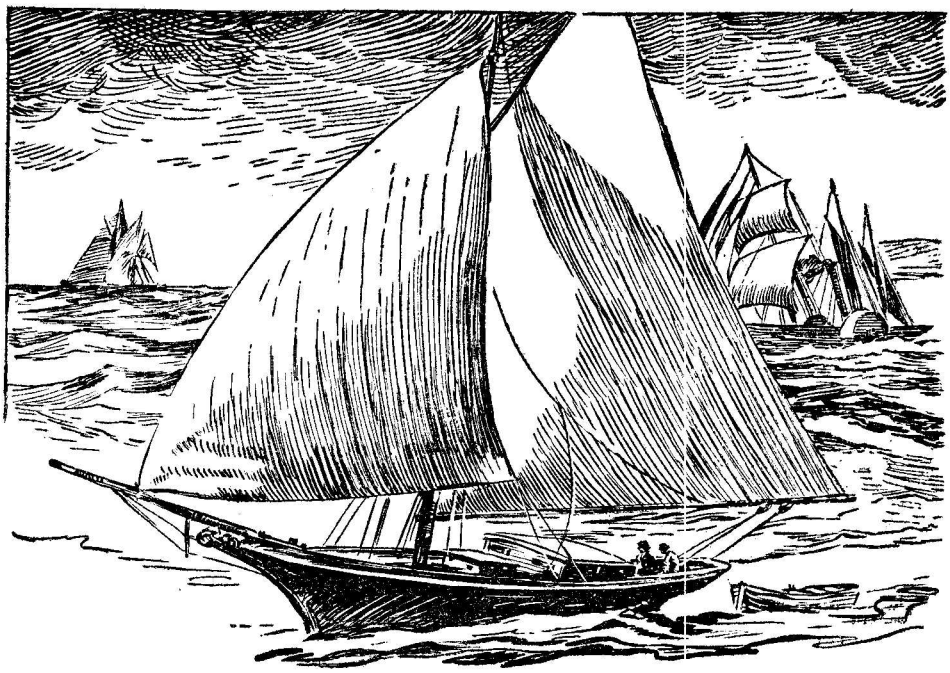
THE SON OF A GOAT HERDER, HANNES LEARNED TO SKI ON BARREL STAVES AND ON THEM WON A RACE AND HIS FIRST REAL SKIS.

CONSIDERING THE NORWEGIAN TECHNIQUE UNSUITED TO THE STEEP ALPINE SLOPES, HE DEVELOPED HIS OWN CROUCHING STYLE. EXPERTS THOUGHT HIM MAD— UNTIL HE WON A BIG RACE WITH RIDICULOUS EASE. DURING THE WAR HE SERVED WITH THE AUSTRIAN ARMY THEN WAS MADE SKI INSTRUCTOR TO THE MAJOR REGIMENTS.

WHEN THE NAZIS TOOK OVER, HE REFUSED TO DISCHARGE A JEWISH EMPLOYEE AND THREW THE NAZI AGENTS OUT OF ARLBERG. HE WAS SENT TO A CONCENTRATION CAMP AND PROTESTS POURED IN FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. AMERICAN FRIENDS SECURED HIS RELEASE AND HE CAME TO THIS COUNTRY TO ESTABLISH HIS FAMOUS SCHOOL AND BECOME AN AMERICAN CITIZEN.

HE HAS HAD HAIRBREADTH ESCAPES IN THE ALPS AND ONCE BROKE HIS HIP IN A BAD SPILL. HAS MADE MANY THRILLING SKI MOVIES AND RECEIVED THE JAPANESE SWORD OF HONOR AND THE AUSTRIAN SILVER SIGN OF HONOR FOR HIS SERVICE TO SKIING.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week



Voyage to Leandro

By HOWARD RIGSBY

Author of "Poppies for Harvard," "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead," etc.

Where is Leandro? Is it an isle that can be located on the map—or is it a fabulous land of the heart's desire, the goal of those weather-dark adventurers who brush aside law and order with an easy gesture? Two lads set out to discover the truth, leaving a dead man behind. A distinguished first novel

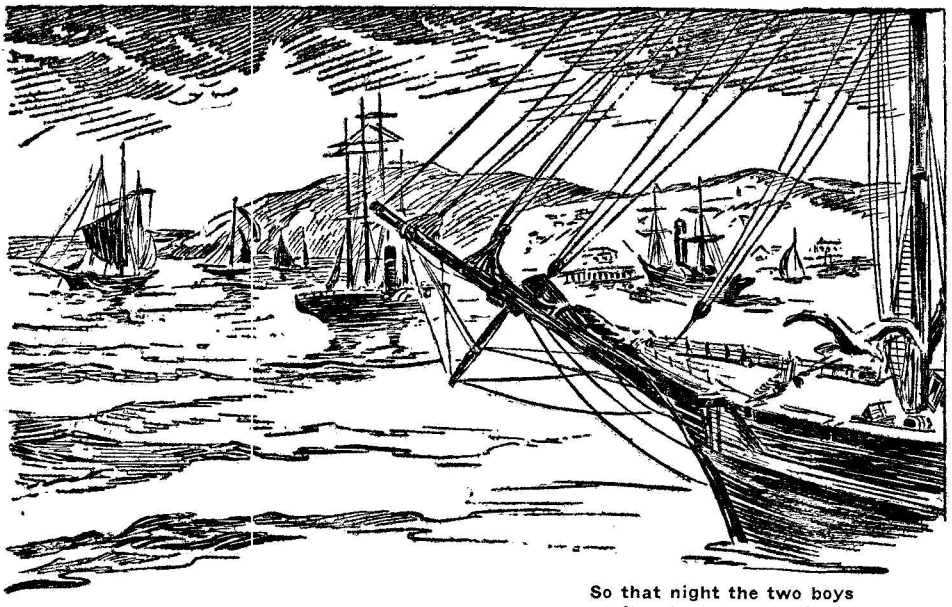
CHAPTER I

WATERFRONT MORNING

OFF the coast of Southern California, there is a handful of small, arid, chaparral-grown islands, one of which, Catalina, is famous. But the rest, even in these days, are seldom visited except by accident and are for the most part roamed only by sheep and vicious tribes of wild hogs whose ancestors were marooned during the Spanish period.

Of all these islands Leandro is the most inaccessible and desolate and the days that I spent there shall always haunt me—and Charles Stribling, too, I know. On these nights when there is a mist and the sound of heavy surf we shall, to the end of our lives, lie feverish in our beds, dreaming of the chase through the brush, feeling the awful yaw of the *Shark,* as she drove toward Leandro's sweating cliffs; and we may see again the bright face of Jeremy Robb and hurry on before the plodding Dane.

My father was a maritime lawyer who



So that night the two boys sailed for a new horizon

emigrated from Charleston to San Francisco at the close of the Civil War. I was born there, within sight and sound and the smell of ships and, after my mother's death, there were always voices heavy with sea talk and good brandy behind the doors of my father's study.

All marine chattel was magic to my eyes, a stripling landsman with a blind passion for the sea and an ignorant reverence for anything that sailed on it. Even the raggedest tar was sure of my envy, and any leaky old tub commanded my deep respect. There was only one password into that cabala of the waterfront to which I yearned to belong and it was "the sea."

Considering my tendencies, I was rather fortunately situated; eavesdropping at the door of my father's study I heard the true story of many a ship's disaster, of men mutinous, of vessels becalmed, scuttled, foundered. It is true that most of my father's commerce was not of such a colorful nature. He was also concerned with such dry matters as the spoilage of cargoes, warranties, indemnities, salvage, rates of insurance and business relating to the custom house. Yet it was crouched shamelessly on the hall stairs with my ears strained toward the panels of his study door that I first heard the story of Strom Sorenson and Jeremy Robb, the mutineers.

That morning, early in September of 1882, my father asked me to deliver a paper to the firm of Beadle and Ide, ship owners and agents on Montgomery Street. Noticing the light that came into my eyes at his request, he explained gravely that the errand would not necessitate my absence from school. In the event that I should be a few minutes late, he scribbled off a note for my teacher.

At the office on Montgomery Street I handed the paper to a clerk, and after glancing at it he frowned, was of the opinion that it was of immediate importance and inquired if I would mind delivering it personally to Mr. Beadle. Both Mr. Beadle and Mr. Ide, he said, had gone to the waterfront and would be found aboard the clipper, *Delight,* which had just arrived, long overdue, from Canton, China. I said that I would not mind delivering the paper at all—and I was off before the clerk could possibly change his mind.

THE *Delight* was well known to me by sight, although I had never had the opportunity before to go aboard her. She was a four-master and, for her tonnage and length, could carry as much sail as any ship afloat. Built at New Bedford in the Fifties for the California trade, she was still lovely, with tall fleet lines that time could not change; but, in her thirty years, she had acquired a reputation as a trollop.

She was as swift as any of the great clippers but she was also capricious and, somehow, her schedules could never be even roughly maintained. And as she lay looming over the roadway that morning I was keenly aware of her reputation. The maiden carved beneath her bowsprit seemed to leer down merrily, winking at the folly of schedules. It was the look of a lady too spirited to wish to be always dependable, and over the whole stately ship I was aware of an aura of truancy, a condition with which I was quite familiar and heartily in sympathy.

As I stepped onto the wharf I saw that the *Delight's* canvas was neatly stowed along the yards, her decks and brasswork were freshly gleaming and the crew was ready to come ashore. Around the gangway Jewish merchants with carts piled with shoes and clothing fought with runners from boarding homes for the arms of the seamen. In back of these birds of prey stood a drab cluster of relatives. The sailors formed on deck and charged off the ship all together, loud thick men with weather-dark faces, wearing jerseys or blue flannel shirts under their coarse pea-jackets.

Going aboard, I saw an old man leaning against the capstan, staring moodily at the retreating sailors. When I asked him where to find Mr. Beadle he directed me with a sullen thumb to the companionway forward. Down the dark stair I was led by a rumble of voices to a door where I knocked and was told, when the voices had ceased abruptly, to come in.

Mr. Beadle, Mr. Ide and the *Delight's* captain were seated at a table strewn with papers and dotted by glasses and a bottle of brandy. Mr. Ide had one pale forefinger laid along his nose and appeared to be lost in thought; he did not even glance up as I entered. The captain's face was flushed above his neat blue suit, and Mr. Beadle looked angry. He peered at me through his glasses, as if I had just arrived in time to relieve him of some gathering choler, and I could see that he was too perturbed and near-sighted to recognize me.

"I've a paper from my father," I told him. "I'm David Lester."

"Well," he snapped, "bring it here. Bring it here!"

I TOOK it to him and then stood hesitant, half-cowed and half-angry at his manner, while he opened the paper and scanned it. He was a small elderly man with features that appeared to be almost metallic in color, texture and sharpness. In that moment, I despised him and thought it a shame that he should have anything to do with the destiny of a fine whimsical ship like the *Delight*. Finally, as if unable to make up his mind about the paper I had handed him, he slapped it.

"Wait," he told me sharply.

"Yes, sir," I said and glanced around the cabin for another chair.

"Well, go on out!" he cried peevishly. "Go on deck, boy!"

His manner was quite insulting and so stung me that I blurted out, "I am David Lester!" And then I stuck there, choked with anger and confusion.

"Well," said Mr. Beadle after a moment, "so you are. And what of it, may I ask? I said to wait on deck."

At that moment there was a pleasant laugh. I looked at the captain and his eyes smiled, understanding me.

"Take a look at my ship while you are up there," he said. "Some say it's the line of her keel that makes her act so flighty, and some"—he glanced at Mr. Beadle—"some say it's her captain. Perhaps you can decide, David Lester."

I managed to smile back at him. "I

am sure it's her keel, sir," I said and as I turned to go he gave me a droll wink, one very much like that affected by the lady on his ship's bowsprit, and to me it seemed very proper that such a man should be the *Delight's* captain.

On deck I strolled about, eyeing the rigging and craning my neck to look up at the dizzy peak of the mainmast. Because of the glowering watch, however, I was afraid to put my finger on any part of the ship, although I longed to try my agility on the soaring ratlines. Then the watch called out to me.

"Hey, lad!" he cried. "Come here."

I walked forward to where he sat. He was a small man with a skin like old cordovan and brownish stubs of teeth. I was quite in awe of him. "Yes, sir," I said.

He gripped my shoulder and his brows moved in a fascinating fashion toward his hair and his reefer cap. "You be a fine bold lad by the look o' ye," said he, showing his teeth. "You be the little man to perform an errand for a shipmate bound over to sit aboard and stew after four months of double tricks t'sea."

With that he clapped me on the shoulder. "My whistle's dry as dust, matey, and I'm wonderin' if you'll go to that grog shop you'll see there off the starboard quarter and fetch me a bottle of Cuba rum while I wait for the dock-watch to get here—if he ever do. Here's the money and more over—enough for a sweet for yourself, lad."

With his money in my hand and his rancid breath in my face, there was nothing I could do but accept the commission, though I feared entering the saloon perhaps as much as I feared the thought of his anger at a refusal. So I set off, repeating to myself, "Cuba rum."

THERE had been several ships in that morning and the bar was dark with sea clothes and loud with the talk of men used to bellowing against the slat of sails in the wind. A piano was going, and there were several women of high color and dressed in finery that seemed garish and strange in the daytime. It was all quite new to me then. If a counterpart of that scene, with a thousand minor variations, has since taken on the quality of an old familiar chromo in my mind, it is, I am aware, no cause for pride.

At first I saw no place to approach the bar and filled with confusion, was about to back out the door when I noticed a gap appear between the broad backs of two seamen. I stepped into it and stood looking at the bartender until he noticed me and came over.

"Well," he said gravely. "And what'll yours be, my lad?"

"A bottle of Cuba rum," I said. "If you please."

"A whole bottle? Less won't do? You must have a fine thirst this morning."

"It's not for me," I explained. "And he just told me to ask for a bottle of Cuba rum."

The bartender leaned one elbow on the bar and pursed his mouth. "Cuba rum," he repeated. "Well, there's Cuba rum and there's Cuba rum. There's all kinds of Cuba rum."

I placed the money on the counter. "Just Cuba rum," I repeated. "So he said."

"Well"—he eyed the money—"that's different. Now with a dollar to pay he'll only be wanting fo'cas'le swill." He picked up the money, tossed it in the till and spun a dime under my nose. Then he reached a bottle from the shelf and set it before me. "And what's a fine young gent like you doin' runnin' errands for the fo'cas'le?" he asked.

Not tarrying to reply to that, I picked up the dime and the bottle of Cuba rum and hurried out the door.

Aboard the *Delight*, the watch, after disappearing into the forecastle for a moment with the bottle, appeared with a new glint in his eye and a swagger in his walk and began pointing out the fine points of the ship's rigging. I understood little of it, but took advantage of his new friendliness to ask permission to climb a bit, and a moment later I was on my way up the ratlines.

When I reached the foremost truck I looked down and the *Delight* looked like a toy below me. The mast swayed gently and for a moment I clung to it with both arms, in a terror of falling. I had never been so high. Over the waterfront roof-tops I could see the streets swooping back up the hills and the bare common that was Portsmouth Square. It was a clear fine day and the tide was running out with a churn and a whisper. As it passed down the line of craft, it toyed with the *Delight's* stern so that she groaned far below me and my mast circled slowly, tilting the horizon crazily. I was remote from the rest of the world, observing it from my lordly tower and I never wished to come down from there.

WHILE I watched, a small boat came skimming on a port tack into the lee of Telegraph Hill. The sail slatted and two men reached up and hauled it down. Oars were broken out sloppily and the boat came on against the tide.

I think that what first struck me as singular about the boat was the number of men that were crowded in it. That it was a ship's longboat, that its mast was jury-rigged from an old yard, I had no idea; nor did I know then, of course, that this loaded boat was a part of events in whose series I was to become involved, by no will of my own, but by that fine casualty of which the sea—and life, no less—is sometimes capable.

As the longboat approached the wharf where the *Delight* lay, I could see that the men were heavily bearded and so blackened by the sun and weather that I at first imagined them to be islanders, or of some foreign race. The only one without a beard was a small figure recognizably Chinese even at that distance. He sat against the knees of a huge man at the tiller, one whose eyes gleamed in his tortured face, a man in whose presence across the water I sensed power, an easy command over that gaunt lot.

They were turning into the basin now, not fifty yards from me, and all at once their terrible fatigue was evident. Each stroke made by the oarsmen seemed, by the effort it cost, to be their very last; as their blades bit the water their cracked lips drew back from their teeth in agony and through their rags their gaunt bodies contorted so with strain that it appeared their bones must certainly break through the skin.

Suddenly I trembled on my lofty perch, at last aware that here was something that the sea had cast up, the end of a tale whose possible particulars my mind was already vivid with. And now I could see the name on the longboat's bow. It was the *Lady Hook,* the name of the proudest of Beadle-and-Ide's Honolulu packets.

Far below me on the deck a voice piped, "What ho, the *Lady Hook!*" And looking down I saw that it was the watch leaning over the rail, quite drunk on his Cuba rum.

Simultaneous with the watch's shout, Mr. Beadle, Mr. Ide and the *Delight's* captain emerged from the companionway and the *Lady Hook's* longboat bumped against the ladder that led from the water to the wharf. A man in her bow grasped the ladder and held the boat close, but he seemed to lack the strength to do more than hang on. The men who had been rowing sat slumped over their oars, and only the huge man at the tiller seemed somewhat alive. He was looking up at the watch.

"The *Delight,* ho," he said in a voice so deeply-pitched and tired that it was scarcely audible. "Captain Michaelson of the *Lady Hook.*"

Then his chin drooped on his chest and he sighed, as if, like his crew, he had been suddenly overpowered by the lassitude of complete exhaustion.

THEN I heard Mr. Ide cry out, "Captain Michaelson!" He, Mr. Beadle and the *Delight's* captain were now in the waist, leaning over and looking down. A few seamen had collected on the wharf and they, too, were staring at the men in the longboat.

"What's happened?" Mr. Beadle demanded. And by his voice, even then, I could detect that he was preparing himself for a shock in dollars and cents.

The blond weary Michaelson lifted his great head and the trajectory of his gaze caught me, a fly in the rigging ninety feet above him. He seemed to speak to me.

"Mutiny," he said.

The word came welling up and almost knocked me from my perch. The men on the wharf stiffened and I could see Mr. Beadle's bony white hands suddenly grip the rail.

"We've got to get those men out of that boat." It was the *Delight's* captain who had spoken, in a voice that was calm and used to emergencies. "We can bring them aboard," he said.

Mr. Beadle shrieked, "Mutiny! Mutiny on my ship—the *Lady Hook*. Well—where is she? Don't sit there, man! Where's my ship?"

It sounded as if Captain Michaelson had tried to laugh. He stood up in the sternsheets, nudging the crouched Chinese aside. "God knows," he said. "I don't, Mr. Beadle."

Several more men had gathered on the wharf and, directed by the *Delight's* captain, lifted the men from the longboat and carried them into the forecastle. Only Captain Michaelson was able to climb the ladder unassisted.

I backed down the ratlines, discovering that it was infinitely harder to descend than to go aloft. When I finally reached the deck Mr. Beadle and Mr. Ide were in a huddle with Captain Michaelson. The *Delight's* captain was approaching with a coat, as, except for a few tatters, the big master of the *Lady Hook* was naked to the waist. And on his shoulders I could see angry wounds where sun had blistered his skin and sea spray had mortified it.

Mr. Ide whirled suddenly from the group. "We'll go at once," he said, and as he spoke he saw me. "Is your father at home, David?" he asked.

I replied that he was, and the two shipowners and Captain Michaelson—bursting from his borrowed coat—started down the gangway. I followed them, and when they entered a cab I jumped up on the seat with the cabby. After all, I reflected, Mr. Beadle had told me to wait; until I was released from that command there was no reason for me to feel guilty about missing school.

CHAPTER II

THE TALE OF MUTINY

WHEN we reached our plain brick home on the hill, I jumped from my seat and ran around to the back through the garden. Lee was working in the kitchen and he screamed at me, "Go long school! Wha flor you home now, Davie?"

"Mutiny!" I burst out breathlessly, and looking at Lee I added, "And there was a Chinaman in the boat, too."

In the front of the house I could hear the bell and, as Lee regarded me with oblique startled eyes, I heard my father go to open the door. Then there were deep rumbling voices and the tramp of feet down the hall to my father's study.

"How you talkin'—golly!" Lee said. "Wha flor Chinaboy mutiny?"

Feeling that I had Lee interested, I warned him mysteriously to silence and left the kitchen, tiptoeing along to the door and, sitting on the lower steps, I could hear quite well. It was there I learned the story of the mutiny on the *Lady Hook*, as Captain Michaelson told it, slowly, dispassionately, his heavy voice echoing through our house.

"You need brandy," I heard my father say, and there was the sound of the decanter against a glass and a great noisy gulp. This was repeated three times until Mr. Beadle finally cried:

"Enough of swilling! I'll thank you now, Captain Michaelson, for your story of how you came to lose my ship."

"Mr. Lester," the captain said, addressing my father. "It's for you to decide if I am culpable. And, sir, you'll have the unadorned truth from me. But, please to

recall, that there is death in guns, and little glory in dying for other men's gold. I'd go down with my ship, I'll have you know, were it only a canoe. But enough—"

"Quite," my father said gently. "I know you for an honorable man, Captain Michaelson, and an excellent seaman. You have been through much. So tell what is necessary and get to a bed."

"I thank you kindly," the captain said. "And there is little to tell. It was a very simple, well-executed act of mutiny and I did nothing but raise my hands above my head. It began in Hilo where the steam packet *Marietta* lay with a broken propellor shaft, or some such mechanical ill that those iron hulks are heir to.

"There was mail and bullion aboard the *Marietta* for this port, and the *Marietta's* captain, Danielson, along with the officer of the port, bound me over to carry it here along with a passenger whom I knew as Mr. Kingston at first and later—as I shall tell—as Mr. Jeremy Robb.

"I may say that I had no hint of the plan to take the ship until it was executed. The fifth day out the passenger, Mr. Kingston, and Strom Sorenson, the boatswain, opened the door of my cabin. Seven bells had just been struck and I was preparing to go on deck. They had pistols and Mr. Kingston was smiling. He bowed and said, 'Captain, you are no longer master on the *Lady Hook*. I have that honor.'

"WHEN I asked him how that was so he invited me to come on deck and see for myself. I did so and, as we reached the deck, I heard Mr. Oliver, the second mate, giving orders to stand-to. The entire starboard watch it seemed, including Mr. Oliver, had fallen in with a plan of Mr. Kingston's to seize the ship and the bullion we carried. As the larboard watch had come on deck they had been overpowered and bound together at the foot of the mainmast. Not a shot had been fired.

"I turned to Mr. Kingston and asked him if he was fully aware of the gravity of his actions and how little hope there was of eventual success for him and for those he had persuaded to mutiny.

"He laughed at me. 'Gravity!' he cried. 'Why, Captain, mutiny—or piracy for that matter—is no grave offense for a man who's done murder. Kingston, you see, does not happen to be my name. I'm rightly called Jeremy Robb and they've a gallows waiting for me in Sydney, as my old shipmate here, Strom Sorenson, will tell you. And, as for mutiny, we two have done that before. No, my dear man, you cannot frighten me with gravity. I defy it!' "

Captain Michaelson paused and I could hear him sigh. "I'd like another brandy," he said. "If it will not offend Mr. Beadle."

The brandy was poured and Captain Michaelson drank, while I could hear my father saying musingly, "Jeremy Robb . . ."

"I asked him," the captain continued, "what he proposed to do with me, the chief officer, Mr. Tripp, and the larboard watch. For answer Jeremy Robb pointed to the longboat which had been stripped of its tarpaulin and swung out from the rail. 'There's water and biscuit,' he said, 'and I'm sure a navigator of your attainment will have no difficulty in reaching land.'

"Computing from my last position, I replied that it was at least fifteen hundred miles to San Francisco.

"Robb snapped his fingers, laughing, 'A mere week-end's sailing. Or, if you prefer it, Captain, you may swim.'

"I lost my head then and I made a lunge for him, but he did not flinch. He had no need to. Boatswain Sorenson, who is a giant with the strength of three men—a great stupid beast of a fellow—grasped my collar and held me as if I were a babe. It was altogether hopeless and I beg you to understand that I could do nothing to alter the course of events after they had gone so far."

"You mean," my father said, "that he set you adrift that morning and that you have come fifteen hundred miles in an open boat?"

"He did," Captain Michaelson said. "And we have. Within half an hour of my appearance on deck we were lowered away, the six men of the larboard watch, the carpenter, the steward, the Chinese cook, the chief officer and myself. I begged a spar and an extra sail and Mr. Tripp was allowed to bring the ship's log. Otherwise we had a supply of biscuit and water sufficient for five days."

"Mr. Tripp did not arrive with you," Mr. Ide commented.

THE captain, as if to answer Mr. Ide fully, cut back in his narrative. "It was the morning of the twenty-first of August at eight o'clock that we were lowered away," he said. "The sun was out, quite hot, and there was a long easy swell with the wind continuing from the southeast as it had for a week. We were lowered from the waist in the lee and as the falls were let go no one spoke a word, but I kept my eyes on Jeremy Robb's and my look promised him that some day I would catch up with him and square accounts between us.

"Only one further incident occurred. Before we drifted away from the side one of the crew who had remained aboard leaned over and flung a wad of marline into the longboat. Mr. Tripp found that it contained three fishhooks. These were later responsible for preserving the lives of at least a few of us.

"As soon as we were off, Robb went aft and Sorenson gave orders for all hands to lay aloft to make sail. As we drifted, watching, the *Lady Hook* began to get under weigh, now sailing south into the wind. We watched while the royals were broken out and she showed us her stern and I can see little Jeremy Robb now; I can see him standing there like a gamecock on the quarterdeck with my ship walking away from me. I wish I could lay my hands on him this minute!"

"You do!" Mr. Beadle cried out. "*You* do!"

That had been as near as the captain had ever come to speaking with any show of passion in his voice and, as he continued after Mr. Beadle's outburst, he was once more methodical and objective in telling his story. "I begged the extra sail," he said, "because I knew we would suffer as much from exposure as from hunger. While we still pitched in the *Lady Hook's* wake we hoisted the longboat's mast and rigged the sheet.

"With the wind continuing fair we set a course about a point off north northeast." The captain stopped. "I may say," he went on directly, "that I never doubted that I could make port. Yet when I had counted our biscuit and water and estimated the days they must last us I realized that the journey would take a great toll of our endurance. But with the wind continuing, I estimated a voyage of only twelve days. It was the gale that blew up the second night as we were out that upset my reckoning and nearly did for us all." The captain paused again. "It was during the gale, Mr. Ide," he said, "that Mr. Tripp was lost.

"Along on the second afternoon," he continued, "the wind failed for several hours and then it began to blow from the southwest, while a sea built up quickly and it was squally. We ran a while full before it, but as the sea came up heavier it was dangerous going, and we began taking water over the bow. I would not strike the sail, however, knowing how precious the miles we could make running before the wind would be to us.

"But toward evening it began to rain and to blow with such fury that there was nothing for it but to take the sail in. But the moment this was done we lay pitching so wildly that it seemed we must swamp at any moment, and it was necessary to start bailing. For a while all was blackness and confusion with the wind whipping our bare mast, so that I expected it to be torn out of the boat at any moment.

"I was at the tiller, trying to keep her bow-on to the seas and I could not make myself understood to Mr. Tripp who was forward. But, finally, screaming at the men next to me, I made myself clear,

telling them to unstep the mast and to rig a sea anchor from the spar and the spare sail. Mr. Tripp had unreved the rope from standing rigging and bent it on the spare sail when the wind again changed quarter suddenly, blasted the spare sail from the bows and snapped the mast off short. In the wild chaos of that moment it was some time before we were aware that Mr. Tripp had gone overboard with the mast, the spare sail and most of our lines."

"Murdered," I heard my father say softly, "Condemned by Jeremy Robb!"

"THERE'S little else to tell," Captain Michaelson said. "The next afternoon, when the sea went down and the wind came fair again, we rigged a mast from the spar. On the tenth day our ration of biscuit gave out, but that evening one of the men succeeded in catching a large barracuda. We divided the fish and the next day caught a smaller one, but it made us all sick. One man, James Treadway, died and had to be thrown over the side.

"Yesterday, several of the men were for eating the cook, arguing that since he was a Chinese it would not count. But I kept him by me. At dawn, on our eighteenth day in the boat, we sighted the Farallones, which surprised me, as the gale had put me off my reckoning and I supposed us farther north. And—well, gentlemen, that is all."

"Where's my ship now?" Mr. Beadle asked. "Tell me that!"

"Your guess is as good as mine,' the captain said. "She may be in Mexico, or they may have sailed for the Marquesas, scuttled her, rowed ashore with the bullion and a story of shipwreck, then taken passage for China. Or perhaps they sailed direct for China."

"I will inform the insurers at once," my father said. "And speak to the *Marietta's* agents who will, of course, be liable for the mail and the bullion."

"It is their loss after all," Mr. Ide agreed happily.

"But there is one point, on which I am not clear," my father continued. "Captain Michaelson, you must care for yourself immediately, but would you, before I report the affair to the insurers, tell me how it was possible for one whole watch to mutiny while the other did not? Isn't that rather odd?"

"It is," Captain Michaelson agreed. "And there is only one explanation for it, and that is the rogue who calls himself Jeremy Robb. A more eloquent liar never lived. And, granting that a man could persuade one watch to mutiny without the other's knowledge, I can think of no better tactic than to make it the second mate's watch. You will all agree," he concluded drily, "that it worked quite well on the *Lady Hook.*"

"It was of you, and of those who might try to prove you culpable, that I was thinking," my father told him. "I am myself convinced that you are not to blame. Yet we are—for keeping you here now."

SO ENTRANCED was I at my listening post that the scrape of a chair conveyed no warning to me and my father had opened the door of his study before I could move.

"You must," he directed Captain Michaelson, "get a cab home at once. And I advise you to put yourself under the care of a physician. Mr. Beadle, Mr. Ide and myself can decide what must be done about trying to locate the *Lady Hook.*"

As my father turned with his arm on Captain Michaelson's to go down the hall, he perceived me on the stairs. His expression showed neither surprise nor annoyance and his voice was quite matter-of-fact. "You will wait, please, David," he said.

I watched him let Captain Michaelson out the front door and then pace slowly back along the hall to me, and it occurred to me that perhaps his abstraction was due to the fact that he was, like myself, still mesmerized by a picture of little Jeremy Robb standing like a fighting cock

on the quarterdeck, while the *Lady Hook* with canvas springing on her tall masts walked away in the sea. But when he came to where I stood on the stairs his eyes flashed at me briefly.

"You are not in school, David. Why?"

"I was directed to take your paper aboard the *Delight*," I said. "Mr. Beadle told me to wait."

He laid a hand on my shoulder. "You are not Mr. Beadle's errand boy," he said softly; then he asked, "You've been listening?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I saw them, Father —coming in the longboat. And I wanted to hear. I saw the Chinaman that they wanted to eat."

"Chinese," he said, rather absently correcting me. "Well, run along, but tend first to your hands. And look at your clothes. You are all tarry."

"I was climbing on the *Delight*."

He smiled. "And it's not only on your hands and your clothes, I think," he said. "It is in your mind, too, David. But let the story you have eavesdropped on this morning be a lesson to you. May it help to convince you that the sea is not the romantic province you imagine it."

He gripped my shoulder and his eyes held my own seriously. "Think of those poor men in an open boat, in a wide empty vastness. Think of choking over a bit of raw fish, David, while the sun cooks you!" He let me go. "Now run along!" he commanded sternly. "And think also of studies, for a change, instead of ships."

CHAPTER III

A SEAMAN BUT NO GENTLEMAN

IT SEEMS needless to state that I was glad that day to go to school. For once I could scarcely wait to cross the hill and enter the building; and I was for several days almost as much of a hero as if I had commanded the longboat of the *Lady Hook* instead of Captain Michaelson. But it was, of course, Jeremy Robb who captured the imagination of us all and it was he each of us secretly admired.

Next morning the front pages of the papers were full of the affair. There were pictures of the *Lady Hook*, of the longboat at the wharf and of the survivors, including the Chinese. All the ports along the coast had been warned by telegraph to watch out for the pirated ship, and a steamer sailing that day for Honolulu was carrying the news of the mutiny along with a description of the mutineers. Although there were no pictures available of Jeremy Robb or of Strom Sorenson, their descriptions were published. An inquiry would be sent on the first boat leaving for Sydney, Australia, to check on their records and see if it was true that Robb was wanted for murder.

Those next few weeks, while the case died in the papers, I walked around with the description of Jeremy Robb in my head. He was about thirty-five years old, about five feet six in height, with an intelligent, animated expression, assertive and confident. His hair was black and his eyes were blue and he looked, acted and talked like a man of education and breeding. Strom Sorenson, although about the same age, was Robb's opposite. He was at least six feet six inches tall his shipmates claimed, blond, blue-eyed and of a very placid demeanor, but a man of terrific strength. A first-rate seaman, he was not considered very intelligent otherwise. Obviously, Jeremy Robb was the brains of the pair.

However, after a month had passed with no news of the *Lady Hook* or her crew, these details were not so often in my mind. Soon I had a new interest. A boat.

It was not mine, but it was almost as good as mine because it belonged to my best friend, Charles Stribling. The Striblings were one of the oldest and wealthiest families in San Francisco. Charles' father was the president of the Pacific Bank, and when Charles broke his arm falling from the eucalyptus tree in back of our house, his father compensated him for the injury by giving him the boat, a sloop-rigged cutter.

AFTER all these years I am quite aware that we must have appeared regular prigs with that lovely boat, and watching us beat clumsily about the bay, many a horny-handed man before the mast must have spit over the side in disgust and cursed a wealthy father for his indulgence, and us for our lubberly handling of a beautiful sea craft.

The cutter was new, designed and built by an ex-ship's-carpenter in Alameda, across the bay. I went over with Charles and his father on the ferry to the estuary to see her and watched her builder paint the name *Shark*—Charles' choice—on her bows. Her deep keel made her a safe boat, but with all sail on, and with her narrow beam and knifelike bow, she was, properly handled, the fastest thing on the waterfront.

We moored at the south end of the basin near the Pacific Company's wharf, and each afternoon as soon as school was out we would tumble onto the Washington Street cable and hurry to the deck of the *Shark*. We were soon passable sailors and learned enough of the currents and shoals so that after a month or two we were able to go down the slough or beat close-hauled up to the Carquinez Straits against a northeaster.

It was along in November that the papers blossomed once more with news of Jeremy Robb. The *Lady Hook* had been captured at the port of Acapulco in Mexico by the naval cutter, *Georgia,* and Robb, Sorenson and the rest of the mutineers were being brought up to San Francisco in irons to stand trial. There was no further news until the arrival of the *Georgia.*

It was a cool clear morning, I remember, and I was just out of bed dressing when there was a knock on our front door. I heard Lee open it and then a deep voice saying:

"The *Georgia's* been sighted off the heads. I was to tell Mr. Lester."

"Olf head," Lee repeated.

Then I heard my father call, "Thank you, Johnston. I'll be down directly she is in."

I splashed my face in the bowl, finished dressing, and, dashing out of my room, almost upset my Aunt Kate who was just starting down the stairs.

"David Lester!" she cried. "Why can't you act civilized? And look at your uncombed hair. Oh, if only you could see the Charleston boys your age. Such young *gentlemen!*"

"Yes'um," I said, and, adopting the sedate carriage I imagined suitable to a young gentleman of Charleston, I followed her down the stairs. But she was not yet done with me—and it seemed to me in those days that she never was.

WHEN we entered the dining room where my father was already seated before his eggs she said, "Robert, something must be done with David. He's growing up like a savage."

I pulled out her chair for her and sat her carefully, then went to my own place and paid strict attention to my breakfast.

"Indeed, Kate," my father said presently, "I recall our mother once making the same complaint of me."

"That, Robert," said my aunt, "was not the same. In Charleston we had traditions and culture and you could not have been savage, had you wished. What would the servants have thought! But here, there is nothing to sustain a child in forming gentlemanly habits. There is no past and there is no caste, Robert. And only heathens to work in the households of this city not grown, with its horrible saloons, its brawling, its duels and—"

"There has not been a good duel since Broderick was shot," my father interrupted. "And it is strange, Katie, to hear such a faithful Southerner condemn dueling."

"—and its waterfront," my heedless aunt went on, "If you could only keep David off that boat."

My fingers felt suddenly cold and clumsy on my spoon and I had difficulty in breathing. I had been going to beg my father to accompany him to the waterfront to see Jeremy Robb taken off the

Georgia in irons. But now all was lost, and in that moment I nearly hated my Aunt Kate.

My father sipped his coffee and looked at me. "Perhaps there is something in that," he said. "David, you have not received a *bene* in your latin for three months. If your studies do not improve, I shall be forced to forbid you ever going again in the boat with Charles."

"But—" I began.

"That is all," he said.

And, knowing that it was, I simmered with the injustice of it. My father had been in a good mood when my aunt and I came into the dining room and I felt that there had been a fair chance of him allowing me to miss school and accompany him that morning. But my aunt had spoiled all that.

I glanced at my father who was now frowning over the shipping page of the morning paper; I looked at my Aunt Kate's thin frustrated features, busy at last with breakfast, and rebellion rose in me. For a moment I had a clear insight to the hearts of men like Jeremy Robb. Perhaps he, too, had been persecuted. A child, was I? And liable to be forbidden a boat? Well, I was thirteen and I was taller than Robb; and if injustice were done me I could act like Robb.

I rose from the table, feeling very calm and a little contemptuous of my father and my aunt because they did not understand just what I was. Some day, I reflected darkly, they would. Some day when I had sailed the seas and the sun and the wind and spray had beaten my face brown. Some day in that future I would return with pistols swinging careless in my belt and I would laugh so that the whole house rang as I tossed a handful of gold before my Aunt Kate and cried, "Well, my lady, here's fare to Charleston where all your fine sissyfied young gentlemen dwell!"

"Why," my father inquired, "do you stand there, David? You are excused, and it's time for school."

With my books under my arm I left the house, but when I came to the corner of our garden, I glanced quickly around me and tossed the books into a clump of juniper. Then I continued on up the street to Charles Stribling's and met him just coming down the steps. He, too, had his books and was eating a bun.

"The *Georgia's* in," I told him.

We looked at one another for a moment and then he said, "Let's go down."

"I'm going," I said. "I came to see if you wanted to go."

He dropped his books behind a pillar and, as we could hear the clang of the cable car just starting down the hill, we ran out to the street. The car was full of clerks and shopkeepers going down to their business, and while Charles and I hung perilously on the side and talked of the *Georgia* and Jeremy Robb, I remember that I thought them a prosaic mediocre lot. The car clanged recklessly down the slope, and ahead of us the bay gleamed coldly. It was altogether a fine day, a fine day for San Francisco and fit for adventurers, in irons or out.

CHAPTER IV

JEREMY ROBB, SEA-GOIN' SLOB

WHEN we arrived at the waterfront we walked along East Street looking for the *Georgia* or someone who could tell us where she might be going to moor. But there was a quiet on the vessels that lay between the wharves that was unusual, and there were strangely few people about. And then we realized that everyone we did see was hurrying south toward China Basin, toward the old public markets and the channel. So we hurried that way, too.

As we went, we were joined by people converging on the waterfront from the hill streets. There was a crowd along the channel by the bridge that was constantly being added to and across the water slot it stretched back into the old rubble-paved square. Everyone there was talking and shouting and laughing, and up the street the windows of the glass works were choked with the faces of its workers.

Most of the crowd that morning be-

longed to, or—more properly perhaps—preyed upon, the waterfront. There were saloon-keepers and bartenders, some still in their aprons, and men in checkered suiting with diamonds in their stocks. It seemed that every strumpet from the Barbary Coast was there, too, turned out in brave professional color. There were hucksters and there were the seamen, noticeable by their jackets and their caps and by the fact that they stuck together in groups of their own kind.

"Where's the *Georgia?*" I asked a young sailor.

He turned. "Why she's right out there in the basin," he said. "The captain's come ashore in his gig."

"Then they haven't taken off Jeremy Robb yet?"

"Not yet," the young man said.

Another seaman laughed: "If they don't hurry, he'll be stealin' the *Georgia,* too!"

We craned our necks, but with the crowd massed along the channel we could only catch glimpses of the water. "Look," Charles Stribling said. He was pointing back the way we had come to where an old brig lay alongside a wharf with a rotting shed. There were men on the roof of the shed, some others leaning at the rail of the brig, and sitting cozily on the foreyard were two boys.

The decks of the brig were dirty with coal dust. No one challenged us as we went aboard, and we were soon perched on the yard along with the two other boys, able to command a fine view of the *Georgia* and the crowd.

The *Georgia,* a gray ugly steam cutter, but very clean, lay at anchor about two hundred yards out. Her ladder was down, neat blue sailors were on watch and two marines with guns over their shoulders were pacing the afterdeck.

A closed carriage came clattering across the channel bridge into the square. Out of it got a tall man in a broad-brimmed black hat and an impressive ulster.

"It's the United States Marshal," one of the men on the deck below called out to another.

BUT I scarcely heard because I was suddenly pulling my cap down over my eyes and trying to make myself small on the yard. Two other men had gotten out of the carriage. One of them was the bulky Captain Michaelson and the other was my father, very cool and aristocratic in the crowded square.

Behind the carriage came a large black police wagon. A man called out:

"Here comes a new black clipper for Jeremy Robb!"

The police wagon was turned so that its stern faced the stone steps of the landing. Out of it got four large red-jowled police. Another cab arrived with the *Georgia's* commander and some other gentlemen, and the *Georgia's* gig which had been lurking off the landing pulled in smartly.

The newly arrived dignitaries, including my father, had a short conference at the landing steps, and then the commander and the four police with their sergeant stepped aboard the gig and were rowed out to the cutter. The crowd was suddenly quiet, and all of us there kept our eyes on the *Georgia.* Her commander and the police went up the side as the marines came to attention. For a moment it was so quiet that we could hear the commander's voice drifting in over the water.

"He's told 'em to bring up Robb and the rest," Charles said.

I nodded and glanced away from the *Georgia* to see what my father was doing. After a moment I discovered him gazing rather pensively over Captain Michaelson's shoulder at me. There could be no doubt of it, he recognized me! I looked away quickly, just as people seemed to sigh and Charles gripped my shoulder.

A file of men had come out of a companionway and were lining up on the *Georgia's* foredeck. You could see the heavy irons on their legs and wrists, and even at that distance you could hear the clank of iron on the decking. I promptly forgot my own sorry predicament and strained my eyes to identify Jeremy Robb.

All of those shackled were bareheaded and bearded, but there was one who was

easily distinguished; above the rest his big blond head towered and it looked as if he might easily snap his fetters if he wished. That was Sorenson, without a doubt. But it was only after a sailor with a short sledge had begun to knock the irons from the prisoners' legs that I located the man I was immediately certain was Jeremy Robb. He was the smallest of the eight, and his long gray coat was the best garment among them. He had his head thrown back and was looking at the crowd ashore; even then there was arrogance in his posture.

THE police stepped forward as the wrist irons were unlocked and placed their own bright handcuffs on the mutineers, then Robb, Sorenson and another were helped down the ladder into the gig. With two police and a marine as guard the gig started pulling for the landing. A quarter boat was being swung out to bring the rest in.

Several police began pushing the crowd back so that there was a lane from the water to the police wagon. And my father, I noted, was no longer looking at me but was quite as busy watching the gig as any butcher's boy.

When the gig bumped the landing steps, someone cried, "Look at little Captain Kidd!" Some of the women laughed, but as Jeremy Robb stepped onto the landing there was silence again. The police that had Sorenson and the other prisoner (who, from his jacket, was the second mate of the *Lady Hook*) hustled their men to the wagon, but Jeremy Robb hung back on the arm of the marine and stared into the cold blue eyes of Captain Michaelson who blocked his way.

I had a good view of Robb's face then. Even with its black stubble and curling unkempt hair, it looked fresh and quizzical, almost gay. "So, Captain," we all heard him say, "you got back. I do hope you had a pleasant sail."

Captain Michaelson replied heavily, "Jeremy Robb, or Mr. Kingston—whatever you please to call yourself—I told you, I warned you that day on deck when you took my ship, that we'd have another meeting."

"And it's so nice to see you again," Robb said. "I'm only sorry I cannot shake hands. But as for warning me, Captain, I disagree. You only spoke of gravity and I defied it." For a moment his eyes were hard and bright in his face as he leaned toward Michaelson's bulk. "And," he cried, "I *still* do!"

With that the marine gave Robb's arm a jerk and edged him past the captain who turned and said loudly: "You'll learn what gravity is on the gallows, man. Then you'll fall—the same as Newton's apple!"

But Robb showed no sign that he heard. We had a brief look at his face, smiling now at a confused girl in red, and then he disappeared into the wagon leaving, even in his ignominy, an impression of dignity and wit.

THAT evening my father called me into his study and told me he thought perhaps there was something to what my Aunt Kate had said.

"David," he complained, "Of late you have shown yourself to be totally lacking in responsibility. Your truancy today convinced me that you have no conception of probity of conduct and I intend to teach you some, so that grown and among men you may have honor and integrity." He paused and his glance moved from my face to the painting on the wall behind me, to the young girl who—and it was always incredible to me—had been my mother.

"I have been lenient with you, David," he said gently, "because you reminded me of her. You were all I had left of her and I wanted her to be proud of you."

My rebellion was for a moment shattered; and there came a lump in my throat and a feeling of helpless remorse. My father remained for a long moment immobile while tears came in my eyes, and I felt that he was no longer there but back in some happy past in which tragedy and I were not thought of.

"David," he said presently, "to discipline

yourself you must first be disciplined. And that is what I propose to do. I have always been gentle with you, but in the future you may find me quite hard. I am going to begin by forbidding you to go aboard the *Shark* for one month. If, at the end of that time, your studies are excellent, I'll remove the ban. But, mind you, I say *excellent.*"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"That is all," he said.

And so it was *all*, but it was injustice done again, too, I felt. If it had not been for my Aunt Kate he would have allowed me to go down and see the *Georgia* come in, so why should he punish me for doing something he would have allowed me to do?

It was the first time I had ever questioned my father's edicts, and it was the first time I had ever thought of him at all objectively. The occasion did not enhance his prestige with me. Retrospect and the tools and handles of the psychologist make it easy to explain what happened to me: I simply transferred my hero worship from my father to Jeremy Robb, for a pirate was more to my taste than a stern judge who curtailed my liberty.

And I was not alone in my liking, for in a sea town like ours Robb had made a tremendous impression with his flagrant seizing of the *Lady Hook*, his repartee and fine gay bearing on the landing that morning. But he was particularly the hero of the bawdy and downtrodden who inhabited the Barbary Coast, and they even made a ribald song about him which we picked up and sang on the playing field at school. It had innumerable verses one of the least offensive of which was:

Oh, Jeremy Robb was a sea-goin' slob
And a pirate of the king.
He stole a ship to buy him booze
But he's going to get his neck in a noose,
And then he won't drink a damn' thing!

Mutiny and piracy were not hanging matters unless there had been bloodshed, and, as there had been none, Robb and the rest faced only a sentence in the state penitentiary. But official information was not long in coming from Australia to the effect that Jeremy Robb and Strom Sorenson were wanted by the Crown on charges of murder and piracy, committed respectively against a captain and his trading schooner with whom they had shipped from Sydney to the Marquesas eight years before. And that was indeed a matter to be settled only by gravity and the gallows.

BUT justice, always languid in maritime matters, was bogged down by official genuflections and formulas. The attorneys who were to prosecute Jeremy Robb, *et al*, one of whom was my father, were not sure they could make a case against the second mate and the rest of the starboard watch without the presence of Robb and Sorenson. And, as the Crown had prior criminal actions against these two, they must wait until the Crown either agreed to allow Robb and Sorenson to be tried in San Francisco or presented the proper papers of extradition and provided transportation to take them to Australia.

While matters hung so, nothing could be done. The mutineers stayed on in jail as Christmas passed and the New Year's came. People made quite a thing of going up to the jail at noon to peek in the yard and see Jeremy Robb taking his exercise.

Meanwhile, I too was incarcerated—in a prison ashore. I worked hard at my studies, but at the end of the month I had not achieved a decent mark in Latin. In history, mathematics and literature I stood near the head of my class, but in the musty syntactical mists of the Caesars I was lost. So while Charles Stribling was on the bay with other companions, my spirit, like that of Jeremy Robb, brooded and longed for escape.

There may be an impression here that my elders had nothing of which to complain in me and that my feeling of rebellion was entirely justified. This is not quite true. At that time both Charles Stribling and I were boys tall and strong for our age and we handled ourselves with the aggressive emphasis on muscle com-

mon to some athletes. We also affected the language of the waterfront; before our friends we constantly used oaths and expressions that would have turned my Aunt Kate's straight red hair into ringlets. At the time, gentlemanliness just did not happen to be a criterion that we chose for our conduct.

There was also some cause for my aunt's criticism of San Francisco as a place in which to raise a youth. It was all right if you stayed in the right districts, but we did not stay in the right districts. To get to the waterfront and the *Shark*, for instance, we had to pass the Barbary Coast and even in the daytime a boy was apt to see and hear things that would be of no help in Latin class.

Yet certainly Aunt Kate and my father had little fault to find with me during that winter. My only excitement came during February, the day the recaptured *Lady Hook* arrived from Mexico and Jeremy Robb and Strom Sorenson vanished.

CHAPTER V

TOWARD A NEW HORIZON

THE progress of the *Lady Hook* from the time Robb took her away from Captain Michaelson had been, from standpoints of both navigation and luck, ill starred. Although Robb, Sorenson and the second mate were all fine sea hands, evidently none of them was really capable of command, for the gale that had blasted Mr. Tripp over the side of the longboat had played havoc with the *Lady Hook*.

The details of how she lost her foremast and her rudder were not known, but the *Georgia* had come across her at Acapulco where she had arrived the day before with her foremast stump rigged as a jury rudder and where Robb was trying to refit and get out before he was caught. The *Georgia* had settled things by firing a shot across the *Lady Hook*'s deck and despatching a boatload of marines to board her. It was later known that when the gale had come up, all hands were drunk.

When she arrived along the middle of February, short-handed, but with a new mast and rudder, the notice of her return was on the front pages of the papers and interest in the coming trial again surged high. That was the morning of the sixteenth and—as if the arrival of the *Lady Hook* were a signal—that night Robb and Sorenson escaped from jail.

The next morning when this news got abroad the city was in an uproar. In the downtown district men stood in knots on the corners and discussed the escape; along the waterfront squads of police tramped up and down, ransacking the lodging and warehouses and searching the vessels moored to the wharves. But no trace of the escaped mutineers was found.

The jailbreak had, it appeared, been effected with the help of a turnkey. This old man now occupied one of his own cells, mum about his part in the affair, and

(*Please turn to next page*)

obviously still in sympathy with Jeremy Robb. It proved, said one of the newspapers, Robb's power to influence people. Perhaps, the paper continued, it was just as well that Robb had not been brought to trial, as he would probably have persuaded the judge, the prosecution and jury to join with him in capturing the city of San Francisco.

But in all the city I think there was no one to whom the news of the escape was quite as much of a personal shock as it was to me, for I had unconsciously identified myself with Robb and while he stayed in his jail, suffering, I stayed in mine. And when he vanished my own rebellion flamed in me again.

YET there were more reasons than that for a quickening of rebellion—old reasons. On the west-Pacific littoral between 35 and 45 degrees north latitude there is, in February, a Spring, potent with green hills and a lessening of fog and wind. Men walk on the sunny side of the street, and air and eyes are balmy; ships seem to come and go with a sort of finality, as if it may never happen quite this way again. Oh, there are so many places in the world, and so many journeys waiting for a boy soon fourteen!

A month passed and it was March and still there was no trace of Robb. A new swagger came into my bearing and my studies slipped. Robb had defied gravity and won and so could I. With my father's ban on the *Shark* still in effect I went aboard her one Saturday afternoon with Charles who planned to sand the deck. There was a fair wind from the northwest and several small boats, the sun on their canvas, were whisking through the chop.

"Cast off," said I.

Charles eyed me to see if I was serious and when he saw that I meant it his eyes brightened. He picked up his box of sand and put it in the cabin and then went forward to slip the mooring. By that time I had the battens in the mainsail and we yanked it up the mast. I took the tiller and on a starboard tack headed her for Goat Island. It was fine to be at sea again, to taste the wind and feel the *Shark* surging lightly along under me; and it was even better this way, I discovered —when it was *verboten.*

Our destinies, I think, are shaped not so much by the great things, but by the trivial. For instance if I had not been perched on the truck of the *Delight's* foremast that day when the *Lady Hook's* longboat appeared, or if on this forbidden sail in the *Shark* the sun had not been shining, or the wind had blown from another quarter; any trivial change in this pattern of triviality and there probably would not have been a world-famous singer who was once, oddly, called Nautilus, I would sleep better of nights and without this scar on my forehead—so many far more considerable things would not have been. But the sun was shining and the wind was fair and we continued until it was clear that the obvious thing to do was to sail due east across the bay, which we had never done before.

In the early afternoon, blown and burned, we came into Oakland estuary and tied to an old piling, then waded ashore. At a waterfront café we ate several oyster sandwiches and drank strong black coffee, and it was not like being just across the bay, but like a port half around the world.

When we got back to the *Shark* the tide was coming in with a heavy foam-flecked chop rushing across it and the pennant on our mainmast was taut. As soon as we made sail we were immediately tearing along close hauled at a great rate, and it seemed we would be home in about half the time it had taken us to come over. But there was a mist in front of the sun, and as we came out into the open water we saw that the fog was swirling down from the tulle marshes of the Sacramento and blanketing the upper bay. It was suddenly quite cold and, as we watched, the turrets and hills of San Francisco hovered for a moment like a dream city above the mist and then were blotted out.

Next, Goat Island disappeared from our weather bow and we were left sailing

along within a ghostly circle of creeping damp. In a little while the sails began to slant and we had to ease off to leeward. The wind was changing and lessening; it had circled and was from the northeast now and gusty, driving the fog across our deck.

For hours in the early night we worked the sails at the whim of the wind and beat back and forth in a clammy nothingness, and all the while the water was growing rougher and our position more obscure. But we were not unhappy, nor particularly afraid. We enjoyed the night and its strangeness. When the wind died and the sails hung damp and listless, we drifted and lay on the bunks in the cabin, listening when we heard the mourn of a buoy or a channel bell tolling. We thought we must have drifted south, along the slough. And we had. Dawn and a brisk breeze from the northeast again that whisked away the fog, showed us the mud flats of San Mateo.

IT WAS noon by the time we had tacked back up the bay and were abreast of the city. As we came about for the last time and headed the bowsprit toward the Pacific Company Wharf, a police boat chugged up behind us. It was a steam launch and when it idled along side I felt a cold chill of fear. All morning I had been dreading the inevitable reckoning when I got ashore. But the police! . . .

"Ahoy, the *Shark!*" cried a man in her bow. "Take a line." He flung a coil of rope that landed neatly on our deck.

Charles caught it as it began paying out, and we looked at one another. His face was pale and scared under his tan.

"Throw it back!" I said suddenly. "We've sailed this far. We don't have to be towed in."

"Right," he agreed. He held onto a stay and flung the rope. It fell short of the launch. "We're sailing in!" he cried.

A policeman went forward and talked to the man who was hauling in the rope. They looked at us critically, then the policeman grinned, waved his arm at us and went back into the pilot house. The launch slewed around, giving us a wash, and headed back down the harbor.

As we let the sails fall and drifted toward our mooring a figure loomed before me, stern and avenging. It was my father, standing on the Pacific Company Wharf with the Striblings.

We took time, furling our sails, getting out the boom cradle and putting on the covers. Meanwhile the trio on the wharf stood motionless watching us and presently there was nothing left to do but lock the cabin and get into the dinghy. Charles rowed and I sat and pretended great interest in a ship going by, but soon we were climbing reluctantly up the ladder to the wharf to stand face to face with them.

"Charles!" Mrs. Stribling cried. "Oh, my boy!"

"None of that," Mr. Stribling said sharply. "Charles, it is only necessary to tell you that Mr. Lester and I agree that the *Shark* should be sold. You will never go aboard that boat again. Give me the cabin key."

"Come along, David," my father said.

In the cab he sat composed and cold and we did not speak. At the door my Aunt Kate met us with Lee hovering behind her in the hall.

"David Lester!" she cried. "Look at your face—burnt, burnt to a crisp by the sun. And your clothes!"

My father moved past her. "Come into the study, David," he ordered me and I followed him, going like a man about to hear his own death sentence, which indeed it was.

When my father was done I was ordered to bed and left alone. Later on Lee brought me some soup, but even Lee was afraid to broach the united disapproval of the household by a kind word. Toward evening I got up and sat by the window, staring out over the rooftops to the bay, thinking of my sentence. I was to have no allowance and each evening I was to retire to my room immediately after supper to study until bedtime.

It was too much; I was the victim of a

series of injustices that had at last become intolerable. And like Robb I must escape. Sitting there in the window, watching the Sunday excursion boat coming back from Paradise Cove, a wild plan began to take shape in my mind, one so impossibly reckless that I suspected that it was only fantasy. Yet I vowed it should not be; I was at a crossroads, my spirit must either dare or perish.

I went to sleep that night sustained in my disgrace by whispering the magic words, "The South Seas."

THAT last day is etched in my memory; I shall never forget a bit of it—my father and Aunt Kate at the breakfast table, the walk to school. If only in his face there had been a little relenting, a hint of understanding. . . . But there was none.

At three that afternoon we were in Latin and a stupor was heavy upon the room as Mr. Hibbs read from Virgil, his voice monotonous as ripples breaking gently on a shore: *"Tantas molis erat Romanam condere gentem. . . ."*

Echoing in through the windows came the exciting bass of a steamboat whistle from down on the bay and even Mr. Hibbs paused at the end of the proem and looked out the windows vacantly for a moment before he went on. I met Charles' eyes across the room and was surprised by a light in them, of excitement or anticipation. That was the way I felt, but why should Charles, I wondered. Did he have a plan, too? The minutes passed slowly and I stared at Mr. Hibbs' pale classic nose and tried to make myself believe that this was the last afternoon I would sit in Latin.

The final bell rang. "Farewell Hibbs!" I wanted to shout. "Farewell Virgil and Cicero and Caesar! Farewell you little drones!"

Charles met me at the door. "What's the matter with you!" he asked.

"Why," I said, "I might ask the same of you. Isn't your father going to sell the *Shark?*"

We were outside now and he stopped and nodded, but his eyes were bright and he looked at me intently. "I'm not going to stand for it!" he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Let's walk over on the hill," he suggested. He seemed nervous with an excitement that he labored to control.

We went along the street and up a winding path to the vacant hilltop. Charles threw down his books, looked out at the bay and then flung himself full length on the grass.

He was nearly a year older than I and usually less excitable. I had never seen him quite this way. "What are you going to do?" I asked again, sitting down.

"I'm going to steal the *Shark,*" he said. "Do you want to go with me?"

"Where?" I said my voice sounding strange.

"I think the South Seas. No one would ever find us there and it's a fine climate. You live in little grass houses on the beach and just fish and swim and sail around. And they have girls to do the cooking. I saw some pictures of some. They're very pretty and they just wear a calico skirt." He sat up. "Will you come?"

"I was going anyway!" I cried in amazement. "I was going to ask you. If you wouldn't go along I was going to stow away."

His eyes widened, marveling at it, and then he thrust out his hand. I seized and wrung it; and so we bound ourselves.

"Sometimes they wear grass skirts," I said. "And dance and play songs. And the people all eat on the ground out of coconuts."

"We could go along the coast to Mexico and then head to the islands from there. We don't just want to go to the Sandwich Islands. They'd find us there. We'll go to the real South Sea Islands."

"We'll need charts," I said, delighted to be practical, "and a lot of food."

"We can make it all right."

"Sure we can."

He stood up. "Well," he said, "we must cast off tonight."

We looked at one another. "Tonight," I agreed, trying to be casual about it.

He sat again abruptly and we began to plan, lowering our voices on the empty hill and glancing out at the bay with eyes that saw a new horizon, a latitude far south where lay that fabulous isle that all men have dreamed of once when they were young, but which no man has ever sailed to.

CHAPTER VI

FLIGHT

TOWARD dark there was a mist along the street, but after supper when I went to our front window and looked out a breeze had come and the mist was gone and I could see the gas lights stretching down the hill.

"David," said my father from the hall, "take your books and go to your room."

He watched me get my books from the table and go down the hall to the stairs, then he opened the door of his study. I turned. "Goodnight, Father."

He glanced up at me. "Goodnight, David."

I went on up the stairs. It was not goodnight, it was goodbye, but he did not know that. Yet sometimes in the years to come he would think of it, he would think of how much my face had concealed, of how off-hand my goodnight to him had been. And, I thought, he would be sorry then.

The key to my door was on the outside. I took it in with me and lit the lamp, then I went back and locked the door. After that I moved quickly, for there was not much time. I opened a bureau drawer and got out my bank which could be robbed by turning it upside down and shaking it. But there was not time for that. With a pair of scissors I pried the little door and shook the three golden eagles that my aunt had given me on my last three birthdays out into my hand. In the lamplight they flashed with a rich intrinsic splendor. Thirty dollars!

There was not much else to be done. I took off my jacket and put a sweater on under it and got an old cap from the closet. I put my jackknife, some handkerchiefs and a pair of woolen stockings in my pockets and then I stood in the center of my room, looking around me at the familiar objects, waiting for the clock down in the hall to strike the quarter hour.

I heard it, and as its one deep note echoed up the stairwell my aunt began playing the piano. How unwittingly, I thought, she had conspired with me; first she had given me gold and now she would drown out any noise I might make on the roof. I blew out the lamp.

My room was a dormer and from the window I slid down to the rain gutter, then hung until I found good footing on the crosspieces of the arbor that covered the walk leading back to our garden. Inside the house I could still hear my aunt at the piano, faintly, and a cable car was clacking up the hill, its light picking out the rails and cobbles of the street. I dropped to the path and waited until it had passed.

It stopped at the corner, and there were voices and then footsteps going off and fading up the block.

The sky was all clear of mist now, and there were clouds with a half moon coasting along behind them and the wind was making the garden trees lean and beckon gently south. I could hear Lee rattling pots in the kitchen as I started along the path to the street.

Light streamed out from my father's study, and as I ducked by the window I glanced in and saw him at his desk. There was an opened ledger on the desk, but he was not looking at it; he was staring before him, his chin was resting on one fist and his dark hair was mussed as if he had been running his hands through it. He looked younger and not very happy and not quite like my father.

I hesitated, feeling a sudden tug of agony at leaving, but I dismissed it quickly. The piano tinkled out at me as I slipped past the front of the house. "Goodbye," I whispered. *"Goodbye!"* Now I was free.

THERE was a low whistle as I reached the sidewalk and Charles stepped from the shadows of the house next door. He carried a bundle. As I came up he did not speak but turned and started walking swiftly down the street. Only when we had hailed a cab several blocks away and were settled inside did he say anything.

"How much money you got?" he asked me.

"Thirty dollars," I told him. "How much have you?"

"Forty-three." He patted his breast pocket. "I've made a list of provisions."

We were suddenly silent and tense, each staring out the window on his side of the cab. It was very strange to be in the cab; it was very strange to be going. Charles had told the driver, "Portsmouth Square" and when the cab came to the southwest corner, Charles called out to him to keep on. About a half block on the other side of the Square he said for him to stop.

The streets bordering the Square were bright with saloons and already stirring with sounds of carousal, but where we alighted were grocers, butchers and ship chandlers, and it was quiet and dark. Charles told the driver to wait and looked up and down the street.

"They are all closed," he said.

"If you want groceries," the driver called, "or anything in that line, knock there at Schwartz's. He lives at the rear."

After we had knocked a while, a fat man came through the store and lit an overhead lamp. When he had admitted us, Charles began reading off the list he had made. There were dozens of tins of biscuit, tinned beef, a keg of salt pork, flour, sugar, dried fruit, tea, potatoes, onions and many other things that I should never have thought of taking along, including a wicker-bound bottle of brandy. While the grocer filled the order methodically, I wandered around the store, fidgeting, and glancing up apprehensively whenever there were footsteps on the sidewalk.

"You boys going on a voyage?" the grocer asked as he put the provisions in two wooden boxes for us, tightly packed.

Charles started. "No, sir," he said quickly. "No—this is all for someone else."

The amount of our purchases was thirty-four dollars. Charles paid and we took up the boxes and staggered to the cab with them, glad to be out of the store.

"The Pacific Company Wharf," I told the driver who had gotten down to help us place the boxes.

As we clattered off, Charles leaned over and whispered, "Dave, do you expect they've missed us by now?"

"I locked my door," I said; "and turned out the lamp. They'll think I'm in bed."

"Good," he said, but he leaned back frowning and seemed very worried.

"How about you?" I asked.

"I don't know," he broke out. "That's what worries me. You see—well—it's this way. My mother usually comes into my room at night before she goes to bed and she—well—she sort of kisses me."

"Oh, Lord," I said. "Then she'll know you are gone tonight."

"I guess so."

"Hurry!" I cried to the driver, for the horse had slowed down to a walk.

We came rocking off the hill street to the waterfront which was quiet and dark with the ships looming ghostly along the way. The horse broke into a gallop and we pulled up at the wharf entrance with an awful racket.

I SPRANG out and dragged a box off the floor. The driver got down and it seemed to me that the look he gave me was full of suspicion. Leaving Charles to pay him and bring the other box, I started carrying mine down the wharf. Halfway to the end I had to set it down and rest and I could hear Charles stumbling along behind me. The driver slapped his reins. The cab gleamed under a streetlight and then tilted up the hill. It was very quiet when it had gone and I could hear the tide slap against the pilings under my feet. There was just the faintest gleam on the water and the *Shark* was only a tiny blot in the basin. I went on to the end of the

wharf and stopped at the ladder where we had tied the dinghy. Charles came up and let his box down with a crash.

"We hadn't better make so much noise."

"There's no watchman," he said. "He's only on duty when there's a ship tied here."

We stood for a second looking out at the dark outline of the *Shark*. "Well," I said, "let's go. I'll climb down into the dinghy and you hand me the boxes." I went a few steps down the ladder and looked below, "It's gone!" I cried softly.

Charles leaned over. "Look under the wharf!"

It was not there. I came back up the ladder, and Charles collapsed on one of the boxes and began to swear.

"Never mind," I said. "We'll swim out. It will be easier that way anyway. We can warp the *Shark* right up here to the ladder and lower the boxes on board without having to lift them in and out of the dinghy. We'd of had to make two trips that way!"

We slid the boxes back into the shadows of the pier shed so that no one could see them from the street and then undressed silently. I climbed down the ladder first and stuck one foot into the water. It was so cold it seemed to burn. Shuddering, I dropped off and began to swim and behind me I heard Charles gasp.

As the tide was setting strongly out, past the *Shark*, it was no effort at all to reach her. I put a hand up and hung onto the gunwale near the stern and it was only then I made out the dinghy, bumping at the *Shark's* hull on the far side. I gained the deck and sat there shivering until Charles dragged himself up beside me. Then I got to my feet.

"The dinghy's here," I told him. "Slip the mooring and I'll tow you over to the wharf."

Charles did not answer or move. "Listen!" he whispered.

I stood quite still, hearing the water chuckle under the bow, the dinghy suckling at the hull and the lullaby of the blocks creaking on the stays. Suddenly the moon sailed free and the ship was bright. Then I saw that the forehatch of the cabin was open and at the same time that I recognized this, there came a heavy placid snore from inside.

NAKED there on the deck with the breeze crystallizing our wet skin, we trembled, staring at one another, and then a cloud passed before the moon and we could no longer see. The snoring continued. Wordless, I started forward along the boom, but I suddenly threw myself flat on the deck along by the cowl of the cabin and behind me I heard Charles slip back into the water.

A steam launch was coming toward us and on its mast was the red light of the harbor police. It chugged past the Pacific Company Wharf and passed so close to us that I could see the expressions on the faces of the men in its lighted deckhouse.

At the end of the basin the launch turned out into the bay. When the noise of it died, I heard a groan below me and a high mad voice cried out, "Cheerily, men! All hands to the windlass and heave her in!"

I lay frozen to the deck. Behind me I could hear the water dripping off Charles as he came back aboard. The companion cover slid open with a bang, and in the dusky foreground a tousled gray head appeared and cast a look aloft. "All starbowlines ahoy!" it roared. "Up and out, you lubbers. We're sinking! Sinking! Man the pumps, you monkeys!"

A figure followed the head out of the cabin and it sat on the cabin top while a bottle was lifted and drunk from. Then he saw me; I could see his eyes gleam, puzzling over me.

"Johnny?" he said tentatively. "My old shipmate, Johnny, come back—is it?"

Charles moved behind me and the old man, seeing him, lurched to his feet. "We're boarded, mates!" he cried, and he swung the bottle at my head.

A reflex, inspired more by horror than bravery, was responsible for my action then. As the old man staggered toward me I rose and seized him. He was astonishingly agile and strong and for a moment

we crashed about, locked together; but, at last, getting purchase with one foot against a deck cleat, I was able to fling him from me. He fell back against the boom and tumbled sprawling down into the cabin. Charles slipped past me and pulled the companion cover shut and snapped the catch. Weak and breathless I clamped the forward hatch on.

"It's the watchman from the wharf," Charles said. "We'll dump him there."

He went forward and slipped the mooring while I untied the dinghy and got into it, tossing him the stern line. Rowing back with the *Shark* in tow, I recovered some aplomb and by the time we reached the wharf ladder, I was feeling a little proud of the way I had handled the drunken watchman.

We listened at the companion before we slid the cover back. The watchman was lying motionless on the floor between the bunks. I swallowed.

"Gosh," I said.

"Just drunk," Charles decided. "Hurry!"

We hauled him out and up the ladder onto the wharf and then began putting on our clothes. But I kept glancing down at the watchman and his wild cries still echoed in my head and the rum-soaked stench of his breath seemed still in my face.

"Come on," Charles called. He was dressed and had pulled one of the boxes to the edge of the wharf. "You hand them down to me," he said.

While I shrugged into my jacket the moon came free again, and looking at the old man I saw that blood was trickling in his gray hair at the temple, blood bright and dark and red in the moonlight.

"Charles!"

He came up the ladder quickly. "Drag him back here!"

Then I heard the voices. Two police were turning under the corner light, coming along the waterfront, past the wharf.

We dragged the old man back against the shed and cowered there, but it seemed that with the moonlight they must see us. At our feet the seamed old face was peaceful with a ghastly ominous peace. The police laughed and their heavy boots were very loud and threatening in the street. But they were soon gone.

"Charles," I whispered, "I think he's hurt bad."

Charles looked down and his eyes widened when he saw the blood.

"Dead," I said. "Do you think maybe he is dead?"

Charles reached out one hand and put it on the watchman's chest. He drew it back quickly and looked at me and for a moment his eyes were as wild and mad as the watchman's had been when he had seen me on the *Shark*.

"We got to hurry!" He gripped me by the shoulder, and his voice was hoarse with his fear. "Hurry! We got to get away!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

With the first tug on his luxuriant whiskers, Mr. Weeble let out the howl of a blood-crazy Piute

The Whiskerious Stranger

By FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "Red Commanders," "The Long Knives Ride," etc.

Remember Mr. Weeble—the mighty mouse of the great Southwest? Well, here he is back again, reluctantly fighting the battles of the just, a hero in spite of himself. . . .

THE weird, waving gas flares of McGratin, the boom oil-pool, lifted suddenly from the black ahead, and the train whooped its joy. Maybe it had been scared, out there all by its shabby, little self in that enormous West Texas night. Whistling bravely now, it hustled, to stop at the first siding, for an important string of tank cars. And at this point dark destiny, disguised as two guys in cowboy hats, climbed silently aboard.

Sleeping the uneasy sleep of the just-but-busted, in the smoking car ahead, little Mr. Wallace Weeble, of course, was not immediately aware that devious destiny was after him again.

His amazing, foot-long mustache writhed and bristled as he slept, and he made funny noises. He had the smoker all to himself tonight, bus competition being what it is. He did not see the shadow that came flickering in again, to dodge back this time even more hastily than it had at first. But he did vaguely feel the ten-gallon shadow of impending events that loomed suddenly over him.

Immediately, hard, hostile hands clipped his shoulders.

"Come alive, you little rat!" snarled a voice in his ear, and with a startled squeak Mr. Weeble tried to obey. For an instant, his mild, short-sighted eyes were so full of sleep and cinders he couldn't see. But above him was menace, he knew, blurringly resolving itself into two fat, red faces under cowboy hats.

"Yeah, it's him, all right." Scowling malevolently, the fatter face bent closer. "Disguised, huh, punk? Tryin' to kid us? Pull that phoney off his mug, Joe, I'll hold him."

"Okay." Laughing raucously, the other advanced a hamlike hand. "Off she comes. So-o!"

The hand caught Mr. Weeble's mustache and gave a terrific wrench.

"Ow-ooh!" The shriek of agony from little Mr. Weeble's throat would have split a heart of stone, but apparently these fiends' hearts weren't. With ferocious gurglings, the fatter face pushed him down again. "Pull harder, you dope!" it commanded. "Peel it right off." Enthusiastically, Fat Face II again tried to obey. And the effect was something like that of being on the bottom end of a bombing.

For now Mr. Weeble was wide awake, and aware of the insult and outrage. They were trying to pull his mustache off, under the impression it was false. It was an error better men than these had lived to repent —that is, if they had lived. Squawling the squawl of a highly enraged wildcat, little Mr. Weeble arose and exploded all over them.

FATTER FACE he butted furiously under the chin with the top of his head, simultaneously blasting a bootheel ankle deep into the paunch of Enemy the Second. A tornado of bony fists, knees, elbows and feet, he hit him at least five times more as that stricken casualty collapsed. Nor, meantime, was he neglecting Enemy the First in the least.

In one wild leap, he had mounted that mistaken menace's fat neck, and was riding him furiously and triumphantly to the floor.

Somewhere, far back in little Mr. Weeble's ancestry, undoubtedly there had been Vikings, as that wild mustache indicated. Perhaps behind them had been gorillas, or Great Whiskered Wauks. The mere idea of pulling the Great Wauk's whiskers, so anthropologists agree, undoubtedly was what made the cavemen cave.

Berserk, a roaring, crimson flame in his brain, Mr. Weeble rode his enemy into the ancient cigar butts and tobacco juice on the floor, batted his head against a seat stanchion, and kneed him in the wind as the horrified victim tried for a gun. And only then did he see the decoration on Fat Face's battered breast.

It was a shiny, nickeled star. An officer! Bank-bred, little Mr. Weeble's awe of the Law was awesome and then some. And here he was assaulting an officer. Two officers, in fact.

With a slashing sloosh of terror in his soul, Mr. Weeble didn't even pause to read the badge. He arose and went away from there, so fast that flaming mustache made him look like a tiny, two-tailed comet.

A hand caught at him as he lunged into the vestibule of the ancient coach, and a voice tried to say something, but Mr. Weeble's panic was entirely too stupendous. The train was starting up again. But the door was open. In one tremendous dive, Mr. Weeble hit the dirt running and lit out for oblivion.

"Hey!" the voice wailed shrilly, and over his shoulder he saw a dark figure drop from the quickening train, and dart after him. "Hey, wait!" it shouted again. And if Mr. Weeble had not been picking them up and laying them down like Seabiscuit sailing home, now he did.

But it was not dark enough in the raw, new freight yard to cloak his flight, nor could he outrun his shadow. There was just too much light, from all those gas flares and floodlights on drilling wells.

Frantic, Mr. Weeble cast a wild glimpse backward, simultaneously trying to double like a jackrabbit, and the result was not

happy. His toe taught. He did a tremendous somersault and the right-of-way came up with a smash.

When at last his agonized breath fought its way down lanes of fire to his lungs once more, his harrier was right over him.

"Now I hope you ain't went and hurt yo'self," it remarked, in an amazingly mild voice for a sheriff or something. "I wasn't tryin' to ketch yuh. Jest wanted to say thanks a heap, for takin' my part."

"Taking your—I beg pardon?" said Mr. Weeble faintly. The other man helped him sit up, solicitously recovering Mr. Weeble's battered derby. "Yes, sir, the way yuh jest up and down thet there Jug Anders was shore, shore purty to see," he breathed. "It shore was. Yuh see, them hellions was takin' you for me."

"They—they were?" Mr. Weeble gulped. "You—you mean you're wanted by—" Of a sudden, his breath went again, despite the fact he hadn't yet got it all back from his first surprise. A vagrant beam of light had just decided to tell all about the other man's face. And the stunned Mr. Weeble's impression was that he was looking at a mirror image of himself; or to make it even worse, an exact reflection of himself before he had dared sprout those whiskers.

"I had me a mustache, too, only it wouldn't stay stuck," informed the other man abruptly, and produced something resembling a dead mouse from his pocket. "See?" He held it against his nose with his upper lip, and Mr. Weeble closed his eyes with a faint moan.

"But mine is genuine, sir, absolutely genuine," he said indignantly, and caught his breath. "You—you are wanted by the law?"

"That's what I'd like to know," said the other man mournfully. His mustache fell off and he caught it, abstractedly chewing one end. "Yuh see, if that there Jug Anders *ain't* sheriff no more, than I suspect I ain't. But if he *is*, I am. And fer stealin' my own money, too, can yuh tie that!"

"I—uh?" said Mr. Weeble faintly.

"This here lawyer feller, Cantrell, says it's only that Lena's still after me for serious, but that's a'most twice worse'n the law." The other man shook his head, and tried the other end of his mustache. "Lena's the old battleaxe that married me, and put all my money in the bank in her name, yuh see. Uh, was you comin' down here lookin' for a job, by any chanct?"

"Why, I am at present unemployed," admitted Mr. Weeble. "But I—" In an eager, quivering rush, the other man was cutting in before he could go on.

"Then you—yo're open fer a real job? he'pin' a man git justice and anyways four-five million dollars? I—I—my hokeys, mister, the minute I seen yuh snoozin' there so peaceful in the train jest like me I knowed yuh'd been sent. And the way yuh up and fit that there Jug Anders! If it wasn't purty! I'm gonna pay yuh a bonus fer that, I am. I'm Mohair McGratin, yuh understand and I—what's yuh say yore name was?"

"The name is Weeble," informed Mr. Weeble, firmly under the impression by now that he was dealing with an escaped lunatic. "But really, Mr. McGuire, I can't—"

"McGratin!" exploded the false whiskered one. "Not McGuire. McGratin. Mohair McGratin! Great jumpin' galluses, Weeble, don't tell me yuh never heerd tell of me! Why I'm the man's wife they named this here oilfield for! I mean I'm the wife's man—oh, dang it, this here's my sheep ranch! If Lena ain't got it all away from me I own half the land this here oil pool's on, yes and I won't be dead till next Tuesday and not then if I dast git to court. You understand now?"

"I—I—oh, perfectly. Perfectly," said Mr. Weeble, in a faint gulp.

CONSIDERING the encouragement he was getting, this time he was going to outrun this gibbering ghost, he was certain. But perhaps Mr. McGratin was psychic or something, for immediately he caught Mr. Weeble's coattails in both hands.

"Wait a minute, now pardner, wait," he begged. "I ain't crazy. Even if I do sound thataway. I'm jest a sheepherder, can't he'p it. But I am Mohair McGratin and I can prove it. I ain't askin' you to do a thing illegal, jest go in and see if I can come in and claim my ranch without gittin' th'owed in jail. You he'p me and I—I'll shore make it worth yore while. I—well, come over here, come over, lookut."

Still holding firmly to Mr. Weeble's coat, he headed toward the nearest lights, on a drilling well perhaps a hundred yards away. Since it was the only coat he had, Mr. Weeble went with it. That was the direction he had intended running anyhow; and besides, now he was curious.

There was a fence around the well, but the floodlights lavished glare far past it, turning the night into unearthly day. Still cautiously holding Mr. Weeble's coattails, McGratin turned loose with one hand first to stick his disguising mustache on again, then to produce a crumpled wad of papers. And as he twisted, Mr. Weeble felt his fears vanish in a wave of almost pity.

Here in the extra illumination he could appreciate more than ever how amazingly much Mohair McGratin did look like him. But it was a resemblance of himself in a very weak moment, so Mr. Weeble added immediately. For plainly, Mohair McGratin was scared.

Behind those fake whiskers, he looked like an intimidated rabbit trying to hide in a hairbrush; and it was no wonder the officers hadn't been deceived. Or had been, rather. Of a sudden, Mr. Weeble realized this was getting all confused again, so he reached quickly for the documents Mohair was offering him.

These, with McGratin's additional explanations, at last made some sense of the matter.

It wasn't as complicated as it had seemed. Mohair McGratin, simple-minded sheep rancher had just made the mistake of marrying a wife, Lena who, by his telling, must have been the favorite child of the Furies. Amongst other little signs of affection, she had walloped him once with a wagon tongue, perhaps when her own was tired. She had also taken complete charge of all his money, depositing every penny he made from his goat ranch in the county seat bank to her own, personal account.

A meek little man, Mohair had stood it just so long, and then had taken horrid vengeance. He had forged her signature to a check, withdrawing the whole account, and with the aid of a gun had coaxed the banker into cashing it. Then, leaving Lena out there all alone with all those goats, he had happily lit out for liberty, strewing banknotes along the way. The money gone, he had disguised himself as "Bill Smith" and had found another sheep herding job—with an outfit so far back in the Rockies his sins had needed seven long years to smell him out.

In the batch of papers, along with deeds and abstracts, were tattered clippings from the advertising columns of various western newspapers, indicating that either the loving Lena had not given up without a struggle, or the law had thought that a fine way to catch a bank robber. There were some Advice to the Lovelorn columns, whose connection with the matter seemed somewhat remote. And finally, there was a month old letter from one T. C. Cantrell, Attorney, McGratin, Texas, addressed, so Mohair explained, to his late boss.

"And look how that there lawyer describes me," Mohair added bitterly. "Like I was a lost billygoat, and will party findin' me kindly notify owner! If still alive, it is very important I get ketched before the twenty-first, as then's when they're gonna settle my hash."

"It says, 'settle the estate,' in the letter here," corrected Mr. Weeble, and McGratin snorted.

"Same thing, ain't it? Or is it? That's what I want to know. And now I'm too skeered to go find out. Yuh see I telephoned that there lawyer from Denver, and he says I better slip down hyar quick and see him. We can fix thet old charge all hokey dokey, he says, but if yuh don't

come the court's gonna declare yo're dead and yore lovin' wife gits yore oil pool. Come on, I'll see yo're took care of."

Mr. McGratin took time out for a breath. "So I come. And lookut what happens on the train! Who told that there Jug Anders I was a comin', and is he still sheriff or ain't he? Before I go stickin' my head in ary trap, I wanta know. That's what I want you to do, go in and see that lawyer man. Lookin' as much like me as yuh do, if it's a trap yuh'll find it out and—"

"W-wait a minute!" cut in Mr. Weeble hastily. "One minute! Just because I look like you, why you want me to stick my head in what may be a trap, and see if I get it bitten off? No sir! Positively! I—"

"Skeered uh them two fatheads, are yuh?" inquired Mohair. "After the way they like to pulled yore whiskers right off yore head, too! Skeered! Why I wouldn't 've thought—"

"No, I'm not scared," snapped Mr. Weeble, with dignity. "But after assaulting officers of the law—"

"But I tell yuh, they ain't officers," broke in Mohair. "Leastways, I'm practically shore they ain't. They're private detectives now, or mebbe just plain kidnappers, workin' fer Lena. And anyways, it was me they thought you was, wasn't it? Can't you prove positive yuh ain't me?"

"Well, I—I do have a strawberry mark on my abdomen," admitted Mr. Weeble, blushing. "But I—"

"That's fine, fine!" applauded Mr. McGratin enthusiastically. "I ain't. If yuh have to, yuh can up'n prove yuh ain't me in one shake of a shirt tail, so to speak. Course Lena would know yo're some other feller first look, but Lena's livin' in Californy, this here lawyer said. He'll think yo're me. Yuh jest show him this letter and find out what's what, and then yuh come tell me if it's safe fer me to come in. And if it is, I—I—by gonnies, I'll make yuh wagon boss uh my oilfield, I will! Yes sir, and look at this. Here's five dollars down."

BEFORE Mr. Weeble could frame a protest, the other man was chinking five silver dollars into his palm. Honest little soul that he was, he got out a, "B-but, sir! How on earth do you know you can trust me?" Mr. Mohair McGratin squelched that with a genial wave.

"Ho! Weeble, the very minute I laid eyes on yuh I knowed I could! I say to myself, I says, Mohair, that there's the handsomest, honestest face yuh ever seen outside a mirror, yes and a man to trust. Ain't I right, now? Ain't I? It's a deal, and you'll do it?"

"Why, I—yes," quavered Mr. Weeble, and stiffened, with sudden resolution.

After all, five dollars in hand was exactly five more than he had. A bright, silver vision was sailing through his mind. Wagon boss of an oilfield, right bower to a millionaire. Risk to it? But of course, there was always risk to adventure!

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Weeble decisively. "You've hired you a man. It's a deal, sir, and a good deal!"

"I knowed you'd say that! I knowed it!" Jubilantly, Mr. McGratin tried to twirl his mustache, which immediately fell off again. "Dang the thing!" he dismissed it, with a grand gesture. "Come on. Now we got 'er all settled, le's go hide. Dropped my warbag off back hyar when I clumb off after yuh, and there's a cave over here where we can cache. Dandiest cave yuh ever seen, too, where ol' Don Pedro Garcia Agua Caliente y Fria, use tuh own this ranch, hid his gold out, they say."

"You don't tell me!" A sudden, intrigued prickling in those lief-as-not whiskers of his own, Mr. Weeble yielded to the urging hand. "This was an old Spanish ranch?"

"I'll tell a pig it was!" agreed Mr. McGratin elegantly. "Wait'll yuh see my ol' ranch house. If they ain't tore it down. Built by ol' Don Pedro, it was, with portholes and secret rooms and a dang dungeon—oh, everything! Even includin' gold buried under it, yeah. Black gold, three thousand feet down!"

A gleam in his mild eyes, Mr. Weeble peered at the lights of the boom town

ahead. The smell of gold, yellow and/or black; and fortune smiling. Those whiskers weren't all he had inherited from those far gone forebears. The old Norse nose for loot went along with the whiskers too, in close connection.

"I—I shall be charmed to inspect your rancho, Mr. McGratin," said Mr. Weeble enthusiastically. "Yes indeed. And if they've torn it down, sir, we'll just make them build it back."

BUT at nine o'clock next morning Mr. Weeble's enthusiasm had gone somewhere, possibly into safe and sane hibernation or something, back in the cave with Mr. McGratin. At least, it wasn't with Mr. Weeble.

Off to the wars, Mr. Weeble had marched into town, to discover they most distinctly had not torn down Mr. McGratin's old Spanish rancho. With boom town sentimentality they had, instead, just made an office building out of it, right in the middle of the toadstool town. And attorney T. C. Cantrell's office, as a sign proclaimed, was the middle hole in the ancient wall.

In other words, to find the man he sought, Mr. Weeble must go smack into loving Lena's parlor, or approximately that; and what such a ferocious female might do to a stand-in for her husband was too, too awful to think about. True, Mohair McGratin and a hamburger stand man on the way in as well had been fairly sure Lena was in California now. But suppose she wasn't?

On the other hand, to stand here with feet frozen to the street was well nigh as perilous. Any minute now the almost as bad Jug Anders might heave in sight. Jug, the hamburger man had said, no longer was county sheriff, and in that Mohair had guessed right. But Mr. Anders had been hired by the townsite company, as the nearest thing to a John Law unincorporated McGratintown had. He sure wasn't much Law, the hamburger man opined frankly, but he was some. And the more Mr. Weeble thought about it, the some-er he got.

So, with a fluttery sigh, Mr. Weeble scuttled timidly into the spider's parlor.

Originally a bedroom or something of the old ranch house, the room was so dusky that for a moment he could see only blurs. But then the blurs resolved themselves into a desk and chairs, serving as settings for a hawk nosed hombre in a loud, plaid suit.

"Yeah? Somethin'?" said the hombre languidly. And then his chairlegs hit the floor with a bang, and all glittery grin, here he came.

"Well, by Godfrey, if I ain't mistaken it—it's"—his voice dropped suddenly to a stage whisper—"Mohair McGratin, eh?" With a tongue-tied gulp, Mr. Weeble held out the letter that had lured the real McGratin home to his fate, fabulous or otherwise.

"Yuh don't have to lie and tell him yo're me if you don't wanta," Mohair had said. "Jest leave him think yuh are till he tips his hand, that's all. Then come tell me." And that was just what Mr. Weeble was trying to do.

"I—uh—you're Mr. Cantrell?" he stammered and turned loose of his end of the envelope only at the other man's emphatic nod. "I—uh—your letter—boss passed it on to me, and—"

Paralysis enfolded Mr. Weeble's vocal chords at this point, but the effect was all right, he judged. Attorney Cantrell obviously was leaping to the right conclusion. He was also leaping, or practically that, to close and lock the door.

"You sure nobody saw you come in?" he asked in that same highly impressive whisper. "Sure? Fine! We've got to be mighty careful, you realize, mightly careful. That old charge—" He came solemnly back, waving Mr. Weeble to a chair, and sitting down himself at the desk. "They're pretty sure you're dead, but that old charge is still hanging, you know," he added, and clucked his tongue against his horse teeth. "Bank robbery, you know. Mighty, mighty serious. But don't you worry a bit, if you've done what I told you, we'll fix you right up, yes sir."

Leisurely, he delved into a drawer, still dribbling conversation out of the corner

of his mouth. "And of course you haven't told a soul here who you really are? Naturally, naturally. All right, Mr. McGratin, one moment now and I believe I'm going to have a surprise for you."

Producing what evidently was an ancient photograph he compared it with Mr. Weeble's quivering countenance a long moment or so before nodding with sudden satisfaction. "Yep, yep, it's you," he said decisively. "Those glasses and that phoney foliage are pretty slick, but the trained, legal eye, my good man, isn't fooled a minute. Now if you'll just step in here—" He got up, starting toward an inner door.

"That mustache isn't—ahump!" said Mr. Weeble tartly, remembering just in time he was supposed to be playing a part here, and not starting a fight on his own Norse hook. Obediently, he started toward the door, then balked. "Yes, and wait a minute! Before I go a step farther, what sir, are your intentions? I don't propose—"

"Just steppin' in here where we'll be real private, pardner," cooed Cantrell soothingly, and swung the door wide. "Comin'? Well, then, if I gotta explain things to you right here and now—"

WITH a reptilian writhe, he flicked a flat, ugly automatic out of his pocket, pointing its muzzle precisely at Mr. Weeble's wishbone. "Surprise! Surprise!" His voice was a snarl. "You dumb cluck! Go on, paddle through that door! Quick!" The gun prodded savagely, and perforce Mr. Weeble paddled, with his mind turning horrified handsprings.

"But I—I don't understand," he quavered faintly, and drew in return a nasty:

"Yeah? You don't need to understand nothin', shepherd. All right, now down the steps there, see? Since you didn't have sense enough to stay dead, why we're just gonna help you, ain't that nice of us? You little boob, did you actually think anybody'd help you sneak back here and cut yourself in on five million dollars worth of oil land!"

"You—you mean you're taking me for a—a oneway walk?" Mr. Weeble swayed, utterly stunned. He had been prepared for chicanery, of course, but not at all for any such flat, cold blooded murderousness as this. For Cantrell was assenting, with positive cheeriness.

"Yep, that's right, shep. And what a big help you been, sneakin' in all by yourself like this. Now you're just goin' to be the missin' man permanent, and what a relief that'll be! G'wan, down the steps!"

"Why you unregenerate scoundrel, sir, I believe you mean it!" exploded Mr. Weeble and balked, despite the viciously prodding gun. At the foot of the narrow stairs was the Stygian blackness, evidently, of a cellar. He just wasn't going down there, no matter what. Red mustache bristling like an angry tomcat's, he turned, fairly spitting defiance.

"It's a pleasure to confound you, sir, but you certainly are not going to kill me. Because I am not Mohair McGratin. I'm not your man, do you understand that? I'm merely Mr. McGratin's agent and if you think—"

"Tryin' to kid the troop, are you, shep?" cut in Cantrell cynically, and dealt out a sudden shove that nearly landed Mr. Weeble head first at the bottom of the stairs. "G'wan, get in there! Or I'll let you have it right here on the steps." A switch clicked and a light came languidly on in the dank cellar, silhouetting Mr. Weeble, as he realized, into a perfect target. Desperately, he tried again:

"Just the same, I'm not McGratin, and I can prove it! Bring in anybody that knew Mr. McGratin personally and see what they say. You reprobate, you've betrayed your evil schemes, just exactly as Mr. McGratin suspected you would. Now if I don't come back Mr. McGratin will take the proper steps against you and—well, my good man, I warn you! Harm a hair of my head and it'll hang you!"

"Oh yeah?" snarled Cantrell, but it was plain he was impressed. He stared for a moment, slit-eyed. "By gad, at that, it's just about goofy enough for that crazy coot to have thought of," he conceded at last, venomously. "All right, shep, I will bring

somebody down here to be sure you're you, and you better be. Because if you ain't—well, there's gonna be two missin' men, that's all. You and him too."

With which cheery promise, he frisked Mr. Weeble cautiously for a weapon, then backed to the door again, glowering his malevolence.

"If you ain't him, you better be ready to squeal, too, when I come back," he advised, as a parting thought. "Because if yuh don't— All right, bozo, all right." The door thudded to behind him, the lock rasped, and Mr. Weeble was left alone with his frightened meditations.

QUIVERING, he looked about him, like a scared Scottie, and then sat down, in the exact center of the floor. The status of his knees made the move seem advisable. His one hysterical thought for the moment was that this was just simply too, too awful. Or, if possible, even more so.

He had expected, at worst, no more than a brief flurry with the law, with its necessity for identifying himself easily and definitely as not Mohair McGratin. But here, very obviously, he had tangled instead with oil country gangsters, and of the chilliest, deadliest kind.

Black, plain murder had glittered in that lawyer's eyes—if he was a lawyer. The missing Mohair McGratin certainly had not been dumb, in hiring and sending in a stand-in first, to see what happened. But, as certainly, Mr. Weeble had been a cluck, to accept the job, and now he was appreciating that fact. The more he thought about it, the more scared he got.

Still, Mohair McGratin had not misrepresented the job, and he had trusted Mr. Weeble implicitly. On first sight, he had done that, and to the extent of five dollars. Knowing Mr. Weeble could betray him, he was waiting out there in that cave. And at the thought, all feverish, Mr. Weeble was on his feet again, scouring his prison like a trapped lynx.

Somehow, he must get out of here before they came back, for he had virtually as much as said he knew where Mohair was. And, plainly enough also, the slit-eyed Cantrell had promised torture to extract that secret. Mr. Weeble didn't think they could pry it out of him; but he wasn't in the least anxious to find out. Besides, tell or not, it was his neck in the noose. "Two missin' men," Cantrell had said, and Mr. Weeble believed him.

But a frantic, inch-by-inch inspection of his cell disclosed practically nothing whatever to cheer him.

Plainly a part of the old rancho building, this dungeon cellar had been constructed by the Spanish dons to hold whatever they'd intended it to hold, evidently. The ancient door was solid oak, and the walls were stone blocks that looked to weigh a half ton apiece. Desperate, Mr. Weeble came back to the center again, under the dusty, discouraged light bulb, which somebody had wired down through a minute crack as a boom town "improvement."

And at this point, Destiny sent a bug.

Quite appropriately, he was a Spanish-looking bug, with a revolutionary expression, and long, fuzzy feelers, curiously like an anarchist's whiskers. Nor was he in the least scared of anything, apparently.

When Mr. Weeble spied him, he stopped, but he did so with a highly insulting gesture, or at any rate what resembled one. He did it again, too, when Mr. Weeble started toward him. And then, with leisurely dignity, he retreated into a corner and vanished, seemingly right through solid, crackless stone.

Startled, Mr. Weeble dropped to his hands and knees to examine that corner at the foot range that was the optimum for his short sighted eyes. When he had thumped and tapped that corner just a moment before he hadn't spotted even the ghost of a crack. But one was there now, just the same, extending three feet up from the floor. It widened, as Mr. Weeble pushed, and abruptly, the fuzzy bug came out again, this time face high.

He all but stepped on Mr. Weeble's startled whiskers, as he backpeddled frantically and vanished, again with that deri-

sive flirt of his feelers. But this time Mr. Weeble didn't mind in the least. For the bottom stone on the right of the corner was swinging inward. "Secret rooms and everything," Mohair McGratin had said; and here, right under Mr. Weeble's startled eyes a bug was showing where.

Behind the panel was darkness and space. A faint, warm breath fanned softly across Mr. Weeble's face, fresh air unmistakably, albeit faintly branded with a musky pungence.

Wildly excited, he rocked back on his heels, heart pounding. Here was the way out, or at least a secret room in which to hide until he could work his way free. He fumbled for a match, found one. And then a faint noise, apparently from the stairs, sent him plunging into frantic action.

Whirling, he snapped off the light, then scrambled frantically back to the narrow opening, and crammed himself through. There was no further noise from the stairs, no rasp of key in the lock, he realized, as he crouched, trembling, in the inkiness behind that panel. His captor wasn't returning—yet. But that lack of light in the cellar would delay him at least a little while when he did come back, maybe give Mr. Weeble a vital, extra minute or two. And meantime, he could, of course, strike a match. He struck one, twisting to inspect his new quarters with wide, hopeful eyes.

IT was not just a room, but instead a passage, curving away to the left, a rough, narrow tunnel hewn through the rock. Beyond doubt, the old Spanish dons had built it as a last way of escape should vengeful Indians burn the place over their heads. The secret panel itself was simplicity personified, just a thin, hinged block of stone, with no trick catches, weights or anything. Apparently its innocent appearance, plus the fact that it was 'way down low, like a doghouse door, in the corner, had been concealment enough in Don Pedro's opinion. So, propping a fallen bit of stone to help hold it shut, Mr. Weeble lit his second match and started out.

Forgotten no telling how long, the passage was all but choked with dust and fallen debris. But, definitely, it slanted upward. It couldn't be very deep under the surface, Mr. Weeble was sure. And within twenty feet, he had confirming evidence.

Daylight was seeping around a corner ahead, daylight, vague, yet unmistakable. A draft, thick with that pungent scent blew his last match out, but Mr. Weeble didn't even notice. Joyously, he was driving forward in a scrambling, plunging dive, around the corner—to stop with a faint gasp.

Directly ahead, the thin roof had caved in, blocking the passage, but letting in a ragged triangle of branch and bramble-laced sunlight, at the top of a ragged, rock and rubble slide. Probably a man could claw and wriggle his way out there in a mere matter of minutes, even perhaps seconds, so Mr. Weeble knew instantly, desperately, wistfully. But that wasn't the point. At the bottom of the slide was devious Destiny's last little joker, a small, casual animal with a hostile glint in his eyes and a general attitude of being perfectly fit to fight. He was a male skunk; and whatever Mr. Weeble's unfamiliarity with other forms of dangerous big game, about polecats he knew only too much.

"I—uh—shoo!" he said feebly. Yawning, the polecat stood up, lifted its battle flag, turned sideways with a coldly calculating squint, and Mr. Weeble did a frantic back flip away from there. Safe around the corner, he stopped and peeped fearfully back. The polecat wasn't pursuing, which was something. But neither was he leaving, which was everything. He was calmly sitting down again, apparently well satisfied and proposing to settle permanent.

Human skunks at one end, the genuine at the other, Mr. Weeble was caught.

Trapped, caught cold! For a moment, the wild idea of throwing rocks at the polecat skittered hysterically through his brain, but he gave that up pronto. The asphyxiating results in this narrow vault would be just too awful. A vague, muffled noise behind him set him whirling in sheer panic.

And then, all ajitter, he was racing back for the panel.

Sooner or later, he was frenziedly sure, that polecat could go away, or maybe he could think of something. But, meantime, if Cantrell and company discovered his escape, and found the secret door as well, why he was sunk. Sunk and then some. He must at least brace that panel.

Stumbling, falling, barking his knees, he had reached the panel and was just tugging a jagged, fallen rock fragment toward it when he heard the lock rasp on the cellar door, and then Cantrell's startled roar.

"Look out, Jug! He's up to something! The light—where's that flashlight of yours, Anders, quick? McGratin, you whiskered fool, where—"

There was swift, trampling confusion in the cellar and the sweep of a flashlight. Mr. Weeble caught that under the bottom of his panel.

PARALYZED with fright, he was jammed against the little door, wondering why the loud backfiring of his heart didn't betray him immediately. Another voice broke in, hard, angry, one he didn't recognize, and then still another, unmistakably that of the ogre of the smoker, the Fat Face fall guy Mohair had identified as Jug Anders.

"But there ain't anybody in here, Cantrell! You big yap, was there ever?"

"There was a little hellion in here, and you heard me unlock that door, didn't you?" blazed Cantrell. "He was here, Mohair McGratin or a dead ringer, handlebar mustache a foot long—"

"Red whiskers?" Jug Anders was breaking in. "Oh, oh! That wasn't him in the red whiskers on the train last night, neither. I know it wasn't! And now he ain't in a solid rock room neither, I—I—fellers, I don't like this! I don't like—"

"If you two, either of you, had the brain of a bat, you wouldn't of made such a howling mess of it," flared the third voice furiously. "He was on that train, the real McGratin. I know he was, a man of mine that knows him personal saw him get on! And then you, Jug, you blasted fool—"

"But that wasn't Mohair, I tell yuh!" Mr. Anders was getting all heated now, and correspondingly addled. "That wasn't him and suppos'n I had left him come into town? Hell, if yore man knowed him, somebody here'd recognized him sure, wouldn't they? Yeah, and in two minutes he'd knowed wasn't no charge agin him at all. And, boy, when he found out you can't produce Miz McGratin in court, neither, because she's dead and you ain't told—"

"Shut up! Shut up, you loose-mouthed fool!" That was Cantrell, frothing mad, by the sound. "We've got to find—Oh, oh! Hear that!"

"That," was the panel door, softly clicking the last quarter inch, tight shut. Perhaps a treacherous bit of grit had held it momentarily against Mr. Weeble's rigid weight. Freezing solid with supreme horror, he had felt it give. The tiny impact had all but splintered him just like an icicle. They'd heard him, he'd betrayed himself.

"Shut that stairs door, Jug, quick! Lock it. He ain't got away, the dirty little fuzz face. He's hid right here in the walls, that was him. I'd heard there was a secret closet somewheres in this old dump, place the old Spaniards use to hide their gold. It's down here, he's in it, and we got him! Where'd that click come from, which wall?"

"Why, I couldn't tell." That was the unknown, third man stammering. "But how—how do you know—" Cantrell's voice slashed him off like a slashing razor.

"Only answer there could be, you dumb idiot! He was here. Couldn't have unlocked the door. No way out. Swing that flashlight. Jug, you loose-jawed oaf, quick! Wherever it sounds hollow-- Quick, dammit, don't you realize there's millions at stake!"

Swift, exploratory thumping and hammering began on the walls, and in his black cell Mr. Weeble went down the last degree, to desperate, absolute zero. The irony of it all! Here, at the last, the information he wanted had been fairly dropped into his lap. No charge whatever still standing against McGratin. Mrs. McGratin dead, which meant not only that Mohair was

free, but also that, somehow, these scoundrels were illegally diverting a fortune.

Freedom and fortune, the key in Mr. Weeble's hands; and here he was, trapped.

Peril before, a polecat behind, and destiny balancing the scales. In brief moments, seconds probably, they'd find that panel, Mr. Weeble knew. Not a chance to bar it now. But maybe, maybe the polecat was gone, maybe the thumping would cover the slight noise of his retreat, maybe he could squirm through that tiny hole in time. Frantic, tiptoe, he slithered back to the shielding corner.

And the pestiferous skunk was still there.

HE was nearly to the corner, in fact, rocking morosely on the balls of his feet. He knew Mr. Weeble was back. He looked up at him, with one calculating eye. Languidly, like a lord to a lackey, he waved with his tail a "Scram, you! Or else!" And it was the last straw.

Berserk, a blaze in his brain and a scream in his soul, Mr. Weeble leaped like a pouncing tiger. Before the startled skunk could even squeak, he was swinging crazily in air, nose down, short legs pawing crazily. Mr. Weeble had him by the tail.

But nothing too horrible happened immediately, so with a gasping breath he straightened. Desperation personified, his act still had not been madness supreme. He had heard that if you just catch a polecat by his tail, the little fellow is unable to engage effectively in his natural propensities. Apparently it was so. But, as Mr. Weeble was just poignantly appreciating, the catch is in the uncatching; just as in holding a bear's tail so he can't bite. Nor was destiny done.

From behind came a sudden, hollow thump and a muffled, triumphant yell. "Here it is, boys! Hollow! Kick it open! Kick!" Red mustache flaring like the oriflamme of Olaf the Offal, Mr. Weeble turned at bay.

There were three courses from which to choose, and he conned them in one lightning look. There was the narrow opening above him, through which maybe he could throw the polecat, maybe he could himself escape in time. There was the possibility that he could just toss the infuriated beastie back around the corner, and squirm out before asphyxiating. Finally, there was the forlorn course, the heroic choice, the unwobbling way of the Weebles dead and gone. Mr. Weeble never hesitated.

Back there were pursuers to stop, yes, and an unknown who most certainly should be branded for future identification. How he reached that door intact, Mr. Weeble never knew. But he did, with the enraged kittie still hanging fire, still vainly trying to climb his own frame. Almost in their faces, the panel burst open, flashlight glare slashed in, and with it, the cry:

"There he is, boys! Got him, by gad!"

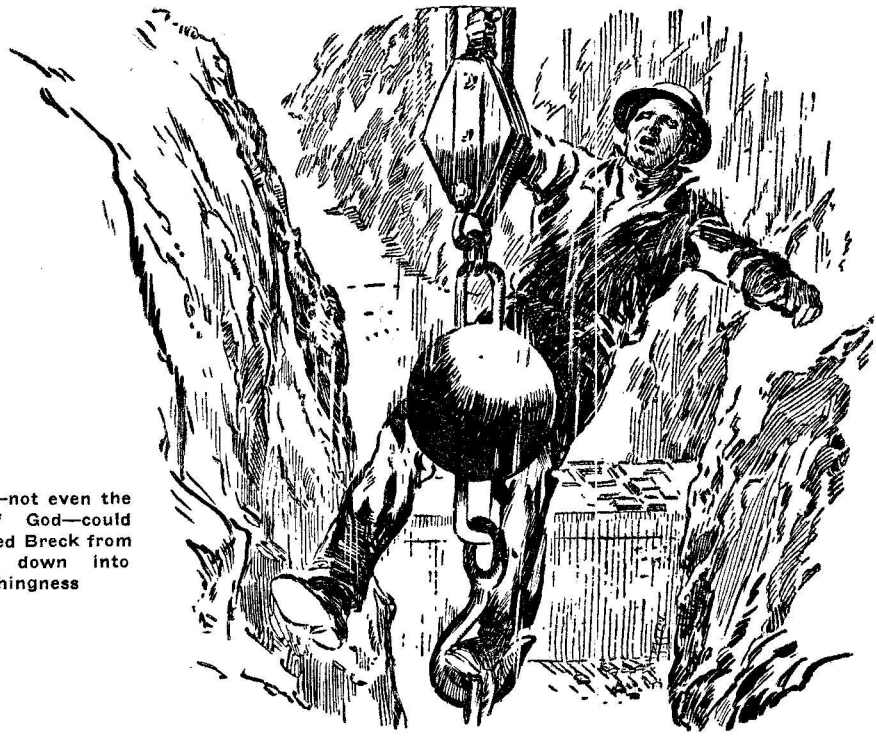
"Yes, boys, here he is!" said Mr. Weeble happily, and let fly.

Almost, but not quite in time, then, he had slammed the panel shut. Almost in time to escape the backfire. But that polecat certainly had been hung on a hair trigger. Howling horror behind, and his own stomach turning outside loops inside, Mr. Weeble whirled, smiling blissfully.

It had been just perfect, he knew, as he staggered back up the passage. Smack into somebody's squatting middle, he had pitched that cat—into Cantrell's, he hoped. It was over. No need for hurry now, inside or out there would not no pursuit, and perhaps it was just as well. It took him five sweating, squirming minutes to claw through that hole, up into sunlit freedom in a mesquite clump, just back of the house. Twenty minutes later, at the mouth of the canyon cave, he was peering into the anxious eyes of Mohair McGratin.

"Well, did yuh—" began Mr. McGratin, then caught his first dull whiff and turned pale. "Uh-ugh, ph-ew-w! Wha—Who in the hell yuh been associatin' with!"

"Would you smell a gift horse in the mouth, Mr. McGratin?" asked Mr. Weeble serenely. "I'm bringing you fortune, my dear sir! Fame, freedom and five million dollars!"



Nothing—not even the hand of God—could have saved Breck from crashing down into nothingness

Wild River

By JOHN STROMBERG

WHEN Speed Foley went to work on Hoover Dam—they called it that when construction started—he was a brash youngster fresh out of college determined to make good on a boast he had made in front of his girl, Janet Collins, and Buck Naylor, a self-satisfied engineer already working on the dam.

With the civil service lists full and the petty jobs pretty well in the hands of politicians, Speed has no luck until, through the intervention of Professor Collins, Janet's father, he is hired as chief-driller Danny Henderson's helper.

At Hagtown he gets into a fight with a bearded stranger, who is down on his luck and desperate because of his wife's illness. After the fight, Speed discovers his wallet is missing and he accuses the bearded man. He has made a bitter enemy, even if, when they meet later at the dam, Speed doesn't recognize Sam Breck as the man he fought with.

A year makes many changes in Speed. His work is hard, and the men, sensing he is not one of them, resent him. Breck in particular seems to have it in for him. For the first time Speed has glimpsed a world beyond the campus and the quiet streets of his hometown—a world where men fight and sweat and sometimes die to earn their living. A world run by what Joe Mendel, a Ph. D. who has been forced to take a clerical job, calls the System. Speed discovers that he is something known as a Bourgeois—belonging neither to one side nor the other, and pretty apt to catch it in the neck when there is trouble. The only loyalty he can have, Speed figures, is to himself.

JANET when she meets him on the street doesn't recognize him. Something is different between them. She senses and fears Speed's new bitterness and hardness; and Speed, jealous of Naylor and his soft engineer's berth, is surly and resentful.

Then Danny Henderson is killed in a tunnel crash, and Speed is the only one who can say whether Danny was in Arizona or Nevada—they were working almost on the Line—when he died. This is highly important to the Company. For a shyster lawyer is pressing Danny's daughter's claim for compensation and the Arizona courts are certain to award higher damages than Nevada's.

Speed knows that Danny was on the Arizona side of the line—but he cannot decide whose side *he is on.* The chief tries to get him to promise not to testify; Mendel taunts Speed with having sold out to the Company—and Speed in turn accuses Mendel of being an anti-Company spy.

TO GET things straight with himself and to recover from the injuries he received in the accident, Speed goes home. He finds his father sympathetic and interested, but unable to be of much help. "This is your fight, Speed. And the Foleys always fight their own battles."

Speed goes to see Janet—but she has troubles of her own. The professor is suffering from cancer. An operation is imperative, but the doctors are not certain that his heart will bear the strain. Speed comforts her as well as he can.

Suddenly Speed, who is telling the story, sees that the only wrong thing for a man to do is to drift, and so he decides to return to the dam and lick his troubles there . . .

CHAPTER XIII

BRAWL

THE way was familiar now. I went by train, and I could sleep most of the time. The desert was a harmless panorama, and the train was full of tourists, and I was amused. They thought Nevada was a desolate, wild country, and they thought Las Vegas was a picturesque and sinful town. Some of them turned aside to see a modern wonder. Boulder City was an orderly, neat village now; but I, Al Foley, the old-timer, could remember the good old days—two years ago, when it was a roaring camp.

I had to have an official pass to stay there overnight. The clerk at the hotel explained about sightseeing tours, official, strictly regulated and controlled. I didn't mind; I knew the reason for it. Men at work couldn't be bothered with tourists.

Even the Government could not subdue the vast, wild flame of a desert sunset, and I knew my way about. It was too late to see the Boss tonight. I had no room in a dormitory, and the restaurants were full of tourists, but my legs by habit took me to the mess hall, where men swarmed like ants and were identified by numbers. Only the man at the door, who took my tourist dollar instead of a number, knew that I was not a member of the swarm.

I saw Joe Mendel at a distant table, and went over and sat down beside him, saying, "Gangway for a tourist!"

Oddly, Joe was not surprised to see me. Joe said acidly, "You're prompt."

"How do you mean?" I said, reaching for platters with the best of them.

"That's right, play innocent!" said Mendel, and got up and moved to another table.

Joe had always been too passionate in arguments, but this was something more. I finished eating soberly. I followed him to the vast and crowded recreation hall; I saw him trying to avoid me, but I pushed into the crowd where he had vanished, and said lightly, "Come outside. I want to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you."

"Snap out of it," I urged, reminding him: "You're not in a position to get haughty."

"I leave that to members of your class."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it. I leave doublecrossing to you and yours, but I advise you to be civil."

Nothing could be private here. Joe glanced around him, and saw strangers, but saw friendly faces too. He said defiantly, "If you've got threats to make, friend Foley, you can make them here."

"No threats. I'm not the superintendent of your conscience; all I want is information. That's your specialty, if I remember."

Voices muttered, "So that's Foley, is it?"

And I never had been popular with stiffs, but now I had too much attention. Men laid down their billiard cues to listen.

I said soberly, "I judge they've found old Danny's body. On the wrong side of the line—for you."

"As if you didn't know!" said Mendel bitterly.

"What makes you think I know?"

"You'd hardly be here if you didn't. You expect us to believe the cossacks didn't notify you?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe. I came to get a job."

"You'll get your job, all right. You've proved yourself a good bootlicker."

"Yeah?" I said. "I wish you weighed twenty pounds more."

THEN Sam Breck elbowed through the crowd, black-browed and glowering. He growled, "Well, I weigh plenty. Talk to me, smart boy."

"Who asked you into this?"

"I asked myself. I ain't no flunky like some people."

"Ask yourself right out. I'm talking to a friend."

"If you mean me," said Mendal, "you're mistaken."

I saw that. Our friendship always had been queer, uncertain, based on disagreement. We could argue without fighting; Mendel didn't live by his reflexes, as I did. Joe Mendel lived by words.

"Okay," I said. "So I'm mistaken. I've been wrong to treat you as a friend. We're enemies, and I can tell just anything I know. Is that the way you want it?"

"I—I don't mean that exactly."

"Sure you do," growled Breck, shouldering in. "This guy can't bluff you."

I stepped back. A voice jeered in falsetto, "Let-a me out! The party's a-gettin' rough!"

That was Faroni—Nick Faroni, called, for some odd reason, "Fingers" by the men who knew him well. I snapped, "Hello, Nick. Haven't the G-men got you yet?"

Only a wisecrack; "G-men" was a new word then, and Nick Faroni had been around Boulder City as long as I had, but it seemed to excite him. He demanded hoarsely, "Whatta ya mean, the G-men?"

"Stick around," I said hastily, "and I'll explain it after school."

I had to be hasty; Breck was grunting, "If you're huntin' trouble, smart boy, here she comes!"

It wasn't courtesy, that warning; he had lunged before he spoke.

But I knew better than to let Sam Breck get close enough to use his weight. I knew he'd rush me—leading with his right, his jaw wide open to a counter-punch, but I cared not hit with my crippled hand.

I slowed him with one left jab as I leaped away. Voices exploded in a joyous roar; "Fight! Fight!" somebody pushed me from behind, tried to deliver me into Breck's vengeful arms; but I whirled around the man and threw him into Breck's path and grabbed a billiard cue from the nearest table, snapped it over my knee and clubbed Sam Breck with the shortened butt.

Joe Mendel squalled, "Faroni!"

Sam Breck's charging weight had crashed me against the table, but it saved my life. Hot lightning grazed my ribs, and a knife flashed upward past my face, slashing my shirt from belt to shoulder. Without volition, while the hand hung poised, I struck with the cue-butt.

Nick Faroni screamed. Voices were roaring and men coming at me, and I yelled at the top of my lungs. No need to care whose head I hit; I had no friends. No need to worry about direction, with the solid table at my back, my muscles free of my uncertain brain. But it was something else that had made me happy. The polished cue-butt, smaller than a baseball bat, was in my right hand, yet the fingers gripped it firmly. I was not a cripple!

Happiness surged up my arm at the solid impacts, and the cue-butt flickered like a magic flame. One man crashed through it and grappled with me, and I drove him back with the jagged end. That loaded bit of wood was a wicked weapon.

Somebody tried to get me from behind,

swinging a full-length cue across the table, but the eyes in front gave warning and I ducked. I saw the man. There was space around me, and I grabbed up a ball and threw it.

Bull's-eye! It felt good to be throwing. If I missed one man, I hit another, and the range was a good deal shorter than from third to first. The range increased as the crowd stampeded, but it didn't matter. I was out of ammunition, anyway. The battle had lasted perhaps a minute.

SHOCKED police pushed through the crowd. A thing like this had seldom happened since the bad old days—two years ago.

It looked like a free-for-all; the police refused to believe that all this damage was one man's doing.

Breck demanded, "What did he hit me with?"

Patterson cried, "Look out for that guy, he's nuts! I tried to take it away from him and he stabbed me with it!"

Faroni moaned, "He brok-a my arm!"

I knew how it felt to be crippled, and I admitted, "I'm sorry, Nick."

"Not yet, you ain't!"

"Shut up," said the police. "Is this your knife?"

"Not-a mine!" said Faroni, shuddering. That knife was very illegal—with a blade six inches long and razor-sharp, snapped open by a button.

"Yours?"

I sighed, "Be reasonable. You think I tried to rip up my own guts?"

"Who did?"

I admitted truthfully, "I don't see."

"Whose knife is this?"

Nobody seemed to know.

"Who threw these pool balls?"

I admitted, "I did."

"And slugged all these guys?"

"I guess I did."

"All by yourself?" said the police, sarcastic. "What a man!"

Ed Patterson insisted, "The guy went nuts, I tell you!"

And I couldn't speak of the secret joy I felt in the use of my scarred right hand. I couldn't tell them that something had washed away uncertainty. No use to wonder where I was coming out; I had to keep going. I grinned, admitting, "Well, nobody offered to help me."

"You just took a notion to clean out the joint?"

"I wouldn't call it a notion. They tried to gang me."

"What about?"

"I guess they just don't like my face."

"I'll say we don't," growled Breck.

"Shut up," said the police. "Where do you work?"

"I don't. I'm just a tourist."

"He's a liar!" said Sam Breck.

"Shut up. . . . Let's see your pass."

It was all in order. One of the policemen said, "I thought so! Didn't you use to work here?"

"Is there a law against it?"

"There's a law against startin' a riot."

"I didn't start it."

"Well, who did?"

"I don't know—all these fellows."

"He's a stiff, all right," said a bored policeman. "That's the old song and dance. Nobody don't know nothin' about nothin'. We'll just have to run 'em all in."

Oh, not literally; the jail was smaller than the recreation hall. They rounded up the ones who bore marks of battle, including me. I argued fruitlessly, "Since when is there a law against self-defense?"

"Who says it was self-defense?"

Joe Mendel met my gaze with stony eyes and did not speak. I wasn't afraid of jail; I'd been in jail and it hadn't killed me. But I had no job. I'd be expelled from the Reservation before I got a chance to see the Boss. I grinned and said, "Ask Mendel. He can tell you."

Joe said stonily, "Afraid I don't know much about it. I know Foley, yes. I happened to be talking with him when he ran amuck—I don't know why."

"Just tell them what we were talking about."

"I don't remember."

"Well, I do."

And Mendel weakened, faltering, "It's true that they—tried to gang him. He had words with Breck, and—"

Sam Breck roared, "He hit me first!"

"But who swung first?" I said. "Don't choke, Joe. Tell them."

"Breck," said Mendel faintly.

CHAPTER XIV

JOBS ARE TROUBLE, TOO

QUEERLY, though, he waited and walked back to the hotel with me. The fire had faded from my veins, and I felt low. The swing shift had come in and the graveyard gone; the stars were calm over Boulder City, and the tourists were asleep. Joe told me bitterly, "I hope you're satisfied."

"I only asked you to tell the truth."

"More than you've done."

I snorted, "You don't want it done about yourself; only about Henderson. You never gave me a chance to tell you I was going to do it."

"Eh?" said Mendel, stopping short in the starlight.

"But it seems I was wrong. The body was in Nevada?"

"Yes," said Mendel, drooping again.

"Well, I don't see why you're so passionate about it. Danny wasn't a friend of yours. I don't know much about spying, but they surely can't expect you to guarantee results. Wouldn't they pay you for it?"

"There's no need to be offensive," he said glumly.

"No," I sighed. "There's been enough of that already. And the queer thing is, all of us think we're right."

"Your mind," said Mendel, "is conditioned to bourgeois morality. Its measure is the dollar. You think I'm contemptible to work against the Company while I accept its pittance."

"No. I only think you're cockeyed."

"You're incapable of comprehending an abstraction. Everything is personal with you. To you, old Henderson was a man."

"I'll say he was."

"To me, he was a perfect example of the way the System works. You admit he was a good workman?"

"He was the best damn driller in the world."

"He earned for the System infinitely more than he ever received?"

I sighed, "Why can't you come down to cases? Danny never worked for the System. He worked for men. They took a job in the hope of profit, yes. But win or lose, they paid him the top price for drillers. He was satisfied."

"His mind," said Mendel, "was conditioned by the System."

"And what's yours? You know as well as I do that the Government pays less."

"At last it treats all men alike."

"The hell you say. Big Chief gets seven thousand a year, and that's big money, huh? But many a big-mouthed congressman gets more. Without a tenth of the ability or the guts. With nothing but a lot of gall. That's politics."

"The Big Boss of the Company gets thirty thousand. Is that justice?"

"No. I think they both ought to get thirty thousand. You think they both ought to get seven."

That was the way our arguments had always gone. Joe snorted, "The dollar sign!"

I snorted, "Who brought it up?"

"I was speaking of inequality."

"Well, once it was the other way about. The Boss was Danny's helper once."

"The good old doctrine," sighed Joe Mendel. "'Work and Win! Newsboy to President!' What you won't realize, friend Foley, is that times have changed."

"I KNOW," I said, despondent too. We came to the hotel, and Boulder City lay about us in the starlight, orderly and sanitary—not a growth but a manufacture, an achievement of modern science.

Yonder, a hundred miles across the desert, old Pete Foley stood at bay, a lonely, tough old scout at the end of a long trail. The day of the scout was done;

the tide of men and millions now was a solid phalanx rolling across the world.

You felt it in the morning in the office of the Company. Important men went in and out; the wires that managed an enormous enterprise ran through that inner door, and it was nearly noon when they let you in.

Yet the Big Boss of the Company was just a man, and Boulder City was a little town. He leaned back in his chair and grinned.

"Hello, kid. How's the hand?"

"Fine, thanks. All ready to go to work."

"From all I hear, you feel too good. I hear you took the recreation hall apart to see what made it tick."

"Oh, that was just a misunderstanding."

"Is that all!"

"Believe it or not, sir, it's the truth."

He sobered, saying, "I'll forgive you this time. If I'd known that you were coming, I'd have warned you."

"Sir?"

"Old Danny has become a cause. A symbol—the down-trodden working man."

"I know," I snorted, reassured; I might have known he knew what was going on. "I've heard the talk—from men that sure stayed off his feet when he was alive."

"They think we bought you off."

"I know."

"It's going to be tough for you if you stick around. I'll come to bat for you this time, but I can't have you flying off the handle every time some stiff cracks."

"Oh," I said, "they'll soon forget it, now that it's all settled."

"Settled?" said the Big Boss, frowning.

"Isn't it?"

"By no means. It's just coming to a boil."

"Didn't you find the body?"

"That's what stirred it up."

"Wasn't it in Nevada?"

"Most of it," said the big man briefly.

And I understood. Old Danny had been tough, but his rheumatic, tired old joints, his stringy human muscles, had been nothing in the grinding of the rock. Nothing was settled.

"Oh," I said, "he—wasn't all together?"

"No. They're sure to claim that the rock moved after he was dead."

And the desert sun was bright outside the windows, but I saw the crashing dark. I said, 'It—sure was moving, the last I saw. I've got to tell you, sir. I'll testify against you if it comes to court."

WITHOUT the movement of a muscle, then, the big man's face had changed—its humor gone, its friendliness withdrawn, its little, bright blue eyes intolerant. He'd been a driller's helper once, but he commanded men and millions now.

"And you've got the nerve to ask me for a job?"

"You said you'd have one for me."

"After you've stuck us?"

"There's no harm in asking."

"Why did you come back here, anyway?"

I couldn't tell the truth. Not all of it. The way time left you stranded if you tried to drift. The way real happenings went by you, missed you while you hid in safety, in your father's house. While Janet's father went with steady feet toward the grim darkness that had swallowed Danny Henderson. While Janet needed help. How the faint, steady clicking of a typewriter through a study door was like the thunder of the drills, and a wild river roaring.

I could only say, "I had to have a job."

"Don't tell me you've already spent your compensation!"

"No, sir. Haven't got it yet."

"Has the claim department made some trouble?"

"No, sir. I just haven't applied for it."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't feel like taking the Company's money till—till it was settled about Danny."

"Oh," said the big man grimly. "So you did think we were trying to buy you!"

"I don't know," I said, and had to clear my throat. "I don't know much of

anything. I—just didn't feel like it."

"And do you expect to go through life just doing what you feel like?"

I said earnestly, "I've got to. When I stop to think, I'm nearly always wrong."

"Well, I'll be damned," said the Big Boss of the Company. "I never dreamed that you had brains."

"I haven't. That's the trouble."

But the twinkle had come back into his eyes. He grunted. "It's the trouble with a lot of men that never find it out." He scribbled on a card and said, "Give this to Walstrom."

"Thanks," I said, and wiped my sweating palms on my numb knees.

"He'll put you on for a few days' training. Signal punk."

"I'm not a cripple, sir! My hand's all right."

He didn't seem to notice my disappointment. He explained, "I've found that good third basemen make the best signal punks. They have to have fast reactions. I'd have tried you long ago, but Danny wouldn't let me. Stubborn old coot!" said the big man, twinkling.

And I hardly noticed that I had learned at last how baseball had determined my whole direction—and how long he had remembered.

"Danny thought you were all right. And so do I—if you can learn to throttle that Irish temper. You can't go through life just kicking people in the teeth because you happen to enjoy it."

"Sir?" I said. "I don't!"

"Why didn't you tell the stiffs you'd testify?"

"They never asked me."

"H'mph!" said the Big Boss of the Company. "Get out of here before I change my mind!"

YOU didn't have to kick people in the teeth. You thought things were against you, and you braced yourself, but the way was open; and it left you feeling a little blank. I saw Joe Mendel in the mess hall, and said glumly, "Gangway for a signal punk."

"Only a signal punk?" said Mende mocking. "I supposed they'd make yo at least a straw boss."

"Laugh your head off. I've got info mation for you, Joe, and you can us it—this time. It's the last time, thoug One smell of spying, after this, and ope comes my mouth."

Joe begged in swift alarm, "Be care ful!" Many of these fellows worked i constant noise and could read lips. snorted, "Won't it be wonderful to slee with a clear conscience?" but I waite till we got outside before I told him.

"Danny died in Arizona, after all."

"But the body was in Nevada!"

"The rock moved it."

"Probably. But there's no proof."

"Oh, yes, there is. The drill. I can believe that he lived to get past it, an he sure never pushed it loose from th jacks. If the drill was with him—"

"I'll find out!"

"Okay," I sighed. "Be careful, though You'd hate to get caught on the last b of spying you'll ever do."

"You mean you'll squeal?"

"You heard me." I said glumly—blamin him because I still didn't know which sid I was on.

But it was queer. As soon as you qui trying to get along with everybody, yo had friends. Once I had hung on th edges of conversations, lonely, grinning t show good humor I didn't feel; arguin when I lost my temper, and getting no where. Now I only went about my busi ness, and men spoke to me. I knew i was because of Danny, and I answere briefly, but they didn't seem to mind

I had my few days' training on a Jo Magee. Don't ask me why they call then that; nobody seems to know. The Jo Magees were the smaller cableways, de signed for the lighter loads—not ove twenty tons. That would have seeme enormous once, but I was used to th scale of things.

Black Canyon was familiar. It was only strange to see the river gone out of it bottom, blocked away by the coffer-dams

thundering now through the giant tunnels old Danny had helped to drive. The Colorado was half tamed. The savage cliffs were carved to receive the abutments of the mighty wall that men imagined; you could trace the shape of it already—the tremendous, curving excavation for its base, the soaring taper of its ends.

HIGH-SCALERS, hung on the rock like spiders, were still working, but not there. They couldn't knock down rock on the men who swarmed like ants in the excavation. They no longer looked like insects, though; my eyes knew the size of things.

Those toy machines down there were ponderous dredges and great power shovels, digging far below water level, down to the little tunnel where old Danny Henderson had died. I knew the very spot in the muck and slime, but I never went down to see it. Danny wasn't there. Nothing was left of him now but a cause, a symbol.

Not the same for different men. The lawyer in Arizona, Mendel's friend, made out the deposition, and I signed it. Mendel said, "That's decent of you, Foley."

I said glumly, "It's the truth."

"But it takes courage to defy the cossacks."

"Cossacks! Why can't you talk English? They don't carry whips. They're only trying to do a job—in spite of shysters and politicians and dumb clucks like you and me, that haven't got the sense it takes to change our minds."

"It's easy for your kind to be courageous."

"Yeah?"

"You'll never starve.'

"Well, not if I can help it."

"You're the grandson of Peter Foley."

Harping on the same old string. I snapped, "And who are you?"

"The grandson of a serf," said Mendel.

"Huh?" I said, embarrassed and disarmed.

"A serf. A man who had to touch his hat to men not worthy to wash his feet. Forbidden to own land. It was a passion with him, Foley. Land!"

"I know. My grandpa too."

"Your grandpa!" said Joe Mendel. "Mine came late. He took a homestead in South Dakota. It was poor land, but he slaved to hold it, starved to hold it. And a stronger neighbor—such a man, friend Foley, as your own grandfather—took it in the end."

And it was true that some of Pete Foley's land had belonged to nesters. I could only say, "That's tough."

"He died a serf. My father died a serf. America!"

"You're not a serf," I said, embarrassed for America.

"What else?"

"You're—well, you've got a darn good education."

"Yes. I slaved for it. I starved for it. I lived on forty cents a day and slept five hours a night. Here, look at my hands!"

Thin hands that were always trembling; Mendel's nerves were shot—burnt out. For what? A job in the time-keeper's office. Courage was not enough.

Yet it was something.

Janet's father didn't die on the operating table. Janet wrote disjointedly, "He's still alive. Oh, Al, don't let me go to pieces now. They had him on the table forty minutes. Forty years. I just kept saying what you told me. 'He's a tough guy. He's a tough guy.' And he is. They say he's got a chance because he won't give up."

Not all the troubles in the world were jobs.

CHAPTER XV

FINGER MAN

FARONI, of course, was hostile—with his wrist in a plaster cast. I could remember how it felt, and I made one effort. Meeting Faroni on the street, I said as cordially as I could, "Hello, Nick. How's the arm?"

But his eyes were poison, and he said

through yellow teeth, "I show you some day. Plenty."

"Hell," I said, "forget it, Nick. You asked for it."

"You tak-a my word and don't forget!"

"Okay," I said, and let it go at that, but I watched Faroni and his friends when they came too close. The weather was getting hot, but the thought of treacherous cold steel could give me a shiver any time.

I had no trouble learning to be a signal punk. A boy's job; most of the signal men were youngsters—punks. No muscle was required. No brains. You only had to be quick, and boys were quicker than grown men.

You only sat on a rock and relayed the signals of the man who rode the loads down out of the burning sky: "Down . . . hold it! Take it a little to Arizona . . . back a little to Nevada . . . hold it! Put it down. . . . Up. Take it away!" You had a telephone strapped on your head, a signal button in your hand, your free arm signaling too. Three ways for safety. It was simple, though.

The hard thing was to keep awake. Even in early spring, Black Canyon was a furnace when the sun was high, an oven when the shadows filled it. The black cliffs stored heat. Smoked goggles could protect your eyes, and you had to have eyes to look into that blinding sky, but nothing could protect your skin. You wore no shirt; clothing was unendurable. I'd never worked in the open sun, and my freckled skin had little pigment, anyway. New sunburn cracked my shoulders, but it helped me to keep awake.

Buck Naylor was amused to see me doing a boy's job. Naylor had been promoted to assistant and did most of his work in an office, in the cool and stately Administration Building; leg work was for juniors. But he paused one day beside my rock and was amused.

"Why, Speedy, you've come up in the world!"

"A hundred feet," I admitted.

"Was the work a little hard for you in the tunnels?"

Naylor didn't even know that Danny Henderson was dead. I snorted, "Hell, that was too easy—working in the shade. You ought to get out in the sun more, Buck. Or buy a sun lamp."

Naylor was smooth and brown and handsomer than ever. Naylor's pay was enough to support a woman. Naylor saw me blistered and unlovely, and he said indulgently, "What do you hear from Janet?"

"The last I heard, her father was still alive."

"Her father?"

"Buck," I said "you're getting fat. You ought to take some exercise."

He wasn't fat, and a signal punk was beneath the notice of an assistant engineer, but I was cheered. She hadn't written him!

The Big Boss of the Company came by and asked me, "How's it going, kid?"

"All right, I guess."

He nodded. "Walstrom says you're doing fine. That sunburn bother you much?"

"Oh, I can stand it."

"Don't take any chances. Better drop in at the hospital and let 'em look you over." Then he said, "I understand that you and Breck aren't exactly buddies."

"Not exactly. Why?"

"Flash Morgan's always kicking about slow signal punks. Think you can hold him?"

Morgan was the fastest operator on the job. I said, "I'd like to try."

"But Breck tends hook for him. Think you can get along?"

"Oh, sure."

"Sam Breck's a surly brute, but he's a good mechanic."

"Sure," I said. I wasn't afraid of Breck; I'd fought the fellow too many times.

And we got along for a week or so. Most of the time, Sam Breck was only a dot on the burning sky; his arm was a tiny semaphore. Men were not insects, all alike, but they were pretty small in the scale of things.

A SIGNAL punk had to be fast. An operator had to be faster—had to know, not only the speed of the drums, but the speed of the punk he worked with. Up there in his shanty under the cable tower, he could see the load slide out from the Nevada cliffs, but the distance was foreshortened.

A light flashed and a bell clanged and a voice spoke in the telephone; he jerked his levers instantly. The drums stopped spinning, and the carriage stopped on the cable, but the load swung on like a pendulum. He had to know how far. He had to shoot the carriage ahead and catch it exactly at the limit of the swing and drop it straight into the canyon.

It took teamwork. Timing. If you spoke too soon, he had to adjust at the bottom, with a thousand feet of cable swinging instead of fifty. Blind; he couldn't see the hook after it dropped below the canyon rim; he had to depend on what you told him. If you spoke too late, he might kill a man or wreck a valuable load.

Flash Morgan's voice came crossly over the telephone: "Hey, punk, I don't need fifteen minutes' notice!"

I said meekly, "Well, I'm pretty green. I don't want to kill me a hook-tender."

"That's my business, punk. I never killed one yet, and I was doing this before you were out of diapers."

But he wasn't as fierce as he sounded, and I learned how fast he was. The loads began landing on the spot—whipping out from Nevada, lurching briskly and then dropping straight as a plummet. Morgan only snorted, "And they told me you were a fast guy!"

"Oh," I said, "are you awake up there? I didn't want to disturb your nap."

"I might be able to stay awake if you'd snap it up."

I grinned and shouted to Sam Breck, "Hang on, big boy! You're going for a ride."

I wasn't kidding Breck; I was kidding Morgan—trying to make him ask for more time on the signals. But Breck didn't like it.

One day, as the great iron hook rode upward past the rock where I was perching, Breck's free foot swung out and tried to kick my head off.

Instinct saved me, but my hat fell spining into the excavation, and its tough, hard fiber burst on the rocks below. Men jumped. They were pretty cross about it—thinking that I'd been careless. Even a helmet, falling from that height, could hurt. The straw boss said to Breck on the next trip down, "That ain't no kind of a joke, Sam. What if you made him lose his balance? Bring him another hat—and charge it to yourself."

It was not a joke. I'd seen Breck's face as it receded into the sky, and something had clicked in my memory. I snapped into the telephone, "Take it away, Flash. Jazz it!"

Now I knew. Breck was the man who had tried to kick me into the river, long ago—two years ago, the day I first descended into Black Canyon, dazed with heat and weak with hunger and bewildered by the scale of things, too dizzy to recognize the shaven face of a bum I had fought in Hagtown.

I COULD protect myself. The hook moved only in response to signals. When a load came swooping into the canyon, Breck might wave his arms till he was black in the face, but Morgan couldn't see him. I could wait till the last split second, till I saw Breck's furious black eyes go wide with fear; I knew Flash Morgan's speed. I could make Breck pass just out of reach, and grin. It helped me forget my sunburn.

Plenty of men were sunburned in those days. This was the summer of 1933; the New Deal was beginning, and new men were pouring in. Big Chief, the quiet engineer, came by and thought I was a new one. He said soberly, "Your skin can't stand it, boy. This sun will kill you."

"It's the only skin I've got."

"You ought to ask for a job where you'd be less exposed."

In 1933. I said, "I asked you for a job

two years ago, and I'm waiting yet."

"Have you been here that long?"

"Not here. I used to rassle steel for Henderson. In the tunnels."

"Oh, you're Foley?"

I was used to being identified that way. I asked him, "Isn't the Civil Service ever going to hold any more examinations?"

"Nobody seems to know," said the engineer, and added gravely, "I'd forgotten that you wanted to get into the Service, Foley, or I might have told you. There's a policy. We don't hire Company men; they don't hire ours."

There had to be a policy; the Company paid more than the Administration could. Especially just now. The Government was hiring a lot of men. Without examination. That was nice for the new juniors but a little hard on the old-timers. The New Deal was on; what went before it didn't count. The name of the Depression had been changed to the Emergency. The name of Hoover Dam was changed to Boulder Dam, after a canyon thirty miles away, a site the engineers had tested and rejected. Maybe the politicians didn't know it was in Black Canyon; all they did was hand out jobs. Big Chief had fought the Colorado thirteen years, but they'd discovered the Emergency.

In those days, I was pretty flippant about it; but Joe Mendel was exultant. Mendel cried, "At last the Government is being organized for human needs!"

"Or something. Far as I can see, the politicians wear the fuzzy pants. If this keeps on, we'll all be eating out of their hands."

"At least we'll eat!"

"As long as we please the politicians."

"Well," cried Mendel, "heretofore, we've had to please the money kings. At least we'll have a change of masters!"

"Yeah, but the money kings were easier to please. They only wanted you to do your job, so they could make a profit."

"Exploit you!"

"Call it that. The politicians don't care what you do, so long as they get the votes. I'd rather do my job."

"If you can get your job to do!"

"There's a depression, Joe."

"There's always a depression for the weak!"

I wanted to cry out, "Why not?" What was the use of courage and endurance if it didn't get you anything? But I was silent. Mendel must have taken an awful beating, to endure humiliation and admit defeat; and I had played through school. I couldn't pretend to know the answer.

Money was not the answer. Janet would get insurance if her father died, yet Janet wrote, "Please kid me, Al. Make me ashamed. I'm almost sunk."

A college professor had a job he couldn't lose, yet Janet wrote, "It breaks your heart. He tries so hard to get better, but he doesn't gain a bit. He only lies there."

All I had to endure was sunburn. And my shoulders began to heal. Not smooth and brown like Naylor's, and not negroid black like Breck's; I was far from handsome. White scars thickened across my shoulders, and red blotches, more like birthmarks than like freckles, gathered around the scars. But I no longer suffered from the sun.

THE summer passed, and the winter came—not the clear, sparkling cold of snow, but the dull chill of desert wind and rain; the job had to go on through wind and rain. The flash floods came, roaring against the coffer-dams and thundering off through the giant tunnels. Danny had not died in vain.

Between the dams, in the vast, curving scar across the protected channel, the concrete had begun to pour; great blocks of man-made rock began to rise. The eight-ton buckets danced on a dozen cableways. My part was small, but I felt triumph when the flush floods passed and did no harm.

And Janet wrote, "I'm so encouraged, Al. He's actually getting cross."

I felt monotony. I had a room in a dormitory—not the same that I remembered, but you couldn't tell the difference. A room ten feet by seven in a hive with

a hundred and seventy single stiffs. A lot of them were strangers, but as soon as they got sunburned, they all looked like stiffs. And talked like stiffs—mostly about the money kings. Joe Mendel said they were conditioned by environment.

Yet they were not alike. One day, in the recreation hall, I learned why Nick Faroni was called Fingers by the men who knew him well.

Faroni was with friends at the soft-drink bar. His mood was liberal; he reached for his right hip pocket. Watching the man by habit, I saw what came out.

A well-worn wallet, marked with a silver F.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN FROM HAGTOWN

AND F could mean Faroni as well as Foley, but that F was a Tumbling F—a Diamond Tumbling F, my grandpa's cattle brand. Pete Foley had given me that wallet, and it's loss had made me a construction stiff. I hadn't seen it since that night in Hagtown. I'd accused Sam Breck of stealing it. I plucked it out of Faroni's hand and crooned, "Come home to papa!"

Nick Faroni whirled and snarled, "Whatta ya think you're doin'? Gettin' funny?"

"If you think so, call a cop."

I guess he wasn't in the habit of calling cops. His hand crept toward a pocket, but I stepped away and plucked a pool ball from the nearest table.

"Pull a knife, and you get this right in the kisser."

Nick Faroni cried to friends, "He took it out-a my hand! You seen him!"

I assured them, "If you think it's any of your business—"

They were not old-timers, but they knew that I'd once played baseball, and they knew how hard a pool ball was. They hesitated. A policeman saw the tableau, and inquired, "What now?"

"He took it out-a my hand!"

"He took it out of my pocket."

"That's what-a you say!"

"Yeah, and I can prove it. . . . Look inside here, will you, Jerry?"

The policeman, playing Solomon, demanded, "Well, what's in it?"

"Forty-one dollars!" said Faroni instantly.

"My name. In ink."

And both of us spoke truly. The policeman scratched his head. Faroni might have seen the money without owning it, but my name had been there a long time; the ink was almost lost on the darkened leather.

"How did this get here, Nick?"

Faroni didn't know; he'd never seen it. Nick Faroni cried, "He switch-a da wallet!"

"You admit this isn't yours?" I said, and grinned.

And he found no way to swallow his hasty words. He had to insist, "He switch-a da wallet! Search him!"

"How about it, Foley?"

"Sure," I said, lifting my arms. "You'll find another wallet, but my name's in that one too."

I'd never been searched. I grinned at Nick Faroni, who could steal from starving men; I lifted my arms and thought nothing of it.

But it gave me a queer sensation. . . . Strange, hot mountains looming, smothering, and children crying in the night. A gaunt, black-whiskered scarecrow trembling in the glow of flashlights, holding up submissive arms while rangers proved the poverty of his ragged pockets. While a woman moaned in the hot darkness—whimpered like an animal, a queer, long, shivering sound. A woman screaming afterward. And Breck had said . . . No wonder Sam Breck hated me.

The policeman found the other wallet, with my name inside. Faroni cried, "How many wallets has he got?"

"How many have you got?" I said. "Search him."

"Nobody search-a me!"

"Why not?" said the policeman. "Turn about's fair play. You claim you lost a wallet; well, let's see."

"Keep your hands off-a me!"

"You want to swear a warrant, Foley?"

"Nah!" I said. "Who cares about a rat?"

I had my wallet back, with eighteen dollars profit. I'd accused Sam Breck unjustly, and I hunted Breck to tell him.

LIQUOR was taboo on the Reservation, even after repeal, but there were places that were off the reservation. There were women. Not attractive women, but Sam Breck was not attractive, either, now. He drank too much, and his eyes were bloodshot, and his hard, sun-blackened face had sagged into heavy lines.

He sat alone at a scaly table in a smoky, shuttered room where a dreary phonograph played all day long and all night long. The women worked in shifts. They didn't coax him to buy drinks; they knew Sam Breck. He had a bottle on his table, and he'd slap you cockeyed when his gloom was on.

"Hello, Breck. I've been looking for you."

"Well, smart boy, you found me. Now run back and tell the Boss I'm drunk again."

"I owe you an apology."

Breck couldn't cope with that. He stared.

"That night in Hagtown. You remember?"

"Yeah," said Sam Breck heavily.

"I thought you rolled me for my wallet. I was wrong. It was Faroni."

"Yeah?"

"I just now caught him with it."

"Yeah?"

"That's all. I thought I'd tell you. But I'd never seen a place like Hagtown; I was scared. And it was all I had—twenty-three dollars."

"Huh?" said Breck.

"I damn near starved before I got a job."

"Why didn't you wire your papa?"

"Huh?" I said.

"Haven't you got a papa?"

"Sure. So what?"

"And a rich grandpa too, I hear."

"You hear a lot," I said, "that hasn't got a thing to do with the price of onions. Look, big boy. We have to work together; what's the sense of always climbing down each other's throat?"

Sam Breck said heavily, "Forget it, kid. I just feel mean, I reckon. Have a drink."

But it was difficult. The liquor was pretty bad, and the dreary phonograph kept playing, and Breck only sat and stared. I blurted out the thing that bothered me.

"How do you mean, I killed your wife?"

"She died," said Breck, "that night."

"Was she the woman that was crying?"

"Yeah."

And I remembered how she looked when the flashlights hit her—a drab, shapeless woman. I said soberly, "She had a baby?"

"Tried to."

"Gosh, I'm sorry, fellow."

"So you're sorry!"

Even now, I don't see what I could have said. I could remember Hagtown, could imagine the hopeless road that had brought him there—a good mechanic, and no place to use his hands. Drifting from town to town, and the woman hungry, and a baby coming. A good mechanic could keep a rusty flivver going when it tried to fall to pieces, but no man could stop the slow machinery of days.

"A boy. It would have been a boy," said Breck, and added hoarsely, "Leila."

"Was that her name?"

"You made her cry. You brought it on. Two days before I got a job."

"I know," I said.

Sam Breck got up; his chair banged backward on the floor. "Get out of here before I kill you."

I got up. The dancers stopped; men disengaged themselves and began to gather. They were friends of Breck's; I gripped Breck's bottle by the neck. But a dreary man—you had to call him a man because his shape was human—scuttled across the floor and whined, "Please, gents, you'll get me into trouble!" Rangers didn't try to regulate the desert, but they wouldn't stand for rough stuff.

Even the phonograph was silent for a moment; it was automatic, changing records without human intervention. But the men had jobs to lose. And Breck was drunk; he had to prop himself on the table with his hands. I set the bottle back and sighed, "Better lay off that stuff."

"Or what?" said Breck in a strangled voice.

"Or you'll slip off the hook some day and spatter all over the canyon."

Then the phonograph began to play again, but a dozen men had heard.

CHAPTER XVII

BLACK HYPHEN

SAM BRECK turned up for work as usual. I rode in the same transport with him, but with tons of human beef between us, and he didn't seem to notice. On the job, I seldom saw him at close range. Flash Morgan's cable served the whole length of the upper face, and it could move transversely too; the towers were on rails.

The carriage of a Joe Magee ran on a single cable, a single load line spinning out from Nevada, looping from the carriage down to the hook and up again, on to the Arizona cliffs and back to Nevada, spiraling over the spinning drums; the same line handled the carriage and the load. But the Government High Line had six mighty cables for the carriage, and a separate load line. Ponderous and powerful. The Joe Magees were temporary, but the High Line—Government High Line—was designed to serve the mighty powerhouse that men imagined. It would be here when the Joe Magees were gone.

Joe Mendel drew a parallel from that. I argued, "Yeah, but you can move a Joe Magee if you need it somewhere else. The High Line is too big to move."

It's safety factor alone was greater than the limit of a Joe Magee. I argued, "Yeah, if safety's all you want."

Safety was all Joe wanted—so he thought. And yet his life was not in danger, working in the office; he was sure of shelter and enough to eat. I showed him a letter from Janet Collins about her father.

Janet wrote, "He went to Denver yesterday, and came home in an ambulance. The legislature has been raising cain about appropriations for the University. Somebody told them how few hours professors teach, and they don't know what else professors do. They're making the faculty turn in time-sheets—punch the clock! That tickled him. But when they started howling about students going radical—you know, just young—he went right through the roof. The doctor couldn't hold him down. He knows some politicians and he thought that he might help."

That was the kind of job Joe wanted—working for the State. He would have been a good professor, too. But he had never struggled with politicians and he didn't realize. I wasn't even sure what safety was. Men could have let the Colorado run as it had always run, swelling with flash floods, ripping the guts out of farm land, wasting the land and water. Wasting lives. But not the lives of the men who fought it now. They could have stayed away.

Men wanted land. They wanted water. And they wanted safety, but the men who paid for it were not the ones who got it. Danny Henderson had paid. And what paid him? Not money. Altruism? That grim runt had never had a kindly thought for any man who wasn't tough.

My life was not in danger—not if I stayed awake. The rock on which I sat was solid concrete, sixty feet by sixty—rising a couple of hundred now, but it was only an outcrop on the vast, wide mass in the canyon's bottom; it seemed low. Nobody rode the concrete buckets. When a load came down that Sam Breck had to ride, he was only a dot on the sky. Mostly I only sat and watched the concrete buckets come.

A LOAD of flat steel plates went over toward the Arizona end. I watched a hyphen slide across the sky, and saw

the tiny semaphore that was Breck's arm, and said without excitement, "Hold it."

Then I shouted, "Hold it!"

Then I cried into the telephone, "For God's sake, Flash, get on it! Hold it!"

For the load had swung, but the carriage hadn't dashed to overtake it, and the pendulum swung back, and the carriage was sliding backward. Without a signal. Against the signal; I could see Breck's frantic arm. And the load was dropping, but not straight. It was slanting backward. I whipped my goggles off; and the sky was blinding, but my need to see was more than the pain of the desert sun. A black thread drifted across the sky—snapping away from the carriage, drifting up and writhing short as it drifted down. That was the load line—broken, but not loose from the carriage. The return line, broken above the carriage; and the Arizona end ran free, racing away toward Arizona, pulled through the sheaves by the falling tons.

The movement seemed quite slow in the canyon's vastness. In its bottom, on that vast, low welter of man-made rock, men straightened up and stared. On the highest step, my human smallness was stretching upward, and my throat was aching, bawling into the telephone, "To Nevada! Fast! Get on it! Try it, Flash! Try anything!"

But I knew Flash Morgan was already trying—shooting the last ounce of tremendous power into one slim chance.

Up there in Nevada, in the shanty under the cable tower, the giant circuit-breakers were flashing and banging. Ponderous drums were stopping as if they had no weight, and instantly whirling, whining to frantic speed—sucking a quarter-mile of cable from Arizona, trying to reel it in as fast as those tons of steel could pull it down. Slowing the fall with speed. And stopping, trying to make the free end whip and catch in the screaming sheaves.

But the power pulled against no resistance, and what happened seemed to have no weight. The black dot slanted, growing, curving as the cable ran, swerving a little in its flight. Those flat steel plates weighed tons, but their sides caught air as their speed increased. It carried them clear of the precipice where I stood. The hyphen stretched and became a line, expanded and was a great black surface, flashing by; and the man who rode it grew and became Sam Breck.

Riding into eternity—with one foot in the hook and one foot swinging free; one hand on the cable, one hand free. I saw his face. And his teeth gleamed suddenly in his dark face, and his free hand passed oddly before his face, palm outward. Sam Breck grinned and waved farewell as he went by.

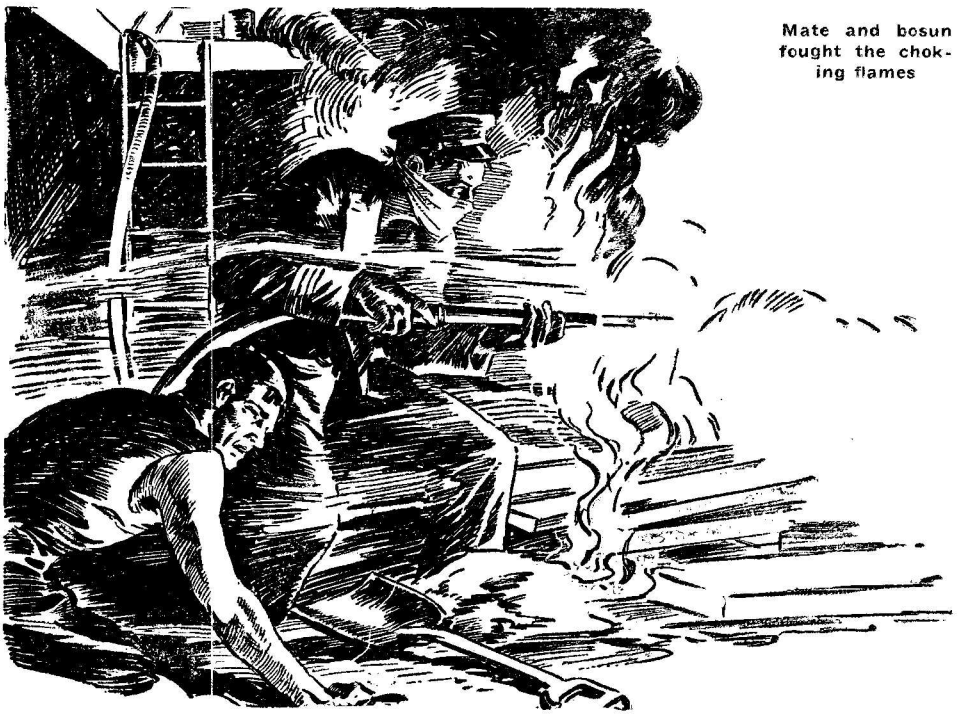
TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Turpitude à la Carte

THE State of Maine will probably be famous for its cookery long after its individualistic behavior in elections is forgotten. Just recently Representative Cleveland Sleeper Jr. has done his bit to protect one of the special dishes of his native state from foreign entanglements. He has presented a bill to the State Legislature which outlaws the use of tomatoes in clam chowder.

The union of tomatoes and clams, Mr. Sleeper says, is "an unholy one and leads only to moral degradation." Of course, there is a recognized tomatoes-in-chowder group, and these people would find Mr. Sleeper's remarks offensive; but no one will deny that Maine chowder should be made without benefit of tomatoes. Fair-minded men will support Mr. Sleeper's bill; and there is plenty of room for further legislation on cooking. Salads, for instance—marshmallow whip and nuts in a salad ought to be unconstitutional.

—Albert George



Mate and bosun fought the choking flames

S. S. Sesame

By CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

Author of "Even Stephen," etc.

What would you think of a steamer whose funnels belched pink and green smoke; commanded by a captain who took a correspondence course in ventriloquism; with an expert bassoon player in the crew? Jim Craig wondered whether it was madness or Utopia. . . . A complete novelet

I

JIM CRAIG gulped the rest of his beer and set the glass on the bar with a thump. "They knew how to handle a crew in the old days," he growled. "Where would Paul Jones have been without discipline?"

"Dunno," said the bartender vacantly.

"In those days they keelhauled 'em, spread-eagled 'em on the shrouds," Craig continued, as another beer appeared before him. "But nowadays—"

"I'm glad I never sailed under you," said the bartender. "Schultz says you're a tough skipper."

"I should have stuck to a trade," muttered Craig. "I worked ten years to command a rusty ship with a crew of scum. Now I'm back where I started—on the beach!"

"Straight whisky."

Swiveling on the barstool, Jim Craig noticed that a slight individual in a seaman's cap had dumped a canvas bag on the floor and was attempting to mount the

stool beside him. The man was sloppy drunk, and a shiny tear clung to the tip of his red nose. After swilling the whisky, he whipped out a soiled handkerchief and began to weep into it piteously.

Jim Craig was in no mood for such antics. "What's eating you?" he inquired snappishly.

"My girl just inherited a cucumber ranch," sobbed the stranger. "I gotta leave the sea and get married."

"What ship you from?" asked Craig.

"The *Sesame*. Best vessel afloat. Fight anybody says she ain't—"

Craig waved away a pair of clenched fists and noted that the man wore the stripes of a first officer. "You might find an open berth on her, sir," suggested the bartender. "She's docked at Pier Fifty-eight."

"Thass her," exclaimed the drunk. "Solid gold from hull to mast!" By that time Jim Craig was half-way to the door.

He found the steamer, *Sesame,* snuggled to a pier behind the Odalisque Soap Company. The ship resembled an ancient crone whose age was concealed beneath several layers of paint. She had bluff bows, a high boatdeck with a skinny funnel, and her stern bulged aft like a bustle. Dun-colored booms fished into her hatches for slings full of cargo, while donkey trucks clattered about the dock-shed wagging their trailers behind them.

Ascending the gangplank, Jim Craig entered the starboard alleyway and paused before a neatly printed wooden sign which was fastened to a door. The sign read,

ULYSSES S. JONES, CAPTAIN. ENTER!

CRAIG entered. The cabin was comfortably spacious, and the walls were covered with framed documents, each bearing an imposing seal. A stuffed penguin stood on a perch above the door, the floor was littered with papers and pencil sharpenings and a battered rolltop desk was squeezed between the bunk and the wash basin.

Captain Jones had his feet propped on the desk, while the rest of him rocked squeakily in a swivel chair. He was a trim, wiry old man with twinkly blue eyes and a mustache that resembled a small snowbank. His hair was snowy too, and a swooping lock mingled with his shaggy brows. He nodded at Jim Craig cordially, displaying firm, tobacco-tarred teeth. Craig grunted a wordless salutation and sat on the bunk. Captain Jones was like something out of a picture: the artist's dream of a typical old sea dog.

"I ran into your first mate over at Conkey's Bar," said Craig. "He did some talking—"

"Glad to hear it," chuckled Captain Jones. "When he staggered off shipboard, he wasn't able to talk."

"My name's Jim Craig," said the seaman, his gray eyes holding the skipper's glance steadily. "I'd like to take his place. I have all my papers, and I know how to command a ship."

"Good." The skipper beamed.

"I believe in making a crew jump," Craig added. "I don't give an order twice."

"What if a man doesn't hear you the first time?"

"Then it's his tough luck." Craig raised a brown fist convincingly.

Captain Jones placed his fingertips together and looked Jim Craig up and down. He saw that the young man was built sturdily—wide, muscular shoulders, long legs and calloused hands. Craig's skin was nearly as brown as his hair, and his clean-cut features seemed a little too sober. "Schizoid type," mused Captain Jones. "Lean face, aggressive jaw, not much humor."

"Do I get the job?" asked Craig bluntly.

Before the skipper could reply, another man entered the cabin. He was Roderick Stamm, coast manager of the Silver Triangle Line; Jim Craig recognized him at once. From gold-tipped cane to waxed mustache, Stamm was the model of streamlined efficiency. He came in stiffly erect, his horsy face a mask of detached politeness.

"Hullo, Stamm," said Captain Jones quietly. "Shake hands with Mr. Craig."

The man glanced at Craig narrowly; allowed him to squeeze a limp, boneless hand. "I've come about that same matter," said Stamm. "The Silver Triangle Line still wants to purchase your ship."

"I'd be tickled to sell her," was the reply. "Then I could buy one of those new Diesels."

"Of course the offer also includes your contract with the Odalisque Soap Company," said Stamm. "You can retire comfortably—"

"No thanks," said Captain Jones. "I'll sell the *Sesame;* but I won't go out of business." The old man's jaw clamped shut forcefully. His decision was final.

"Mr. Carlyle, our eastern representative, is waiting on the dock," said Stamm. "Won't you have a talk with him?"

"Be glad to." Captain Jones arose, crammed some tobacco into a pipe and followed Stamm out the door. "Come along, Craig," he called back.

Jim Craig clumped down the gangplank, wondering what this was all about. The old skipper was a strange sort; but he seemed shrewd—too shrewd to be fleeced by a crooked outfit like the Silver Triangle Line.

RODERICK STAMM led them across the wharf and halted by a heap of bulging jute sacks near the *Sesame's* bow. "That's odd," he said. "Carlyle must have gone into the shed. You gentlemen wait here; I'll find him."

Captain Jones lit his pipe as Stamm walked briskly into the shed. "That swab has a shifty face," he declared. "According to Lombroso—"

"Hey!"

As Craig shouted, he lunged forward, pulling Jones with him. High above loomed a huge rope sling loaded with fat gunnysacks. A cable whined through its pulley, and the load of cargo plummeted downward, striking the dock with a shuddering thud. A loose rope rapped Craig's shoulder, knocking him off his feet. The triangular metal block clunked against concrete, and gunnysacks burst like exploding shells, littering the pier with millions of tiny particles. Craig tried to arise and flopped sideward drunkenly. He could see now that the wharf was covered with a layer of seeds which rolled and squished underfoot.

Captain Jones was squatted on the concrete several feet away, the pipe still hanging from his lips. He gazed at the split sacks and tangled gear bewilderedly; then brushed the seeds out of his hair and stood up. "Thanks," he said to Craig. "You saved my life."

Craig started for the gangplank. "I'll fix the guy on that winch!" he fumed. "Damned carelessness!"

The stevedores were all working aft, and Craig found the forward welldeck entirely deserted. Both hatches were open; but no one was near them. Those little seeds on the wharf—he recognized them now as the kind he always scraped off restaurant rolls. The ship's hold was stuffed with sacks of sesame seeds. Turning his gaze to the dock-shed, Craig saw a black, expensive sedan cruise slowly between the stacks of cargo and head for the street. The saturnine face of Roderick Stamm glowered at him from the car window and disappeared into the spacious back seat.

"Looks like Stamm and his friend aren't coming back," observed Captain Jones, leaning over the rail of the main deck.

Craig scowled up at him. "That snake left us standing there on purpose," he declared. "Stamm intended to commit a deliberate murder!"

"Wouldn't put it past him," replied Captain Jones calmly. He lit his pipe again and made for the bridge ladder. "Report on board tomorrow morning, Mr. Craig," he called over his shoulder. "You're hired."

II

IT WAS not until two days later that all of the *Sesame's* crew returned aboard ship. "I always like to give my men a few days shore leave when we reach San Francisco," the skipper told Jim Craig. "After that long trip from

India, they're wild as bearcats; and I, personally, am sick of looking at 'em. Now, if you'll sign these articles—"

Craig nodded soberly and scribbled his signature to the bottom of a contract. He was convinced that discipline on the *Sesame* was extremely lax. Captain Jones was undoubtedly a capable skipper, but the years had made him soft, easy-going. The unbreakable rules of sailing men had been drilled into Jim Craig's brain, and he knew that the sea would not tolerate softness. On shore, Craig was a personable young man with pleasant gray eyes and a long jaw; but once at sea, he became Eric the Red, Ahab and Captain Bligh all rolled into one.

Loaded with ballast, the *Sesame* finally slid beneath the Golden Gate Bridge and pointed her nose toward the Pacific. Craig knew that she was bound for India to pick up more cargo; but beyond that Captain Jones had kept him singularly unenlightened. The crew worked like beavers the first day out, coiling lines, battening hatches and putting the vessel in all around good shape. Late in the afternoon, as Jim Craig was going on watch, he noticed a surprising thing.

The *Sesame's* funnel was emitting billows of bright purple smoke.

"That's some of Cody Gear's work," the skipper told him. "Cody's the chief engineer. He mixes some kind of a methyl compound with the oil to keep carbon out of the fire tubes. The experiments haven't done much good yet; but they sure make pretty colors."

"I don't like it," said Craig sternly.

"Can't be helped," replied Captain Jones, shrugging his shoulders. "Cody has complete charge of the engineroom. He's got a robot oiler that's a wonder. I'll show it to you."

They entered the midship deckhouse and climbed down a series of slanting steel ladders which connected the catwalk levels. Giant metal arms twisted the propeller shaft rhythmically, eccentrics bounced and the entire engineroom throbbed like a living heart. Craig could not help admiring the gleaming cleanliness of the place. Every shaft and bearing moved with oil-cushioned ease. Not until he reached the bottom level did Craig realize that the room was entirely deserted.

"Nice setup, eh?" said Captain Jones, beaming proudly. "See those oil cups and flexible tubes—"

"But where's the black gang?" asked Craig.

The skipper motioned him toward the fireroom, and as Craig edged past the boilers, he saw five men seated around a big soojee bucket playing poker. A grizzled man in an engineer's cap winked at them and pointed to a stack of chips in front of him. "The boys are gettin' cleaned today," he said cheerfully. "Three kings."

"Beats me," growled the second assistant. "I'm through. Craig can take my place."

"Sure," urged Captain Jones. "Sit down, Craig."

"In case you don't remember," replied Craig stiffly, "I'm supposed to be on duty."

"Trugham won't mind standing watch a little overtime," said the skipper. "You can do the same for him some day."

Craig stared at the captain in blank astonishment. It was difficult for his orderly mind to comprehend such a breach of discipline. A first officer neglecting his duty to play poker with the black gang! The idea was repugnant. Craig began to believe that he had shipped out with a crew of madmen.

"What goes on below decks is none of my affair," Craig said acidly. "However, I find it hard to believe that responsible officers would leave a ship's engine unwatched."

The chief engineer laughed. "That old engine don't need watching," he declared. "If anything goes wrong, a light flashes up there on the bulkhead. Absolutely foolproof—"

"Mr. Craig—please come to the bridge at once!"

Craig jumped as the second mate's voice boomed into the fireroom. "Loudspeaker," explained Cody Gear, pointing up the

fiddley. "Much more practical than the old fashioned speaking tube. It's my own invention."

"You see, Mr. Gear is somewhat of a genius," said Captain Jones proudly. "Give me four bits worth of chips."

CRAIG stalked out of the fireroom and made his way to the navigation bridge. He found Second Mate Trugham in the charthouse tinkering with a boxlike instrument filled with wires and having two dials set in a Bakelite panel. "It's almost completed," announced Trugham. He removed a pair of thick glasses from his birdlike nose and cleaned them with his shirt-tail. "This instrument will measure the exact height of waves—a valuable scientific aid to navigation. It embodies the principle of inverted ratios—"

Jim Craig snorted his disgust. They were madmen, every one. He was doubly convinced of it now. "Why'd you call me?" he demanded.

"Oh—" Trugham blinked forgetfully; then said, "It was about the quartermaster, Duggin. He has a toothache and wants to be let off his watch. The Swede has offered to take his place."

Craig considered this the last straw. "Are we running a steamship or a day nursery?" he flared. "As long as I have anything to say, every seaman will stand his own watch! Where is Duggin?"

"In bed," Trugham replied sadly. "His jaw is all swollen."

Craig bounced down the bridge ladder like a wild animal. Entering the crew's fo'c'sle, he found several A.B.'s arguing loudly in the messroom, while a weird, melancholy noise mingled with the rumble of the steering engine. Rounding the corner of the alleyway, Craig barged squarely into Red Miggs, the bosun. Miggs was a fiery-headed giant with a stub nose and fists like the blocks of a mainsail.

"Where's that man, Duggin?" growled Craig.

"Ain't seen him."

"Address me as 'sir!'" Craig's eyes glinted coldly. The red headed man scuffed his feet against the floor plates, and his freckled face wore a sheepish grin.

"Ain't see him, *sir*."

Craig brushed the bosun aside and entered the crew's quarters. A spidery man was seated on the after bunk blowing through a tall, pillarlike instrument with a curved mouthpiece. A low, guttural melody ensued, unsteady as the man's rolling eyes.

"I'm looking for Duggin," stated Craig.

The musician blew a sour note, winced and pointed to an upper bunk. A tow head appeared over the bunk rail, and a pair of red eyes glared at Craig sullenly. Duggin had a wet towel tied around his head; his left cheek was considerably puffed.

"You belong on deck," Craig snapped. "Climb down!"

"I'b sigg," mumbled Duggin. "I godd bad hoofache."

"That won't keep you from handling a ship's wheel!" Craig grasped the man's collar and yanked him out of the bunk. Duggin pawed at his persecutor wildly; but Craig booted him into the alleyway. Scrambling to his feet, Duggin displayed amazing vitality as he sprinted across the after well deck. Jim Craig adjusted his coat, gave the spidery musician a black look and stepped from the fo'c'sle.

Red Miggs was leaning against the spare propeller on deck. "You shouldn't have done that to Duggin," Miggs ventured earnestly. "A toothache is might painful—"

"When I want your opinion, bosun, I'll ask for it!" Craig felt that he had a right to be snappish. An officer trained and regimented by the code of the sea didn't take advice from underlings. Craig made his own decisions; that was why he was an officer.

Instead of being properly subdued, Red Miggs decided to make the matter an issue. "I won't let you kick my seamen around like dogs," he told Craig bluntly. "Maybe on other ships you can do it; but not on the *Sesame!*"

"One more crack and I'll have you logged," Craig threatened.

The bosun's freckled throat reddened. "Too bad we're not ashore," he scowled. "I'd knock you out of that monkey suit in two shakes—"

Jim Craig's temper had been taxed overtime. Without giving the action any consideration, he shot a swift, stinging uppercut to the point of Red Miggs' jaw. The burly bosun's head struck the propeller blade, and he slumped to a sitting position on the deck. Miggs' mouth spread to an open gash, and he arose ponderously, both fists doubled. Craig stepped away lightly, like a hunter facing a rampant rhino. Miggs lowered his head; charged.

A hoarse, prolonged blast of the ship's whistle brought both men to a sudden standstill. They glowered at each other for a second; then heeled and raced forward. The crew scuttled on deck, and Captain Jones popped out of the fiddley annoyedly—a straight flush clutched in his right hand.

A wisp of gray smoke rose from an open manhole by the number one hatch, while Mr. Trugham unwound a flat ribbon of hose. Half-sliding down the ladder rails, Jim Craig scooted to the forward welldeck.

No doubt about it, the *Sesame* was on fire.

III

STEEL bars clanked, timbers rattled as the tarpaulins and hatch covers were thrown off methodically. Men bent their backs to hand pumps, and a slender stream of water spurted into the hold.

Bracing his back against the mast, Jim Craig directed a second hose at the smoking hole. The water slushed 'tween decks but was prevented from entering the hold by the lower hatch covers. "We can't get at the blaze!" shouted Craig. "Pull off those 'tween deck hatch covers!"

Red Miggs lowered his massive frame through the manhole, followed by two A.B.'s. As the 'tween deck hatch covers were removed, smoke poured skyward, and streams of salt water sizzled into the flaming depths of the ship. "Send me a hose!" called Miggs. "I'll squirt hell out of it!"

Craig shut off his stream and clambered into the manhole, dragging the hose with him. Soot-blackened, Red Miggs was starting to descend into the cavernous inferno far below. "Lucky there's no cargo aboard," Craig muttered. "But we've got to check it before it can reach the oil tanks."

"Shut up and gimme the hose," rasped Miggs. Craig handed it to him and hauled on the writhing snakelike tube as Miggs climbed down the ladder. The hissing noise increased. Craig tugged until the entire length of the hose was played out, and followed the bosun

The floor of the hold was a blazing mass of dunnage. Miggs stood on a hill of sandbags, his beefy arms swinging the firehose. Craig dropped beside him, carrying an axe and shovel. Splitting the sandbags, Craig scooped their contents onto the smouldering spread of lumber, and as the flames subsided, a flood of smudge issued from the petulant embers. Craig tied a handkerchief about his mouth and nose; dug the shovel in with renewed vigor. Turning, he saw that Red Miggs was on one knee, struggling to keep control of the hose.

"Ankle—" gasped the bosun. "Turned it on one of them timbers—"

Craig jerked the hose from Miggs' hands. They were standing directly beneath the hatchway, engulfed by a swirl of smoke and vapor. A bright tongue of flame leaped up by the ladder. The embers had flared again, cutting off their retreat. Pivoting, Craig swished water into the heart of the flame. It had little effect, for the fire displayed a resistant bluish tinge, like the blaze of a Bunsen burner.

Suddenly the hose went limp, and a scant trickle dripped from its brassy nozzle. Craig tossed it away and slashed into the blue flame with his shovel. Sand plopped over the burning boards persistently, and the flames petered out with a crackling grumble.

A racking cough shook Craig's frame;

his eyes smarted as the gush of black smoke clogged his throat and nostrils. Moving back, he stumbled over Red Miggs. The bosun was trying to pull himself toward the ladder.

"Grab hold." Craig forced the man's arms around his neck. Dragging the bosun's ponderous hulk behind him, he found the steel rungs. The ladder was scorching hot. He pulled himself upward, legs straining, sweat pouring down his bare chest.

"I can make it now," muttered Miggs. Letting Craig ascend first, he grasped the ladder and hoisted himself slowly.

Emerging from the manhole, Craig gulped salt air. Men darted past him, pumps wheezed and both hoses now hissed a steady stream. "Looks like we've got her under control," called the skipper. "Can't figure out how the thing started."

"Did you have any kerosene in that hold?" asked Craig.

Captain Jones shook his head. "Nothing but ballast and some dunnage," he replied.

"Those boards had been soaked with kerosene," stated Craig. "This fire wasn't accidental!"

"Can't believe it," mused the skipper. "I'd trust every man aboard."

"I wouldn't." Red Miggs wiped his sooty forehead and glared at Jim Craig meaningly. "We've still got some business to settle, Mr. Mate!"

Craig faced him, head erect. "That can be settled ashore," he rapped in a metallic voice. "As long as there's a deck under my feet, I'll give the orders!"

"He's right," agreed Captain Jones. "That's why I hired Mr. Craig—to give orders." He patted some tobacco into his pipe and slouched away unconcernedly, while the two men scowled at each other with mutual hatred.

"SURE, I sailed on lots of ships; but never on a tub like this. They're all screwy, see? Skipper, crew, everybody!"

Jim Craig listened interestedly as the scrawny, hollow-jawed steward gabbled at him. The steward's name was Tom Walters, and he seemed to possess a measure of common sense. "This man, Miggs," said Craig inquisitively. "Where'd he come from?"

"Used to be a pug," said Walters. "Served eight years in the navy; then went to Hollywood to crash the movies. He was on relief when Cap'n Jones found him."

"And how about the chief engineer?" Craig asked.

"He's a crackpot too," muttered the steward. "Sailed on the *Levi* during the war and worked for some Galveston oil company. He's goofy over gadgets. One time he took off the ship's smokestack to make a wind tunnel. And speaking of smokestacks—"

"I know," grunted Craig. "What color is it today?"

"Light blue," said Walters. "That stuff he dumps into the oil makes the ship look like a Roman candle. He's nuts, see?"

Jim Craig shrugged his shoulders disgustedly and sauntered down the alleyway. As he passed the skipper's cabin, a hearty voice shouted his name. Craig entered and found Captain Jones at his desk, surrounded by stacks of books and sheets of scribbled paper.

"I've been wanting to talk with you, Craig," said the captain genially. "It's about Red Miggs. I'm afraid you're going to have trouble with him."

"*Have* trouble?" Craig snorted bitterly. "The man's done everything but start a mutiny."

"As I understand it," the captain went on calmly, "the trouble started because Duggin had a toothache."

"Duggin was deliberately trying to avoid duty," retorted Craig. "His tooth was okay the next day."

"Only because I treated it," was the reply. "He had a bad abcess in an upper bicuspid. I can see why you might have been rough with Duggin; but you shouldn't have socked Miggs—"

"The man was disrespectful," Craig cut in. "I won't allow insubordination!"

"I suppose you're right," the skipper admitted, with a sigh. "But in spite of that, the crew is down on you."

"And I don't give a hoot what a gang of deckswabs think!" rumbled Craig.

"Too bad," said the skipper hopelessly. "That means you'll have a most uncongenial trip. And the minute we tie up, Red Miggs will get you into some dark alley and knock your block off."

"Just let the big ape try it," scowled Craig.

"Would you be willing to let him try it now?" A twinkle crept into the skipper's blue eyes.

"Any time he thinks he's man enough!"

"Miggs used to be a boxer," the skipper warned.

"If he gets funny with me, he's liable to be a corpse," Craig muttered between set teeth.

"I'd rather settle the matter without bloodshed," proposed Captain Jones. "Will you meet him on deck this afternoon at four bells?"

"Sure," grunted Craig, making for the door. He paused with one foot in the alleyway. "You're a poor excuse for a ship's master," he said coldly. "No crew can respect a captain who won't enforce discipline!"

Captain Jones smiled back indulgently, stroked his fluffy mustache and bent once more over the books and papers.

NEARLY the entire crew of the *Sesame* was assembled on the afterdeck at four bells. A makeshift boxing ring had been set up on the number four hatch, and Red Miggs sat on a stool in one corner lacing up a brown bulbous glove. The bosun's grinning face sobered as Craig entered the ring. Paying no attention to the gawking crew, Craig slipped out of his coat and remained disdainfully aloof while Tom Walters tightened his gloves.

"It's disgraceful," hissed Walters. "Makin' a first officer scrap like a common sailor. Miggs'll cut you down in a second; and that's what they want. See?"

Craig did not reply. He watched Captain Jones step into the ring spryly and signal for attention.

"Before we get started," said the skipper, "I want to say that I believe you've sized up Jim Craig wrong. It's easy for an officer to smack down an A.B. when he knows that it's mutiny for the seaman to hit back. But there's not many mates like Craig—willing to settle differences fair and square. You've got to admit that he's game for trying."

A cheer went up, and Craig glanced around surprisedly. Duggin, the Swede and several others were shouting encouragement at him. Red Miggs scowled; spat his gum over the ropes. Captain Jones nodded, and someone rang a ship's bell.

Miggs came out of his corner charging. Craig sidestepped easily as the bosun's glove shot past his ear. Miggs was not bothering to feel his opponent out; he wanted to get it finished as soon as possible. Craig moved back to the ropes as Miggs whirled and drove in, head low, fists working like triphammers. Suddenly, a jolting uppercut snapped Miggs' fiery head upward. The bosun staggered away; shook off the effects of the blow dazedly. Craig shuffled forward, but Miggs kept out of reach, his eyes bright and shifting.

That uppercut had come as a sobering shock, and Red Miggs realized that the bronzed young man was no setup. He danced on his toes lumberingly, locking his right hand to his chest. Lashing out with a hard left, he stepped in close and stabbed the right at Craig's body. Craig stood firm, and they exchanged a flurry of steaming punches.

The crew set up a bellowing tumult as Miggs bored in. Leather fell with a wet thud, and Craig bobbed away, his nostrils crimson. The big bosun straightened; sent out a pawing left. Craig's head rolled with the blow, but before the mate could regain his balance, Miggs whipped a smacking haymaker to the base of his long jaw.

It seemed to Craig that the sea and sky had exploded. His back whacked the canvas, and a revolving heaven seemed pierced with millions of white needle

points. He rolled over on his stomach and tried to arise, but his knees were like rubber. He heard Captain Jones counting. Then a bell rang.

"You better give up, Mr. Craig." Tom Walters was wiping his face with a wet towel. The firmament adjusted itself, and Craig saw Red Miggs sitting placidly in the opposite corner. He felt his bruised jaw and found it bloody. "The bell saved you that time," continued Walters in a nasal whine. "But you'll never last another round. That guy's dynamite—"

Craig lurched to his feet with the bell. Red Miggs was advancing slowly this time, calm as a butcher. With a heavy, flat-footed movement, Miggs aimed a short punch at his enemy's heart. The glove slid under Craig's armpit, and the mate brought a thumping right hook over to Miggs' ear. Miggs went down on one knee, but got up instantly.

The crew yowled expectantly as Miggs squared his shoulders and again waded into Craig with both fists. The bosun was fighting mad, and his anger could be appeased only by a quick knockout. Craig took the battering stolidly. His left cheek had become a dark smear, and his arms seemed like lead weights; but he kept shuffling back, parrying to keep those sledgehammer punches from his jaw.

Abruptly, Craig halted, dodged a hurtling glove and whapped a curving left against the bosun's kidney. Miggs stiffened as if stabbed with a knife, and Craig slammed his right fist to the solar plexus. To Craig it seemed that his glove sank in as far as the wrist. Miggs' cheeks became an odd whitish color. He started to crumple, and Craig clipped him neatly on the chin.

The hatch cover shuddered under two hundred pounds of dead weight. Captain Jones counted ten, and it was all over.

"Nice work, lad." The skipper patted Craig's back exuberantly. Duggin, the Swede, Trugham and the entire black gang crowded around to grasp his hand. Craig wiped off the blood; nodded cheerfully. He had expected resentment and received congratulations. It puzzled him slightly.

"Shake, Mr. Mate!" Red Miggs offered his hamlike paw, and Craig squeezed it heartily. "I'm thanking you for dragging me out of the hold that time," muttered Miggs in a husky voice. "I couldn't thank you proper till we'd settled this scrap man to man. Say, I got a bottle of good Bourbon hid in my locker. What do you say you and me—"

"Sorry, I never drink on shipboard," Craig replied crisply. "By the way, bosun, that after bulkhead needs painting." He put on his coat, pulled each sleeve down with an efficient jerk and climbed up the deck ladder.

IV

CAPTAIN ULYSSES S. JONES propped his feet on his desk and pointed his pipestem at Craig demonstratively. "Here's the idea," he stated. "What do you look forward to most when you're in port?"

"Getting back to sea again, I suppose," said Craig.

"Exactly," said the skipper. "A seaman's always wishing he was where he isn't. I love the sea, but I always wanted to go to school and learn things, like the landlubbers. Instead, I worked hard, bought my own ship and started to make real money. Still I wasn't content. I wanted the advantages of the land; but the sea was in my blood, and I couldn't leave it. So I decided to toss tradition overboard and turn my respectable merchant ship into a sort of yacht."

"A yacht?" Craig was really fuddled.

"The customary procedure aboard merchant vessels is to make the crew live in a pigsty, pay 'em as little as possible and make 'em work like hell," said the skipper. "In that way the shipowner sometimes makes money. I didn't want to make money. All I wanted was to sail the blue water and have a good time doing it. I couldn't afford a yacht; so I carry cargo to pay expense. My crew has been selected carefully. They're all good sea-

men, but they have other interests also."

"Like Mr. Gear?" suggested Craig.

"And like me," said the skipper. "Those fancy papers you see on the wall are all diplomas. I take correspondence school courses. Psychology's my favorite study; but I'm also a plumber, a radio operator and an amateur detective."

"It sounds crazy," remarked Craig.

"Perhaps," the captain replied. "But Mr. Trugham is an excellent mathematician and astronomer, able to handle a ship or an account book. Mr. Gear has revolutionized the engineroom. Our cook, Henri, was chef at the St. Francis Hotel before I lured him to sea. And Bastinoff, the ordinary seaman, is a celebrated composer of concertos for the bassoon."

Craig stared at the patterns in the rug. "What if all merchant ships were run this way?" he ventured.

"Might not be so bad," replied Captain Jones dryly. "On most vessels the crew hate the officers, the officers hate the skipper and the skipper hates everybody. It's not that way aboard the *Sesame*."

"Something's wrong, though," said Craig. "You haven't forgotten that fire in the cargo hold?"

Captain Jones shook his head. "I analyzed the charred dunnage," he said. "You were right about the kerosene."

"I'll bet Roderick Stamm had a hand in it," declared Craig.

"Stamm's in San Francisco."

"An incendiary bomb planted in the hold would do the work," Craig contended. "The Silver Triangle outfit seems determined to put you out of business."

"Can't understand it," said the skipper. "I'll ask Oakie Trumbull about the matter when we reach India. All our cargo comes from Oakie's plantation in Chanpur."

"What does he raise?" asked Craig.

"A rare specie of benne," he answered. "The plants thrive only on the Eastern Ghats, and the seeds are used exclusively for the manufacture of Odalisque Soap. Oakie developed the specie by interpollenization. His brother Oscar, invented the soap."

"Then Oscar runs the soap company?"

Captain Jones shook his head. "Poor Oscar died last year," he stated. "Both the soap company and the plantation now belong to Oakie. You'll meet Oakie Trumbull when we arrive in Chanpur."

THE Sesame slushed into Chanpur early one morning, just as a dazzling ribbon of gold streaked across the Bay of Bengal. High above the forecastle head loomed the green and purple heights of the Eastern Ghats, and directly in front of the prow lay a sprawling waterfront. Scores of squat, bulging luggers bounced around the sun-stained water, an advancing tide licked the yellow beach and dew-drenched palms glinted like splinters of emerald.

Chanpur itself was a bundle of dingy white buildings laced together with crooked streets. Near the wharves stood an open fish market, a bazaar and a dilapidated temple surrounded by squawling beggars. The *Sesame's* steam winches had already begun to rumble when Jim Craig strode down the plank.

"You come with me," Captain Jones told him. "We'll walk over to Oakie's plantation."

"I ought to stay here," said Craig. "The cargo—"

"Bother the cargo," grunted the skipper. "My men have handled cargo before. Come on."

With a springy step the old skipper went jauntily across the waterfront, waving now and then at turbaned, bowing figures. Several mongrel dogs growled at their heels raffishly as Captain Jones paused to toss a few copper coins at the beggars.

"Delightful place, India," he declared, inhaling a particularly rancid odor. "After months of clean salt breezes, it's good to sniff something noxious. Restores a man's sense of values."

Jim Craig snified also. He was beginning to understand the skipper better. Shoving back his cap, he gaped leisurely at the crumbled carvings on the temple and admired the flashing color that greeted him

at every turn. Strings of silver-finned fish; brown men toting bundles of faggots; a cow with jeweled horns—

"A thousand greetings, *sahibs!*"

Lustrous eyes and teeth smiled at them from beneath a lumpy turban. The Hindu was big and broad, with a face like that of a bloated eagle. Behind him was a large palanquin born by four stalwart coolies. He raised the door and thrust one hand out invitingly.

"For your pleasure," he purred. "I am sent by *Sahib* Trombool to avoid you the long and dusty venture to the plantation."

"Trumbull must be sick," mused Captain Jones. "He never was this considerate before." He climbed into the palanquin, and Craig crawled in beside him.

They found the transportation little better than walking, for the palanquin jounced and joggled creakily, its bearers trotting along at a fast pace. Jim Craig stretched out his long legs, lit a cigarette and lifted one of the wooden shutters curiously. They were proceeding down a dark, winding street which seemed to be getting darker and more crooked every minute.

"I thought the plantation was *behind* the village," said Craig. "We're going toward—"

THE boxlike litter dropped with a rattling thud. Craig's body stiffened, and his head nearly went through the roof. Captain Jones uttered a hoarse bark; grabbed for the door. A bullet splintered the shutter, an inch above Craig's shoulder.

"Duck!" Craig shouted the word as a second slug whistled past the skipper's nose. They both crouched low; but it was like hiding in a match box. Pressing on the opposite door, Craig lunged outside. They were in a blind alley which was completely roofed from an upper window. Craig felt something sting his arm, and started to run.

Captain Jones was already ahead of him, racing for the nearest doorway. Plaster splattered from the wall as Jones disappeared through the aperture. Craig stumbled in behind, gripping his bleeding arm. The curved doorway led to a small hall which was boarded off from the rest of the buildings with thick timbers.

"We've been trapped," rumbled the skipper. He noticed Craig's arm. "Hurt bad?"

Craig shook his head. "Look," he muttered, "they're coming!"

The four palanquin bearers were barring the only exit from the alley and advancing toward the house with cautious steps. Each man carried a small caliber revolver, and each face was maliciously grim.

"Stand away from the entrance," Captain Jones advised Craig. "They won't dare come in here. This was the house of Punrab, the leper. It's unclean, and they're afraid of it."

Jim Craig was not so confident. The four coolies looked too dumb to be afraid of anything. He crouched on the floor, and his good hand rested on a loose cobblestone. They were still advancing, dark eyes gleaming wickedly. Craig sucked in his breath. A crimson pool was puddling beneath his fingertips. He could see the Hindus wedging together, blocking all chance of escape.

A shrill, gibbering cry rang from the shadows. It seemed to come from above the door, and it made Craig's scalp prickle. The four natives froze, their mouths drawn with horror; and, employing great presence of mind, Jim Craig fiercely heaved the cobblestone.

It struck the second man on the right, smacking his forehead with a dead *clunk*. The coolie plumped to the ground, while his companions skeltered up the alley, robes flapping. Turning the corner, they knocked down two native policemen, who had finally been aroused by the gunshots. Instead of starting in pursuit, the policemen arose angrily and came to investigate the cause of the mischief.

Jim Craig was only vaguely conscious of what happened after that. He knew that someone had placed him in a cart which was jogging over the cobbles. The sky was very blue, and it hurt his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in the skipper's cabin on the *Sesame*.

"YOU'LL be in shipshape by tomorrow," said Captain Jones. "Nothing serious; but you lost a lot of blood. Walters, hand me that cotton."

The weazened steward looked questioningly at the skipper, then at Jim Craig and finally at a heap of fluffy white cotton on the desk. A trickle of perspiration wormed down his cheek and he shivered visibly. "You know I can't bear to touch cotton, sir," he whined. "Just looking at it makes me feel crawly inside!"

"I forgot," chuckled the skipper. He picked up the cotton and began pulling it apart. Walters shuddered again; then scooted out the door. The captain wrapped a bandage around Craig's arm. "Sure pretty the way you heaved that rock," he said.

"But the voice in the house," countered Craig. "Where'd it come from?"

"From me," said the skipper. "I told them I was the unclean spirit of Punrab, the leper." He pointed at an extra-large diploma on the wall. "Ventriloquism," he explained. "I learned it in twenty lessons."

Craig sat up on the bunk and saw a bald, rotund man with sandy sideburns enter the cabin. The newcomer wore a high winged collar, a stringy tie, and his clothes hung to his portly form like bleached gunnysacking.

"Ahoy, Oakie," said Captain Jones. "Meet Jim Craig."

Oakie Trumbull's kewpie-like face expanded to a prim smile, and he offered his hand delicately. "Shake," he urged. "Any pal of Jones's is a pal of mine. I'm sorry to hear about this dreadful occurrence. Who placed the finger upon you?"

"We'd like to know," said Craig, giving Trumbull a puzzled glance.

"The cops grilled a confession out of the guy you sloughed," Trumbull informed him. "He's a member of the Rahanda mob—a group who practice thuggery along the coast. You see, we in India have organizations very much like the American gangsters. Those men were hired to kick you off."

"*Knock* us off," corrected Captain Jones.

"That's what I mean," nodded Trumbull, his moon cheeks becoming pinkish. "But I have no idea who hired them."

"I have," said Jim Craig cryptically.

"Look," said the skipper, grasping Oakie Trumbull by his frayed lapel. "I've carried your cargoes for ten years. Have you any reason for wanting to cancel my contract?"

"None at all," replied Trumbull quickly. "But I think you should know something: I'm returning to America with you. I've sold my plantation and the entire Odalisque Soap Company!"

Captain Jones sank into a chair limply.

"I've lived in India since nineteen ten," said Trumbull in a plaintive tone. "My experiments with the benne seed are completed. I want to go back home and see all the things I've read about. I want to walk down Broadway with two blondes, meet all the gangsters and learn that apple dance—"

"Can't blame you, Oakie," sighed Captain Jones. "But what happens to me?"

"Your contract still holds good for twenty years," Trumbull stated. "I took care of that."

"Thanks, Oakie," said the skipper, greatly relieved. "Who'd you sell the company to?"

"Blamed if I know," was the flustered reply. "Some men came and offered me a million dollars for it. I didn't ask any questions. I just signed."

"This may explain a few things," Craig cut in. "The Silver Triangle Line has evidently learned about the sale, and they're willing to resort to murder to get Captain Jones's contract."

"They can't get away with it!" Oakie Trumbull blurted out hotly. "I'll tip the mitt to those chiseling slobs."

"Half the time I don't know what he's saying," the captain remarked. "He gets that lingo out of detective books and tries to swallow it in one gulp. Why don't you speak English?"

"Okey-doke," said Trumbull obligingly.

When Jim Craig left the cabin, he saw Tom Walters standing in the alleyway. The steward winked at him knowingly; followed him to the midship deck.

"Crackpots," said Walters. "The skipper and Trumbull both. Neither one knows enough to keep out of the rain."

"The skipper's got a wall full of diplomas, and Trumbull has a million dollars," Craig shot back. "You call that dumb?"

"Look at the way this ship is run," persisted the steward. "There's no rules—"

"If you want rules, join the navy," said Craig briskly. As he walked away, Tom Walters glared at his broad back, muttered a testy oath and went into the midship companion.

V

IT TOOK three days to sink the ship to her Plimsoll with cargo. Second Mate Trugham supervised loading, using a carefully drawn plan of the cargo holds. Since the skipper was unwilling to trust a native within fifty yards of the vessel, the crew did stevedore's work, hefting cargo sixteen hours a day.

Red Miggs was a hellcat on wheels. He pleaded, cursed, sang, plopped sacks into the slings and handled a steam winch as if he intended to tear it apart with his bare hands. There was little loafing and no discontent. One morning Bastinoff, the musician, reeled across the waterfront sotted with wine. Five men promptly tossed him into the bay, sobered him up over a barrel and put him in the number three hold to stack cargo.

Jim Craig worked along with them, watched—and continued to wonder.

Late at night the final load of cargo arrived in a big wagon. Craig had the sacks whisked aboard and was starting up the gangplank when he saw the wagon driver peering out of the dock-shed. A bright cluster light shone on the Hindu's face, and Craig recognized the dark, aquiline features. It was the eagle-faced native who had enticed him into the palanquin.

Craig entered the shed by another door and approached the man from behind. The Hindu appeared to be staring intently at the *Sesame's* amidships, and when Craig was within five feet of him, he whirled catlike.

"A thousand greetings, *sahib*—"

The Hindu's eyes became startled as he saw Jim Craig's set face and the bandaged left arm. He fumbled within the folds of his robe at the moment Craig swung. Craig's punch was clean and hard. It struck the Hndu flush on the jaw and sent him fluttering backward like a mallard full of buckshot. Brown legs protruded from the sweeping robes as the man hit the planking, and a revolver suddenly gleamed in the Hindu's hand.

Jim Craig's early youth had been spent booting footballs for Polytechnic High School, and this experience now proved its worth. With one arm injured and a gun wobbling at him from below, there was nothing to do but kick. His toe thumped the Hindu's wrist with remarkable accuracy; the revolver splashed flame and went skittering across the dock. Writhing like a dervish, the Hindu found his feet and sprinted for the seaward end of the wharf. Outrunning Craig, he sped out of the shed and onto the loading platform.

A frantic scream greeted Craig when he emerged into the starlight. The Hindu was pinned to the floor timbers by a massive, apelike body, and chattering his fear to the sky.

"Should I smack him silly?" asked Red Miggs, lifting a gnarled fist. "Or do you want to do it yourself?"

"Let him up," ordered Craig.

The Hindu arose shakily, Miggs keeping a firm hold on his collar. "A thousand pardons, *sahib*," he whimpered. "So innocent I am of harm—"

"Why were you prowling around here?" Craig snapped.

For several seconds the man gazed silently at the flooring. Then, with an abrupt, wriggling movement, he literally leaped out of his clothing. Red Miggs stood

holding an empty robe, while the brown, naked figure attempted to jump from the wharf.

Before he could spring, Jim Craig clipped him on the ear with a blow that spun him half around. He toppled off the pier like a lump of lead and sank immediately. Red Miggs threw the robe away and watched the expanding ripples. A few bubbles glistened on the surface. The Hindu did not re-appear.

"Looks like that's the end of him," said Craig quietly.

"Don't kid yourself," growled Miggs. "Them Hindus can hold their breath indefinitely."

They watched the dark, star-flecked water for about ten minutes and finally returned to the ship. While they were walking up the plank, a dripping head bobbed from under the wharf and glared up at the *Sesame's* blunt bows. With an unpleasant, watery chuckle, the Hindu swam shoreward.

JIM CRAIG was playing poker in the fireroom when the skipper's voice boomed at him from the fiddley speaker. He threw down his cards, climbed amidships and noticed that the *Sesame's* funnel was topped by a feather of lavender smoke. Craig smiled indulgently. Colored smoke was rather soothing to the eye when billowing against a crystal blue heaven. No doubt about it, the chief engineer was something of a genius.

Oakie Trumbull was in the skipper's cabin when Craig entered. The paunchy, moonfaced little man had the desk piled high with parchment folders. "I was showing Jones my collection of rare flowers," he said proudly. "Sneak a gander."

Craig peered over Captain Jones' shoulder and saw only an array of chopped-up plant fibers. "They don't look like flowers to me," he said. "Where are the petals?"

"I only collect the most interesting parts," replied Trumbull. "Petals have little interest, since they are merely meant to attract insects. The vital parts of a flower are the stamens and pistils, for they perform the function of reproduction. This specimen is really a wow."

"What is it?"

"The capsule of the purple poppy," said Trumbull, holding up a small, brownish object. "I'll split it with my knife. Here, smell this."

Craig sniffed at a brown stain on Trumbull's forefinger. The odor was heavily sweet, languorous.

"That," stated Trumbull, "is pure opium. Now, this one over here—"

Captain Jones swiveled around. "We'll be in San Francisco tonight, Craig," he cut in. "I know you haven't been satisfied with the way this ship is operated; so I've decided to pay you off as soon as we reach port."

Craig's jaw dropped, and his throat became very dry.

"I've admired you," continued the skipper. "In time you'll probably be a big man in the shipping business. You'll make money; but you won't have any fun. That's the penalty a man has to pay for success."

"Supposing . . . I wanted to stay on?" ventured Craig.

"Sorry," said Captain Jones, with an air of finality. "I can't keep a mate who doesn't get on with the crew."

Craig went on deck feeling very annoyed. Outside, Tom Walters was standing suspiciously close to the captain's porthole. "It's a rotten shame," said the steward. "Firing the best officer aboard! I'd like to see the old man get his. See?"

"You would?" Craig was impressed by the steward's acid tone.

"Sure thing," snarled Walters. "He gripes me stiff."

"Too bad I can't settle with him for this," muttered Craig sourly.

"We ain't in Frisco yet," said Walters, his beady eyes glittering. "Lots of things can happen—like that fire in the hold, for instance. See?"

"No," replied Craig. "I don't quite see."

"I got friends in Frisco," said Walters mysteriously. "You stick with me and—"

Craig grasped the steward by the arm.

"Let's go in and tell our troubles to the skipper," he suggested. "Nothing like confession to soothe the soul."

"Whadda you mean?" flared Walters. "Leggo!" He twisted his body violently and lashed his fist into Craig's neck. Craig gulped, and the veins in this throat stood out like cords. He regarded Walters as scum, too despicable to fool with; and Jim Craig knew how to treat scum.

Tom Walters never knew what hit him. Craig's uppercut turned his body to jelly, his eyes to glass. Hiking the steward over his shoulder, Craig took him into Captain Jones' cabin; flopped him on the bunk. "Here's the rat who built the bonfire," he declared. "I figured you might want to talk to him when he comes to."

"Much obliged," said the skipper, stroking his mustache calmly. "I've suspected Walters for a long time. Oakie and I will question him."

"We'll grill him," added Trumbull, bundling up his flower fragments. He beamed at Craig owlishly.

They both reminded Craig of two kids about to play cops and robbers, and he doubted if they could get much information out of a sneering rodent like Tom Walters. Walters had hinted that something might happen before the ship reached San Francisco—something similar to the fire in the hold. Craig decided to investigate.

ARMED with a flashlight, he searched the forepeak, the forward and midship holds, combing every corner for evidence of explosives. It was late evening when he reached the afterhold, and off to starboard the lights of San Francisco could be seen glimmering faintly through a veil of sea mist.

Slipping through the manhole, he lowered himself to the 'tween deck. The place was jampacked with bulging sacks, which were kept in position by nailed timbers. The flashlight's icy circle danced nervously over the beams and bulkheads. A rolling ground swell made the hull plates creak, and as Craig crawled over the cargo he could feel the pulsing thrust of the propeller. He played the light against the closed hatch; then snapped the switch.

Crouching in the darkness, Craig inhaled deeply. He could detect a faint saccharine fragrance, an odor distinctly apart from the musty jute. The inky blackness seemed to sharpen his sense of smell, and he advanced slowly, his nostrils leading him to a spot directly beneath the hatch. He recognized the odor now. It was the same languorous perfume that had emanated from a sticky fluid on Oakie Trumbull's finger.

He snapped the light on, took a jackknife from his pocket and slit one of the sacks. A flurry of tiny seeds spurted from the gash. Craig dug into the seeds with his hands and pulled out a wad of brown, sticky gum. Raw opium; the sack was full of it.

Under the guise of a pleasant, bumbling eccentric, Captain Jones was undoubtedly engaged in smuggling narcotics. The benne seeds were nothing but a blind. Craig crawled up the ladder shakily and sat on the afterhatch while a cool moist breeze soothed his face.

"Look to starboard, mister. That ship seems to be headin' right for us!"

Craig was aware of Red Miggs standing beside him, chewing complacently at a withered cigarette butt. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the red running light of another ship. A series of diamond-like flashes sparked from the vessel's bridge. "She's signaling for us to stop," observed Craig. "She may be a patrol boat."

"We got nothing to worry about," said Miggs.

"That's what you think," Craig told him. "There's enough dope under that hatch to send us all to Alcatraz."

"Dope?" The bosun's cigarette fell from his lips. "How'd it get there?"

Craig shook his head; then, with sudden inspiration, smacked one fist against his open palm. "That Hindu in Chanpur!" he exclaimed. "The last load of cargo was brought in his wagon. The stuff was planted!"

"We stowed it on top," Miggs reminded him.

"Heave it overboard," ordered Craig. "If they find it below decks, we're sunk. Tear off those hatch covers and fall to!"

As the bosun bellowed for all hands, Craig scuttled to the bridge and rang for full speed ahead. By the time the other vessel was only three hundred yards away. He made her out to be a trim motorship of the Silver Triangle Line.

Captain Jones was nowhere in sight, so Craig snapped his orders to the second mate and returned aft. Cluster lights flooded the welldeck while the crew threw off tarpaulins. Craig stationed himself at a winch; lifted one of the booms. The motorship was swinging in a wide circle, intending to pull alongside. A megaphoned voice from the vessel's bridge ordered the *Sesame* to heave to.

The *Sesame's* boom dipped; deposited five sacks on deck. The crew hastily dumped them overside, and an angry tumult rang from the motorship's port rail. Men were ganged there, armed with guns and clubs. An eerie whistle sounded from the opposite direction, and Craig sighted the swinging spotlight of a coast guard. The *Sesame* was sandwiched between both vessels.

With a superior burst of speed, the motorship veered recklessly. There was a grinding metallic sound as both ships scraped hulls and propeller blades tore up the sea in unison. Craig heard the clash of chains, the fall of planking. The crew of the motorship was attempting to come aboard.

"Keep 'em back!" Craig shouted. "They know we're trying to unload this stuff, and they want the sea cops to catch us red handed!" He gave the winch controls to the deck engineer and darted from under the mast table.

VI

GUNS blazed amidships and belaying pins cracked down as the Silver Triangle men jumped to the *Sesame's* main deck. Plucking a stanchion from its socket, Jim Craig scrambled up the well deck-ladder and advanced flailing the metal bar with both hands.

Two of the motorship's crew dropped before him like tenpins, and the others retreated hurriedly. A bullet zipped past his head, and the grinding rumble of hull plates arose to a screeching din as both ships wallowed in the swell.

Duggin was hurling fire buckets from the boatdeck, and the French cook brandished a meat cleaver in the galley entrance. Firemen flocked out of the fiddley, wielding crowbars and burners; but the invaders continued to leap aboard, and the coast guard vessel blew her whistle commandingly.

Craig smashed through the clutter of sliding, grappling figures and plunged into the foreward deckhouse. Someone grabbed his knees, and he fell sprawling in the alleyway. He kicked himself free, closed the door behind him and stood facing Captain Jones. The skipper's blue eyes were grave and perturbed.

"I've ordered Mr. Gear to stop the engine," said Jones. "There's no sense fighting. Call your men off, and we'll lower a ladder for the coast guard."

"But you dont understand," Craig protested. "They're trying to frame us—"

The skipper shrugged his shoulders. "Can't be helped," he said. "I won't have my ship turned into a slaughter house."

There was no need to lower a ladder, for the coast guards bow nudged the *Sesame's* welldeck, and armed bluejackets piled over the side, followed by a white-capped officer. Within a few minutes, the rioting had ceased. Men growled among themselves as the coast guard sailors herded them indiscriminately to the after-deck. Craig and Captain Jones met the naval officer by the bridge ladder.

"You're all under arrest," said the officer bluntly. "We're taking charge of this vessel."

"You haven't any right to do that," protested Craig. "You've made a mistake—"

"I don't believe so," snapped a sharp, twangy voice. Craig wheeled around. The voice belonged to Roderick Stamm. Stamm had come aboard from the motorship, and he appeared as stiff and well-groomed as ever. "The Silver Triangle Line is always willing to work with the government," he said, his thin lips curled smugly. "I commend Captain Howe of the Coast Guard for his diligence—"

"Please stay out of this," said Captain Howe curtly. "What cargo is the *Sesame* carrying, Mr. Jones?"

"Seeds," replied the skipper.

"Is that all?"

"No-o," drawled Jones thoughtfully. "I also have quite a cargo of opium. I can explain that better if you gentlemen will come into the charthouse."

JIM CRAIG followed them into the charthouse. Peering over Stamm's shoulder, he saw Tom Walters tied firmly to a chair. The steward's beady eyes were rimmed red, and a bright desk-light glared into his face. A square instrument with two dials stood beside the chair and was connected to Walter's wrist with a copper band. Oakie Trumbull sat in front of the contrivance, puffing a cigarette.

"This machine is constructed to measure a man's psycho-galvanic reflexes," Captain Jones expounded. "It operates as a lie dectector. Now, Walters, I want you to tell me who hired you to start that fire in the *Sesame's* hold."

"Nobody," snarled the steward.

Oakie Trumbull stared at the dials. "That was a lie," he announced. "I'll have to give him the works."

"Not again!" pleaded Walters, his sunken cheeks paling. "I can't stand it!"

Trumbull picked up a large roll of cotton and slowly pulled it apart in front of Walter's bugging eyes. The steward's body tightened, perspiration rolled down his neck and a blue vein appeared on his temple. Finally, Trumbull brushed the cotton against the prisoner's face and fingertips, and Walters yelled as if seared by a flame.

"I'll tell—" he sobbed. "Stamm wanted the skipper's contract with the soap company. Stamm planned everything. He tried to kill Captain Jones, destroy the ship; and his agents in India planted the opium aboard—"

"You're lying!" barked Stamm wrathfully.

"I'm afraid you can't weasel out of it," said Captain Jones. "I've already got a signed confession from Walters. Furthermore, your own actions gave you away. You informed the coast guard that we had dope on board, and you used one of the Silver Triangle ships to make sure that the coast guard would find us. Then, when my men tried to get rid of the narcotics, you committed a brazen act of piracy to preserve the evidence!"

"It sounds plausible," admitted Captain Howe. "The Silver Triangle men had no authority to board your vessel. Also, I fail to see how Mr. Stamm could have known of the opium unless he, himself, had it placed there. I must take you into custody, Mr. Stamm."

"I'll fight you!" blustered Stamm. "I have lawyers—"

"And I've got proof!" returned Captain Jones, waving a paper under his nose.

The coast guard captain pushed Stamm out onto the bridge. "I'll take this man, Walters, along also," he stated. "But there's one thing more I want to know. Where on earth did you ever get a lie detector?"

"My second mate invented it," replied Jones. "It's really an instrument for measuring waves."

"I been tricked!" gasped Walters.

"We only used it for the psychological effect," explained the skipper. "We didn't need a machine to tell when *you* were lying."

WHEN they were gone, Jim Craig sat on the table disconsolately. "Looks like I botched things up," he said gloomily. "Stamm's men wouldn't have boarded us if I hadn't started to throw that stuff over the side."

"That one act of violence is what will send Stamm to prison and ruin the Silver Triangle Line," said Captain Jones. "What's more, you enabled us to force a confession from Walters."

"I still think we should have used a rubber hose on the steward," groused Oakie Trumbull. "The wretched crook would have blown his topper if we'd slipped him the heat."

"We inflicted a much more subtle torture," said the captain. "Walters had an ingrained aversion to raw cotton. The feel of cotton or even the sight of it being torn apart caused a sensory and nervous disturbance more terrible than pain. His hatred of cotton had developed into a real psychosis. Schlegenheim has written of a similar case in—"

"Tell me this," Craig interrupted. "Why did Stamm want your contract with the soap company?"

"It's all explained in this radiogram I received a few hours ago," said Captain Jones. "Oakie didn't know it, but he sold the Odalisque Company to the biggest soap manufacturers in America.

"Production of Odalisque Soap will soon start on an international scale, since its oil has been found to contain an agent that revitalizes the skin. This means that the company will demand millions of tons of benne seeds. The Silver Triangle Line learned about the deal ahead of time from its Indian operatives."

"So they tried to steal your contract," added Trumbull. "They knew the agreement would be canceled if you were convicted of a crime—such as hauling opium."

"The radio message contains an excellent offer from the Dagget Line," Captain Jones went on. "They'll take a lease on my contract, but the *Sesame* will still haul her usual quota."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Craig, but his bruised features failed to show much exultation. "I wish you luck."

"And I wish I could keep you on as a mate," replied the skipper. "But as I said—"

"I know," said Craig morosely. "Forget it."

He went outside and leaned on the midship rail. The Gate Bridge was a string of twinkling lights off the bow, and he could see the Silver Triangle motorship plowing along with the coast guard. Wandering aft, he heard the melancholy wail of a bassoon. Men were sprawled on the poopdeck adjusting splints and bandages.

"That's a mean cut on your forehead." Red Miggs grinned at him from beneath a helmet of gauze. "Lemme patch it."

"I'm okay," said Craig. "How's the crew?"

"Some of 'em got busted up a little; but nobody was hurt," said Miggs. "They all think you're pretty swell."

"Huh?"

"I tried to tell 'em different, but they wouldn't listen," the bosun continued. "They say any guy that can thrash Red Miggs and slap three gorillas down with one swipe of a stanchion is good enough for them. They're screwy."

"I'll be sorry to sign off," said Craig.

"You can't sign off," chuckled Miggs. "Maybe you don't know it, but the skipper's got you under an iron-bound contract for three trips."

"But he fired me—"

"Hell, he can't fire you," repeated Miggs. "He just said that to improve your psychology. The skipper's a nut on psychology."

Craig pondered for a moment. The salt air stung his gashed forehead pleasantly, and a pleasing oily smell wafted up the ventilator. The *Sesame* had suddenly taken on the charm of a sea-going Utopia where tough men were banded together to sail the seas easily and not worry too much about paychecks.

"Say," whispered Miggs confidingly. "I've still got that bottle of Bourbon—"

Craig's gray eyes sparkled with interest. "The skipper doesn't allow liquor aboard ship," he said amiably. "We'd better get rid of it—right away!"

They didn't waste a minute. . . .

Gaunt Max Halberg swung his whip viciously

West of Water

By PHILIP KETCHUM
Author of "Paths of Conquest," "Wagons West," etc.

The land is parched and the cattle dying; the old range-hates are remembered sharply—and Sheriff Tom Moffatt must untangle a mystery by the light of barns aflame

EIGHT spools of barbed wire stood on the station platform at Wall; old Sam Price squatted in a chair on the porch of the hotel down the street; and out on the road from Bitter Creek, a cloud of dust marked the approach of a wagon.

Sheriff Tom Moffatt lounged in the doorway of his office. Occasionally he glanced toward the station platform and then over at Sam Price and then up the road toward Bitter Creek. He was a tall young man, usually good-humored and in the opinion of some folks, too easy-going for a sheriff. But right now there was a thoughtful expression in his eyes and a slight frown on his forehead. That barbed wire, the cloud of dust on the Bitter Creek road and the presence of Sam Price all spelled trouble.

A short, heavy-set man came out of the hotel, nodded to Sam Price and then crossed the street toward the sheriff's office. As he came up to Moffatt, he wiped a hand across his face, pushed back his hat and said glumly, "If this dry spell lasts much longer I'll be finished. I never saw the like of it. The grass on my place is burned out worse than it is around here."

Moffatt nodded. He said, "But you've still got water, Herman, and that's more than Price has."

Herman Fletcher looked back across the street. He said slowly, "Yes, I'm better off than Price, but not much better. I've only got one well left, an' the water in it is mighty low."

"How's Bitter Creek?" Moffatt asked.

"Not much more than a trickle."

The cloud of dust on the road to the north was drawing nearer. Moffatt saw two men come out of the Cattleman's Bar, stare that way and then move over to the hotel porch and join Sam Price. One of the men was Red Slauson, the cattle king's foreman, and the other was one of his riders. Both were wearing guns. Moffatt scowled. He said, "See you later, Herman," and started toward the hotel.

Sam Price was a big man. He was heavy, broad of shoulder. He had a square, stubborn face. His skin was leathery and wrinkled. He was an old man now, but the years had not bowed him. There was in his bearing and in the brightness of his eyes the same arrogance of spirit which had governed him when he controlled the whole of Washata Valley. Moffatt could sense that as he climbed the porch and he could hear it in Price's voice when the old man rasped, "Well, what do you want?"

Moffatt shrugged. He said easily, "Nothing, Sam. I just dropped over."

Sam Price grunted. Slauson stared at Moffatt blankly and the other man looked down at his boots.

Up at the north end of the street a wagon wheeled into view. Moffatt heard it but he didn't look around. Watching Price, he saw the old fellow's lips tighten, saw his hands clench.

"Well?" Slauson asked.

"Stop him," Price commanded.

Red Slauson moved past Moffatt to the street and Price got up.

Moffatt said, "Easy, Sam." But if Price heard him, he gave no sign. A heavy scowl on his face, he started forward.

SWINGING around to face the street, Moffatt saw Halberg's wagon rocking forward. Max Halberg, a gaunt, thin figure, was driving the team. Irene, his daughter, was in the seat beside him. She was wearing a bonnet and Moffatt couldn't clearly see her face, but every line of it was distinct in his memory.

As the team came forward, Slauson moved into the street. He grabbed the reins of the nearest horse just back of the bit. The team stopped and very deliberately, Max Halberg handed the reins to his daughter and took up his whip. "Get back from those horses," he snapped.

Price crossed the boardwalk. "Just a minute, Halberg," he called.

Halberg's face was thin, dust-streaked. As he glanced over at Price he scowled.

"What are you goin' to do with that barbed wire?" Price demanded.

Halberg leaned forward. He said bluntly, "That's none of your damn business, Price. You're through runnin' this valley. Tell your man to back away from my team."

Tom Moffatt stepped down to the boardwalk, every muscle suddenly tense. Price wasn't used to being addressed in that manner. Moffatt could see the back of the old man's neck turn red. He anticipated a sharp answer and then was somewhat astonished when Price said, "All right, Slauson. Let 'em go."

Slauson released his hold on the team and Halberg took the reins from Irene's hands.

"I wouldn't try fencin' Bitter Creek," Price said slowly. "I don't like to see cattle go thirsty."

About to drive on, Halberg changed his mind. "Why not?" he challenged. "We've filed on all that land over there."

"I just wouldn't try it, Halberg," Price answered.

Halberg laughed. There was a bitter note in that laughter and a triumphant note, too. A lot lay behind it. Half a dozen years before, when several small ranchers had moved into the Washata Valley and settled on Bitter Creek, Sam Price had made war on them. The trouble had been so serious that a U. S. marshal had had to come clear things up. And

Price had lost, for the land was public domain and was open to settlement. Price, it seemed now, had forgotten those days, but the men on Bitter Creek hadn't forgotten. They still hated him, and that hatred was reflected in the bitterness of Halberg's laugh.

But now, at last, the Bitter Creek ranchers had the upper hand. Price's wells were dry. He had to have water, and the only water in the valley was in Bitter Creek.

Other men had come out on the street and were watching Halberg and Price. Moffatt glanced at Irene. The girl was looking straight ahead, a tight, set expression on her face.

"I'll build my fence where I damn please," Halberg grated.

Price said nothing and Halberg laughed again. He shook out the reins and drove on to the station.

Slauson swung around. He said, "Look here, Sam. Let me—"

Price shook his head. "Come on, Red. Let's saddle up."

Slauson's face was mottled with anger. He ground out a curse and stared bleakly after Halberg.

Price said again, "Come on," and started for the livery stable.

Tom Moffatt stood where he was before the hotel. He watched Price, Slauson and the third man walk up the street and disappear inside the livery stable. Herman Fletcher moved over to the Cattleman's Bar and pushed through the doors. Several others followed him. A few hung around on the street, their faces grave. Now and then they would glance toward the station platform, where Halberg was loading the spools of barbed wire onto his wagon.

THE shot came suddenly and unexpectedly. It wasn't loud. It was like the breaking of a dry stick. Up on the station platform, Max Halberg, who had been rolling one of the spools of barbed wire toward his wagon, straightened up, clutched at his chest, and then folded up over the spool.

The men in the street stiffened, looked at one another with startled faces.

"Where did that come from?"

Three mounted horsemen rode out of the livery stable and without a glance down the street, turned north. Moffatt's hand moved to his gun. He half drew it, then changed his mind and shoved it back in its holster. Turning, he started to run toward the station platform.

When he got there, Irene had lifted her father from the spool of barbed wire and was bending over him, tearing at his shirt. Short, gasping sobs were coming from her throat. Blood fountained from the wound in Halberg's side and showed in a frothy foam at his mouth and nose. His eyes were wide open and were already glazing.

Doc Walters came rushing up, gave Halberg one glance and then shook his head at Moffatt. Nevertheless, he bent over the man, and from his bag he took a wadding of cotton and pressed it against the wound.

In a strained, cracking voice, Irene said, "Is it—will he—"

Walters made no answer. He didn't look up at the girl.

More people came crowding around, whispering questions, staring soberly at the dying man. Herman Fletcher came up. At a nod from the doctor he bent over Irene and lifted her to her feet. There were tears in her eyes and her body was shaking.

"Well, Sheriff?" barked a voice. "What are you going to do?"

Moffatt swung around. Directly behind him stood Joe Kurth, one of the Bitter Creek ranchers. There was an angry expression on Joe Kurth's broad, bearded face. His eyes bored into Moffatt. Others were staring at him, too, Moffatt suddenly realized. A sharp silence had swept over the crowd.

"Well?" Kurth demanded.

Moffatt straightened. He hadn't cared much for Max Halberg; the bitterness in the man had made him unapproachable. But the cowardliness of his murder sickened Moffatt now.

"Anyone see who fired that shot?" he asked bluntly.

There was no direct answer, but Kurth stepped forward and faced him squarely. "You know who fired that shot," he growled, "and so does every one here. You heard what was said in front of the hotel. And you saw Sam Price and his two thugs ride out of the livery stable an' head west right after Halberg was shot. What I want to know is what you are gonna do about it."

Moffatt looked up the street. The livery stable was in line with the way the shot must have come, but in spite of that and all that had happened, he couldn't think that Price was the man who had shot Halberg. Whatever else might have been said of Sam Price, he was a man who always fought his battles out in the open.

Staring back at Kurth, Moffatt said slowly, "I don't know what I'm going to do."

Kurth swore. He said heavily, "Well, I know what I'm going to do."

Moffatt glanced over at Irene. The girl had been watching him, but as he turned, she looked away. Her face was very pale. To Herman Fletcher, who still stood at her side, she said, in a low voice, "Will you make arrangements about—about my father?"

Moffatt didn't hear what Fletcher answered. He swung around and started walking toward his office.

THROUGHOUT the remainder of the afternoon the Washata valley broiled under the unbroken heat of the sun. In the country to the north of Wall, thin, thirsty cattle clustered about dried up water-holes. A good many of the critters were down for the last time, would never arise again. For almost three months, now, there had been no rain.

Sitting in his office in Wall, Sheriff Tom Moffatt considered the problem facing the valley. It went deeper than the unsolved question as to the murderer of Max Halberg, though it was made more serious by that murder. Sam Price, whose range was to the west and north of Wall, had no water for his stock. Fletcher, whose range was beyond that of Price's, was almost out of water. To the east and south there were several other outfits in almost as bad a fix.

And there was water in Bitter Creek. Not much, but still enough to save some of the stock. Previously, Sam Price had not been able to use the water in Bitter Creek, and certainly, after what had happened, he could expect no help from that direction. Joe Kurth would see to that. Kurth had been as bitter toward Price as Max Halberg.

To top all this off, Sam Price wasn't a man to sit idly by and let his cattle continue to go without water. He had come to this country when the only law was carried in a man's gun, and he still believed in that code.

Trouble loomed ahead.

As the night shadows gathered, Herman Fletcher came over to Moffatt's office.

"Irene Halberg's going to take her father's body home," he reported. "She plans to leave in about an hour and drive it during the early part of the night. Sid Halberg, her brother, got here a little while ago. I don't like the way he talks."

Moffatt nodded. Sid Halberg was just a sixteen-year-old kid, but he did a man's work, considered himself a man. There was the same bitterness in him that had been in his father. Of the whole family only Irene had been untouched by a hatred for Sam Price. And after tonight, Moffatt decided, perhaps she too would grow bitter.

"Kurth's gone, of course," Fletcher continued. "You'll have to watch out for him, Moffatt. The man's a born trouble-maker. He'll stir up the ranchers on Bitter Creek."

Moffatt looked up. "Where was Kurth when that shot was fired at Halberg?"

"I don't know. Why?"

Moffatt shrugged. He said slowly, "Pete Hayes, over at the livery stable, swears that no shot was fired from there."

"Hayes is a friend of Price's, isn't he?"

"Yes."

Fletcher scratched his jaw. He said, "Moffatt, maybe you won't thank me any for telling you this, but over at the Cattleman's Bar they're wondering whether or not Sam Price is too big for you."

Again Moffatt shrugged. He said, "Thanks, Fletcher."

Fletcher looked at him curiously and then went out.

Moffatt got up and walked to the door. He stared up and down the street. The darkness was thickening, but it seemed to have grown no cooler. His shirt was plastered to his back. There was not a breath of air. Here and there people were loitering along the street, and in front of the hotel he saw the Halberg wagon. An impulse came to him to cross over and see Irene, but he put it away, aware of a sudden ache in his heart. Twice, today, Irene had looked at him as though she hadn't seen him. It would be best, he decided, not to hunt her up.

HORSES clattered down Wall's one street and Tom Moffatt made out three riders. They passed the livery stable, the store, the Cattleman's Bar and continued on. Suddenly they swung toward where he was standing, and in the half light Tom Moffatt made out the heavy figure of old Sam Price. Slauson was with him, and so was the third man who had been with him that afternoon.

"Moffatt?" Price called.

"Right here," Moffatt answered quietly.

Price leaned forward. "I hear you're huntin' for me," he snapped. "That so?"

Moffatt shook his head. He said, "No, Sam. I'm not huntin' for you—yet."

The old man's body seemed to relax. "One of my men heard what happened here an' brought me word. I don't know anything about who shot Halberg."

Moffatt stepped forward. Some of the men who had been standing out on the street, he noticed, had drawn closer and were listening to all that was said. A slim, youthful figure crossed the porch of the hotel and stepped down to the street.

"Well?" Price demanded.

"I didn't say anything, Sam," Moffatt answered quietly.

"Price!" grated a voice, "turn around!"

Sam Price turned his head toward the hotel. Sid Halberg stood in the street before it, a gun in his hand. The boy was quivering with passion and his voice, when he spoke again, was high pitched and uneven.

"You killed my father, Price. You didn't give him a chance. You—"

Men were scattering away from the line of fire. Price, hunched over in the saddle, didn't move. Moffatt ran forward. As the boy lifted the gun he lunged for it and struck it aside. A shot exploded and Moffatt felt a searing pain tear across his side. He heard young Halberg cry out, and he glimpsed a gun in the hand of Red Slauson. Whipping a hand to his holster, Moffatt snapped up his own weapon and fired, but Slauson's plunging horse lifted the man out of the way. Moffatt fired again as Slauson wheeled and spurred down the street, but he knew that his bullet had missed.

Holstering his gun he dropped down at Sid Halberg's side. The boy was shot through the arm and the shock and pain had made him unconscious. Men crowded around, and someone ran for Doc Walters. Moffatt stood up. He saw Irene hurrying forward, pushing her way to her brother's side.

Sam Price hadn't left. He still sat on his horse at the edge of the crowd, and when Moffatt stood up, he asked, "How is he?"

"Through the arm," Moffatt answered.

Price shook his head. He said heavily, "I'd give a good deal if this hadn't happened."

Moffatt made no reply. He watched Price turn his horse and ride away, followed by the other man. And then, suddenly, Irene Halberg stood before him. There was a high flush of color in her cheeks, blazing anger in her eyes. "Why did you have to interfere," she cried bit-

terly. "Do you owe Price so much that you have to fight his battles, or are you just afraid to cross him?"

Moffatt swallowed. He said slowly, "Price didn't kill your father, Irene. And if I hadn't interfered—"

Irene Halberg stepped forward. Her hand lashed out, stinging against Moffatt's cheek.

Moffatt lifted his fingers to his face. Somewhere he heard a man laugh, and he wondered what he should say, what he should do.

Irene's eyes measured him scornfully. She swung around without another word and moved to her brother's side. Moffatt stared after her. For several moments he stood where he was, then turning up the street, he headed for the livery stable.

WAR clouds hung low over the Washata Valley. Half a mile to the south of Bitter Creek, running an irregular course from the Washata hills to Caraway's Sink, the Bitter Creek ranchers built their fence, and further to the south, old Sam Price rounded up his cattle, such as were still able to move. Half a dozen, silent, shifty-eyed men with hard-bitten faces drifted into the valley from other ranges. They were men whose holsters were tied down, whose guns were for sale. It was rumored that Sam Price had sent for them and that they were on his payroll.

Sheriff Tom Moffatt, riding over Bitter Creek way, hunted up Slim Gering. Gering was a young man, and between him and Moffatt there had long been a close friendship. The two of them discussed the situation for half an hour. Gering had few suggestions to offer.

"The fence is there an' it'll stay there," he predicted bluntly. "Last night some of Price's men tried to cut it. There was quite a scrap, though no one was seriously hurt."

Moffatt frowned. He said slowly, "There's more water in Bitter Creek than you men need. It runs on down into Caraway's Sink and disappears into the ground. That extra water would save Price's cattle."

"But it won't."

"The Bitter Creek men hate him that much?"

"Yes. And more now, since Halberg's death."

"Who's the real leader?"

"Joe Kurth, I guess. And it won't do any good to talk to him, Moffatt. He wouldn't listen to you. In fact, it won't do you any good to come around here at all. People think you're Price's man."

Moffatt knew that that was true. He left Gering and rode south to see Sam Price.

"What are you going to do, Price?" he demanded abruptly.

"About what?" Price asked.

"About that fence."

The old man's face darkened. He said grimly, "There's water runnin' to waste back of that fence an' my cattle need water. I'm waitin' three more days. If it don't rain heavy by that time, I'm takin' my cattle to Bitter Creek."

Remembering what Gering had told him, Moffatt said, "You tried it last night, I understand."

Price shook his head. "You're wrong there."

"But I heard that an attempt was made last night to cut the fence."

Price again shook his head. "When I make an attempt, I'll cut it."

Moffatt tried to argue with the old cattleman, but he found that he couldn't. Regardless of the way the Bitter Creek ranchers felt toward him, regardless of their claims on the water, Moffatt knew that Price was morally in the right. Water was being wasted and his cattle were dying of thirst. Under such circumstances, any man would have fought.

Heavy of heart, Moffatt turned away. Here was a situation with which he didn't know how to cope. He represented the law, and the law was on the side of the Bitter Creek ranchers. They had filed on the land along the creek and had a right to fence it. But despite the law, he knew

that when the showdown came he would be on the side of Sam Price.

TURNING up toward Herman Fletcher's place, Moffatt got to thinking about the death of Irene's father. He had made little progress toward the solution of that killing. In an envelope in his pocket he had the butt of a brown paper cigarette and a broken match-stick. Those two things he had picked up in a vacant building up the street from the livery stable in Wall. Believing that Price wasn't guilty of the murder, he was sure that the murderer had fired his shot from that building. But he had no other clues as to who the man might be. The building was open. Anyone might have entered it by front or back door and, in the excitement after the killing, might easily have escaped.

There was no one but a Chinese cook at Fletcher's ranch and the cook didn't talk much English. Moffatt gathered that Fletcher and his two hands were away. The cook thought that they had gone to Wall.

Moffatt turned back toward Wall, vaguely troubled. There was more in the picture than he could understand. If it had been Price or one of his men who had shot Halberg, and if Price had admitted making the attempt to cut the fence the night before, the issue would be clear-cut and easy to understand. But Price hadn't shot Halberg and he had said that he hadn't tried to cut the fence. Who, then, had made the attack on the fence, and what had been the purpose?

It was growing dark, and on a sudden impulse, Moffatt swung around and once more headed north. He passed the valley wherein Price was gathering his stock and once or twice he sighted another rider. Two miles south of the fence he drew near to one of Sam Price's line shacks, and at the same time he saw a rider from the north heading that way. The man from the north pulled up at the shack, dismounted and squatted on his heels near the door.

Moffatt drew back. He wasn't sure who that rider was, but the man had made him think of Joe Kurth. And from the way he acted he was waiting to meet someone. Moffatt dismounted, suddenly curious as to what Kurth was doing there. He led his horse over to a draw, hobbled him and crept back to the hilltop. The man at the line shack hadn't moved.

Moffatt once more turned back. He circled around until he figured that he was back of the line shack and then started creeping forward. It was now rapidly growing dark, but it wasn't so dark that he could move swiftly and expect to escape detection, and before he reached the back of the shack he heard a second rider come up. The slight breeze carried him the murmuring sound of voices.

Moving closer to the shack, Moffatt occasionally caught a word or two and then, as the men moved to the side, he heard one of them say, "We've got to do it. Things are moving too slow."

"Tonight?" asked the second man.

"Yes. We'll take Halberg's place. It'll make a nice fire."

Both men laughed and Moffatt lifted his head. They were mounting their horses. In the fading light, Tom Moffatt couldn't make out the face of either man.

"All right," said one of them. "Give me three hours."

The other waved and said three hours and then rode west. The other man headed toward Bitter Creek.

Moffatt stood up. He walked forward to the line shack, trying to puzzle out what he had heard, trying to figure out who the two men had been. He couldn't be sure that one of them had been Kurth, even though he felt that one had been. As for the other . . .

Bending over, Moffatt searched the ground. Near the front door of the shack he noticed a broken match-stick. He picked it up. In his imagination he could see a man lighting a cigarette, habitually breaking the match-stick in his fingers and then dropping it. A shiver ran over his body. One of the two men who had

been here was the man who had murdered Halberg. And he had let him ride away.

Moffatt walked back to where he had left his horse. He took off the hobble, climbed into the saddle and started for Bitter Creek. Those two men had mentioned Halberg's place. He had a feeling that he might meet them there.

HALBERG'S ranch was located at the east end of Bitter Creek, bordering on the sink. It was a two hours' ride from the line shack and Moffatt's horse was tired and could not make the trip any faster. In fact, Moffatt was afraid that he had little time to spare when he did arrive there. And he came alone. There had not been time to ride to Wall for a posse, and two of the Bitter Creek ranches he had passed on the way had been deserted.

The Halberg ranch was also deserted, Moffatt discovered when he reached it. The house was dark and no one answered his knock. He put his horse in the barn, unsaddled it, watered it sparingly and forked down some hay. After that he went back to the house, carrying his rifle with him. There was no porch to the place, but Moffatt found a seat in the shadows near the front door.

He was hardly in his place before he became aware of the sound of an approaching horseman and, loosening the gun in his holster, he stood up. Across the flats from the west he watched the rider approach, and it wasn't until the horse pulled up near the corral that he saw that the rider was Irene. She swung lightly to the ground and started for the house.

Moffatt stepped forward. He said quietly, "Irene."

The girl came to an abrupt stop. Her hand jerked up with a gun. And she must have recognized him at once for she said sharply, "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

Moffatt's lips tightened. In the girl's tone, in her attitude, he could sense the same bitterness which had governed her father, and not sure what course he could follow, he said, "After all, Irene, I'm still sheriff and—"

"If you mean that," Irene interrupted, "get your horse and ride west with me. Price is going to try and cut our fence tonight."

"And all the Bitter Creek men are up there waiting for him."

"Yes. We had words—" The girl stopped.

Moffatt leaned forward. The girl's statement fitted in with what he had heard at the line shack. One of those two men had drawn the Bitter Creek ranchers to the west, leaving this ranch unprotected. "Listen, Irene," Moffatt said. "There will be no attack on your fence tonight. You've been misled. If there's any trouble it'll be right here. Get back on your horse, go after the Bitter Creek ranchers and bring them back here."

Irene had moved closer. She had lowered her gun, but now she suddenly lifted it again and Moffatt heard her say bitterly, "That's a lie. You only want me to make things easier for Price. Men are saying that you are on his side. I didn't want to believe it. . . ."

Moffatt shrugged. He said slowly, "Yes, Irene, I am on Sam Price's side. I hate to see cattle die of thirst while Bitter Creek empties into the Sink. It's not a pretty sight, thirsty, skinny cattle, dying out there on the plains."

The girl flushed, bit her lips. She said stubbornly, "Sam Price killed my father, or had him killed. One of his men shot my brother. He's always hated us here on Bitter Creek. If he was here an' we were on his place, he'd do it to us."

Moffatt shook his head. "You're wrong."

"I'm not wrong. I—" The girl's voice broke off. Distinctly through the night came the sound of racing horses.

Moffatt said swiftly, "Get on that horse of yours and head west."

Irene ran for the horse. She led him to the barn and came hurrying back. "I think I'll stick around here, Mr. Sheriff," she said grimly, "and see what happens."

There was nothing for Moffatt to do but accept the girl's decision. Already the

horsemen were quite near. He turned to the door and opened it. "Get inside."

IRENE moved through the door and Moffatt followed her. From the darkness of the room beyond he saw a dozen shadowy figures pull up near the corral.

"House first?" asked one of the men.

"Yeah," came the answer. "an' then the barn."

Three men moved toward the house, one carrying a huge tin which Moffatt guessed must contain coal oil. And as they came closer Moffatt saw that the men were three of the strangers who had recently come to the valley.

Moffatt's hand closed on his gun. He lifted it from its holster, aware of a strange excitement. When the men were still half a dozen steps away he moved back through the door and lifting the gun, said bluntly, "That's far enough, boys! Stop right there!"

The three men stopped rigidly. The one carrying the can dropped it. Guns flashed in the hands of the other two. Moffatt fired. He heard one of the men scream and saw him clutch at his stomach. He fired again and at the same moment felt a stabbing pain through his leg. Two of the men turned and started running toward the barn. Moffatt gritted his teeth, lifted his gun, fired a third time and one of the running figures seemed to trip.

Orange flames lanced out at him from the darkness near the barn and Irene suddenly appeared at his side. She pulled him back through the door and when his wounded leg wouldn't hold him up and he fell, he pulled Irene to the floor with him.

Irene was sobbing, and he was afraid that she had been hurt. He tried to get up but Irene held him down.

The shooting from the outside continued. Tom Moffatt looked up at Irene. "Are you all right?"

The girl nodded. A shot whistled over her head and Moffatt pulled her flat on the floor.

From outside someone called, "There's only two horses in the barn. That means there's only two of 'em. Let's finish this up."

Moffatt re-loaded his gun, peered through the door.

"Who are they?" whispered the girl.

"Imported fighters," Moffatt answered. "Some people think Price brought them in, but I don't think so. Price fights his own battles."

There was a moment of silence. Moffatt could guess what was happening. The men outside must have surrounded the house and now were crawling forward. His hand tightened on his gun. A figure loomed up in the doorway, and he fired. Leaning across his body, Irene sent a shot from her gun at one of the windows. And then quite suddenly the drumming sound of galloping horses came to his ears and he heard men shouting and the sharp cracking explosions of rifles.

He sat up, got to his feet and moved to the door. A dozen or more horsemen were milling around in the space between the house and the barn.

"Hello the house," boomed the voice of Sam Price.

Moffatt turned to Irene. "Light a lamp."

Price got down from his horse and came toward the door, several of his men following him. Irene lit a lamp. Moffatt said, "Come on in, Price."

The old cattleman blinked at Moffatt. "You, huh."

Moffatt nodded and Price said, "You started me thinkin' this afternoon, Tom. Like I said, I didn't make no attempt to cut the fence an' I got to wonderin' who did. Then tonight, when one of my men slipped off, I got the other boys together an' we followed him. He met up with some others an' we trailed along. That man, by the way, is outside, but he ain't interested in things any more. He's dead."

"Slauson?" Moffatt asked.

"Yeah. Red Slauson."

Several more riders pulled up near the house and came hurrying forward. One of them was Herman Fletcher. He nodded to Price and to Moffatt and said, "I heard

the firing an' headed this way. Looks like the party was over."

TOM MOFFATT leaned against the wall. Pains were stabbing through his leg and he could feel his boot filling with blood. He looked over at Price and then at Fletcher and the girl. Irene had a puzzled expression on her face. Fletcher, too, looked puzzled.

There was a bit of confusion at the door, and several men came into the room dragging Joe Kurth with them. "We found him hidin' out in the barn," said one of the men.

Kurth moistened his lips. He said feebly, "I can explain, I—"

Moffatt took a deep breath. He said slowly, "Irene, wasn't Kurth the man who told you Price was cutting the fence west of here tonight?"

Irene nodded and Moffat said, "Kurth met someone on an old line shack and I heard them plan this. I think that the man he met was Red Slauson."

Fletcher rolled a cigarette. He lit it, absently broke the match and dropped it at his feet. "I'm sure it was," he said. "They were mighty thick, those two, but Kurth ain't to blame. He probably believed Slauson."

Moffatt stared down at the broken match at Fletcher's feet. He reached into his pocket, took out an envelope. Staring at Price, he said slowly, "Lots of folks figured that Max Halberg was shot from the livery stable. He wasn't. He was shot from a vacant building a little beyond. I found the stuff in this envelope in that building."

Price took the envelope, opened it. He said curiously, "The butt of a cigarette an' a broken match-stick."

Moffatt nodded. He said, "Now look over there at Fletcher's feet."

Every man in the room stared at the floor at Fletcher's feet. The broken match-stick lay near his right boot.

"Fletcher just lit a cigarette," Moffatt said. "An' like he always does, he broke the match-stick an' dropped it. What he said about Kurth an' Slauson was true, but not all true. He wants to get Kurth off because Kurth knows that Fletcher is the man back of all the trouble."

Fletcher looked up, his face pale. "That's a lie," he gasped.

Moffatt shook his head. He felt suddenly sure of his ground. He said, "No, Fletcher. You promoted the antagonism of the Bitter Creek ranchers against Sam Price. You wanted them to break him, and then you planned to move in and gobble up his place. You got his foreman to go in with you and Joe Kurth to help. When things didn't move fast enough, you killed Halberg to stir the men up more. Tonight you planned to burn this place and let Price take the blame. You rode off when Price and his men came up, then came back just to make sure no one gave you away. You hired the gunmen who—"

Moffatt stopped. Fletcher was bending forward, panic and anger in his face. Suddenly, desperately, he clawed at his gun. Moffatt's hand slapped to his holster, jerked up again. He fired twice while Fletcher's bullet plowed into the rag carpet on the floor. Fletched tilted forward, sprawled out on his face.

Moffatt eased his body to the floor and Irene hurried to his side.

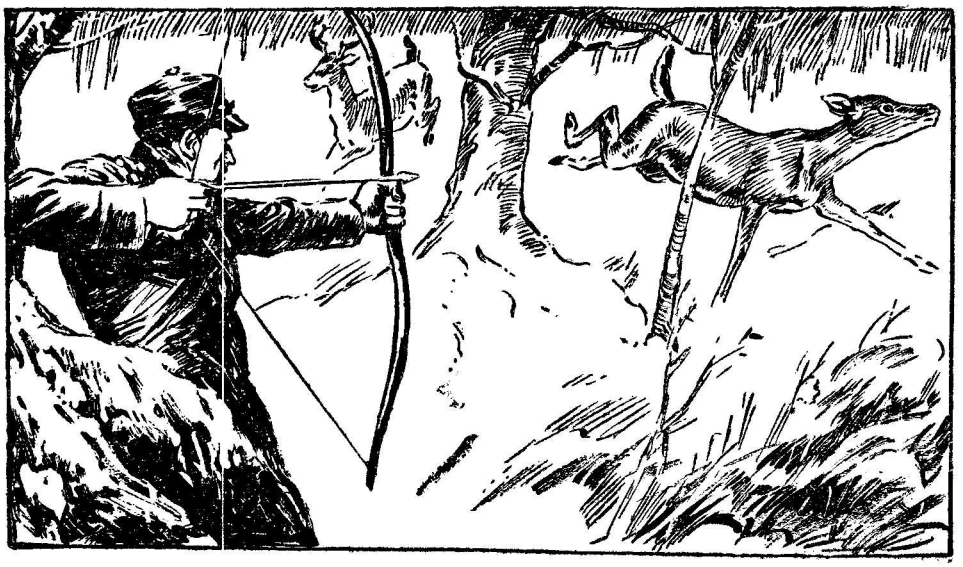
"Just a bum leg," Moffatt explained.

The girl drew a deep breath. She said, "Tom, tomorrow I'll talk to the ranchers around here. The fence will come down, at least the part of it that borders our place. I've been a fool from the very beginning, but—"

Moffatt shook his his head. "No, Irene, you—"

A sudden smile flashed in the girl's face. "We can quarrel later on, Tom. Right now, let me see that bum leg. I'm really a good nurse."

Over the girl's shoulder old Sam Price winked at Moffatt. "I'll get my men out of here," he promised. "I can see we'll be in the way."



"I," Said the Sparrow

In Dabbit Run, it's every able-bodied mountain-man for himself—and he who would play Providence must do it in cautious silence. A plain tale of the hills

By
JIM KJELGAARD
Author of "River Man," "The Bee Hunter," etc.

JIM BRIDGER had died long before Wayne McCloud was born, but Wayne felt that he would be eternally indebted to him. For it was Jim Bridger who had said, even though he had said it through an actor impersonating him, that the bow was better than the gun.

Not that a hillbilly had two bits to spend on moving picture shows very often, but that quarter had yielded larger dividends than any similar sum of money Wayne had ever spent. Right after it he had made himself a bow.

You could, as Wayne discovered by thumbing through a catalogue in the local sporting goods store, buy readymade bows, but they cost plenty. Besides, due to a chronic shortage of ready cash throughout most of his life, he had made his own fishing rods, saddles, knives, and nearly everything else he owned. He could make a bow.

He made it from a straight piece of hickory that had been seasoned in his attic for two years, scraped it down with knife and glass until each end was adjusted within a hair's breadth of the other and it had a good fifty-pound pull. He tipped his arrows with points cut out of a discarded wagon tire and moulded in a home made forge, and had an outfit that would drive an arrow through an inch board about as regularly as he could hit it.

That got to be pretty regularly after a couple of months. When he was able to hit the board every time, he practiced on everything else in sight—the dead trees in the beaver dam in old man Kinsey's meadow, the sides of the shed and barn, stumps in the fields, and anything else that made a good target. Four months after

finishing the bow he found himself in possession of the answer to a hillbilly's prayer —an accurate but deadly and silent weapon.

What with revenue men, game wardens —particularly Lem Knowles who had eyes like a hawk, a nose like a bloodhound, and the character of a weasel—and other snoopers who hadn't yet learned how to mind their own business, in the past Wayne had seen a lot of times when it was a tossup whether he and those who looked to him ate a good meal or just wished they had it to eat. There was lots of game in the forest and plenty of fish in the stream; the Lord had provided just about everything a man needed. The trouble was taking it without getting caught.

Rifles, unfortunately, could not be discharged without noise. All through Dabbit Run it was said that you couldn't shoot off a twenty-two without Lem Knowles hearing it and being on hand six minutes later. That frequently proved embarrassing.

Venison, the taking of which was prohibited all but two weeks out of the year, was the year-round meat staple of the Dabbit Run residents. An average of three times a year Wayne had to hit for the high places leaving his deer in the clutches of Lem Knowles. Lem had never caught him yet, but he always said he would some time.

But owning a bow that would kill a deer took at least half the risk out of shooting them. It cost a hundred dollars to kill a deer out of season, and no Dabbit Runner knew how much that was because they seldom had more than five dollars at one time.

If you didn't have the hundred it cost a hundred days in jail, enough to kill a hillbilly who couldn't breathe properly if there were as many as four other houses within a mile of his own.

Anybody caught with illegal venison was given ten days in which to raise the fine if he pleaded guilty and waived a trial, but exclusive of finding oil instead of water coming out of his well, a Dabbit Runner couldn't have raised a hundred dollars in a hundred times that many days.

WAYNE finished his bow the last of September, and killed his first deer with it the last of January. It was easy, and solved completely the problems arising from the explosion of a rifle. Wayne wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. All you had to do was creep up on a deer, shoot him, and all the noise you heard was the twang of the released bow string.

On February twenty-eighth, the first deer was gone and he was hunting another. Silently, as only a born hill man can move, he slipped through a patch of snow laden hemlocks in his back pasture. The wind was blowing hard and some deer should have sought refuge there. Stooping, he peered under the lower branches of the hemlocks. In the center of the thicket he saw the feet and lower bodies of four deer, but they were out of bow range.

Wayne settled himself comfortably with his back against a tree. In the thick growth he couldn't get closer to the deer, so he would let the deer come to him.

If they didn't do it today they no doubt would tomorrow, and after that there was an endless succession of other days in which he wasn't doing anything special.

However, after some five hours of waiting, the deer came trotting along to plant their feet suddenly down and shove their big ears forward as they saw a man in their path.

Wayne strung a broadhead that had taken him five hours to make, raised the bow, and shot.

The arrow caught a fat doe in the neck. She fell kicking there in the hemlocks while the other three scampered away.

WAYNE wasn't getting careless, and ordinarily knew all about his back trail and what was liable to be on it. But he had been in the hemlocks more than five hours, which was all the time anybody interested in his affairs needed to catch up with him. Consequently he didn't go to the edge of the hemlocks and scout the

country a bit after he had shot the deer.

If he had, he would have seen Lem Knowles cut his trail in the valley and follow it a third of the way up to the hemlocks. Lem had a vast ambition—to stick Wayne with a heavy fine or jail sentence or both.

Lem had known Wayne to venture into the hills in winter for a lot of reasons, none of which were legal. So when he cut Wayne's trail he followed it a little way intending to see what Wayne had been up to now. But Wayne usually made long trails; previous attempts to follow them had never been fruitful, and Lem left the trail to return to Wayne's house.

Ambushing him there was a new idea that might have merit.

Wayne dressed the deer. He tabulated on his fingers the needy of Dabbit Run, but Ruth and Al Ganley seemed to be about the only ones right now. Al had been felling a tree three months before. He had miscalculated his angles, and the tree had fallen on him. Ruth and Al were a swell pair of kids. They had been married three years and still thought it marvelous to look in each other's eyes.

Wayne lingered in the hemlocks until dark. Then he shouldered the two hind quarters of the deer, struck through the hemlocks to the creek bottom, and followed it as far as Cub Hollow. Ruth and Al lived there. Al's coon hound, Gyp, bristled fiercely and snarled when he first caught the scent of an intruder, but he changed his greeting to a mildly hysterical welcome when he recognized Wayne.

Still pale and weak, but fretting to be up and around, Al grinned at Wayne from the bed. Ruth hovered near, anxious only to give more of the infinitely tender care and nursing that had snatched Al from death and set him on the road to health. Wayne grinned back. Ruth laughed happily. Wayne had that effect on people.

"You look as good as a silver fox in a trap," he assured Al. "You'll be on your pins again in no time."

"He wants to get up so he can trap beavers," Ruth said. "I told him I'd break his other leg if he didn't stay quiet at least four weeks more."

"That's right," Wayne agreed. "You stay easy until Ruth says you're fit, Al. Shucks, I'll get your beavers for you."

Ruth Ganley gasped, and sat down on the bed. Al gaped at him. Wayne fidgeted. Catching Al's beavers wouldn't be exactly legal, but it would be all right because Ruth and Al were a swell pair of kids who had spent everything they had, and sold everything they owned to pay Al's doctor bills, and now they faced a new growing season without any money to buy seeds, more poultry, or any of the other things so necessary to their life.

It wasn't as if he was doing Al a favor that Al need feel obligated for. Dabbit Runners never had much money, but they worked hard and managed to keep things going. And if they didn't stick together in times of stress it would be a fine mess. Even the most shiftless Dabbit Runner never asked anybody else for help. Wayne could catch six beavers for Al with hardly any extra trouble. He could catch some for Ruth too, but that wouldn't be necessary. Al's would give them all the start they needed.

FOR years beaver had been increasing in Patten County. Imported as an experiment, they had multiplied until they had all but overran any place they could build a dam. There were beavers in meadows, pastures, and spring houses. There were, all things considered, too many beavers.

This year, for the first time, there was an open season from the first of March to the tenth. Anybody with a license was legally entitled to six, and with Moe Levinson paying fifteen dollars for green beaver pelts, it looked as though prosperity was about to descend on Dabbit Run.

Wayne would catch Al's beavers along with his own. He hadn't quite decided what he would do with his own after he caught them. A creature of the present, he lived in it and never tried to cope with future problems until they arrived. He had no

such desperate need for money as Ruth and Al. Gardens were all right but they tied a man down when he could just as well be fishing. Two bits in his pocket when he went to town was all the money a man really needed. Wayne already had about thirty dollars worth of foxes that he had caught during the winter and he hadn't even tried to sell them as yet.

He swung back into the hemlocks after he left Cub Hollow to get the two front quarters of the deer he had left there. Wrapping them in the deer's skin, he struck down the hill towards his own house. Serenely he picked his way among the wood chips that littered his back yard and fumbled at the door.

"All right, McCloud. Don't make any fool moves."

Wayne whirled, surprised and ready to fight. But he relaxed as he recognized the origin of the voice. Lem Knowles, a shadowy figure, crouched beside the wood shed with a pistol in his hand. Wayne grinned. Lem would have a pistol.

LEM spoke again, not quite able to subdue the elation in his voice. "Caught with the evidence! That's nice of you. I thought your foot would slip sooner or later."

"Might's well go in the house," Wayne spoke sheepishly.

There wasn't any sense in getting all excited. Lem told the truth. He did have him dead to rights. Of all the years he had dodged Lem in the hills, he had to walk into him right at his own door. It was right cute of Lem to catch him that way.

Wayne opened the door, and went in to light a lamp. Lem followed him in, gloating over the venison that Wayne laid on a table. Wayne looked at him curiously. Lem was somewhat more excited than the occasion called for. That was hardly the way for a man to act when he's got another man down.

Lem put the gun in its holster, but he left the holster flap unbuttoned. Wayne snickered silently.

Lem was as tall as he, and maybe weighed a few pounds more, but he was slow on his feet. If Wayne wanted to, he would take that toy gun away from him and spank him with it. But he was caught, and the best thing was admit it. You couldn't match a spade flush with a pair of deuces when your cards were called. You had to pay, and in spite of the fact that Wayne didn't like Lem, he was doing the job he was paid to do. Any man should if he took pay for doing anything.

"Where'd you get the deer?" Lem inquired.

"It dropped out of Santy Claus's team on their way back to the north pole and broke its neck when it fell," Wayne explained. All Lem could do was soak him a hundred dollars.

"Where's the rest of it?" Lem pursued.

"Wasn't any more," Wayne said. "You won't believe it, but this deer didn't have only front quarters."

Lem narrowed his eyes. "You know what it'll cost you?"

"A hundred dollars."

"You got it?"

"Oh, sure," Wayne said. "I'll write you out a check."

Lem got out of his chair and stretched casually—too casually. "It's your right to see a justice," he explained. "I'll take you now unless you want to sign an admission of guilt. If you do you can have ten days to pay the fine. If you can't pay in ten days it'll mean a hundred days in jail."

"I'll sign," Wayne said easily. "I don't want you to go tackin' this on some innercent person."

He scribbled his signature on the paper that Lem extended. With too minute attention to detail, Lem put it in his wallet and tucked it away in his pocket. That done, he looked at Wayne with glassy, hard eyes. Of all the outlaws in Patten County, this lanky hillbilly had given him the slip more times and broken more laws than all the rest combined. Lem Knowles did not relish the idea of being made a laughingstock by a Dabbit Runner, and he was not a man to forgive.

"Oh yes," he said, as though it were an afterthought. "I'm revoking your license until after you pay the fine. That's law, left to the discretion of the arresting warden. I hope you didn't figure on paying your fine in beaver pelts. There's twenty known dams in this district. I'm putting in a deputy for every three dams, and having an extra patrol the whole thing.

"Kinsey has complained about the beavers in his pasture. I'm closing that dam to trapping. The state is going to destroy it and take the beavers for restocking after the season. So I hope you didn't figure on going beaver trapping, because it'll cost you an extra hundred dollars or an extra hundred days if you do. Well—goodbye."

BEAVER season and prosperity descended simultaneously on Dabbit Run. Ten beaver traps was all anyone could set, but that's all anyone needed. Six beavers was the limit for one trapper, and though the Dabbit Runners felt no moral restraint about exceeding the limit, they couldn't do it and get away with it. Each pelt had to be inspected and stamped by Lem Knowles or one of his deputies. The trapper then had to make out an affidavit testifying as to where and how he caught it—and the rule was ironclad.

But six beavers, ninety dollars worth, was all any Dabbit Runner rightly needed. Anybody with ninety dollars cash was all set for a long while. Moe Levinson moved into Dabbit Run in his trailer, and bought the pelts as fast as they were stamped.

Including Wayne and Al and Ruth Ganley there were eighteen licensed trappers on Dabbit Run. Al couldn't trap because he wasn't able to be around, Ruth had to mind Al, and Wayne refrained because Lem's deputies watched him twenty-four hours a day. The remaining fifteen trappers had nineteen open dams to work in. Each dam harbored from six to fifteen beavers. The Dabbit Runners took their catches from the biggest and primest of these, returning all cubs and undersized animals to the water. And everybody was happy except Wayne.

Even in his sleep, Wayne thought of two things—the spring that lay just ahead and the county jail at Sharpstown. He also thought of his promise to deliver six beavers to Al Ganley, and the way Ruth had gone all limp on the bed when he had promised. Seeing Ruth and Al penniless when they counted on him for aid probably rankled worse than the other two, but they were bad enough.

It did seem as though Lem was riding him unnecessarily hard, and the trick he had used to make him sign a confession wasn't exactly the way the game should be played. Had Wayne known that his license was to be revoked he wouldn't have signed the confession, and would have demanded a trial. He would have been convicted, but Lem wouldn't have had so much to crow about.

And then there was the spring.

It would be hard enough to stay in jail for a hundred days at any time of the year, but ten times as hard in the spring. Everything woke up then. You knew how the deer felt when they played in the fields just for the love of playing, and you could idle the long, sunny days away over some favorite pool never caring whether you caught anything or not.

Wayne hadn't missed a spring since he had been one year old and his mother had put him outside to crawl around in the chicken coop. It would come right hard to pass this one up.

But the ten-day open season on beavers passed half away, and every Dabbit Runner had his limit. They knew of his plight, and Wayne felt their silent sympathy, but it was unwritten law in Dabbit Run that every able-bodied man should take care of himself. Only the sick and old should be helped.

Lem Knowles' various deputies came in from the dams to which they had been assigned and camped in an abandoned shed directly opposite Wayne's house. Hopefully Wayne looked across the bunches of willows in the meadow at the beaver dam in

old man Kinsey's pasture. Lem didn't need those beavers for restocking. The trappers had left more than enough for that.

Lem needed them, Wayne suspected, as a temptation to himself. Old man Kinsey would holler if there were beavers in his pasture or if there weren't. He was Dabbit Run's best complainer. But Lem had worked five years to trip Wayne up. If he could dangle those beavers in front of Wayne until the last of the season, and tempt Wayne into making a try for them, he could double the fine and that would make Lem twice as happy.

If he couldn't lure Wayne into slipping, he would probably tear the dam out and trap the beavers just as he said he would do.

The days grew longer as spring advanced. Wayne chopped willow logs in his back yard, conversed amiably with the deputies, and occupied himself with—of all things—a drainage ditch leading from the back of his barn into a patch of willows. It was a deep ditch, almost hip deep to a man, but it was a senseless undertaking because Wayne's barn needed draining no more than a beaver needed fins.

By the ninth day of the season Lem was sure that Wayne could not be made to try for the beavers, but would accept his fate meekly. Lem shrugged, and made ready to trap the beavers in old man Kinsey's pasture.

THE climbing sun had melted the snow in all except the sheltered places, and it had thawed the ice on the beaver dam. Old man Kinsey hadn't run any cows in ten years, and his pasture had grown up to a rich growth of poplar.

Five years before a pair of beavers that had been crowded from the creek had moved into it and built a dam in a tiny spring run. The dam had grown until now it was nearly seven feet high at the spillway, covered almost five acres when taken together with its host of "feeder" dams, and probably sheltered at least eighteen beavers.

The spring run tumbled over the dam, and followed a dozen winding branches over half a mile or more of old man Kinsey's pasture. Three hundred feet from Staple Creek, the various branches of the run came together to narrow into a single stream, make a sharp bend, and empty into Staple Creek.

A single cage trap just spanned the run where it emptied into the creek. Two deputies posted there to take it out as soon as a beaver was caught and to put another trap in, should take at least three quarters of the beavers in the dam. It was certain that the beavers would follow the run to the creek. Beavers never crossed dry land for any great distance if they could help it, and the spring run dwindled to nothing if they should try to escape in the other direction. And it was practical to trap them at the creek because they might leave the dam in any of a dozen places.

Wayne was digging in his ditch when Lem and his deputies went down to the dam. For half an hour after they had gone, he kept digging. Then he climbed from the ditch to enter the barn. From a convenient knot-hole he watched Lem stoop to set the charge that would blow the dam out. Lem and his deputies were absorbed in that—entirely too interested to see Wayne make a flying leap from the barn into the ditch with his bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows in the other.

At every place he had been able to tie one on, a willow shoot stuck perpendicularly from Wayne's clothing. He resembled nothing so much as an oversized porcupine until he threw himself prone on the ground. Then he looked like any of the other numerous little patches of willows that had spread from the creek into old man Kinsey's pasture.

Wayne crawled down the ditch until he came to the patch of willows into which it led. He heard the charge of dynamite that ripped the dam out, and saw the roily flood come spilling down the spring run. Crawling slowly, lying perfectly motionless every time one of the deputies glanced

his way, he crawled to the dense jungle of willows where the branches of the run came together again.

Two minutes after he arrived a beaver came swimming out of one of the branches of the run. Wayne fitted an arrow, to which a long cord had been attached, to his bow and shot. He drew the beaver up beside him and waited for the next one. They were coming fast now.

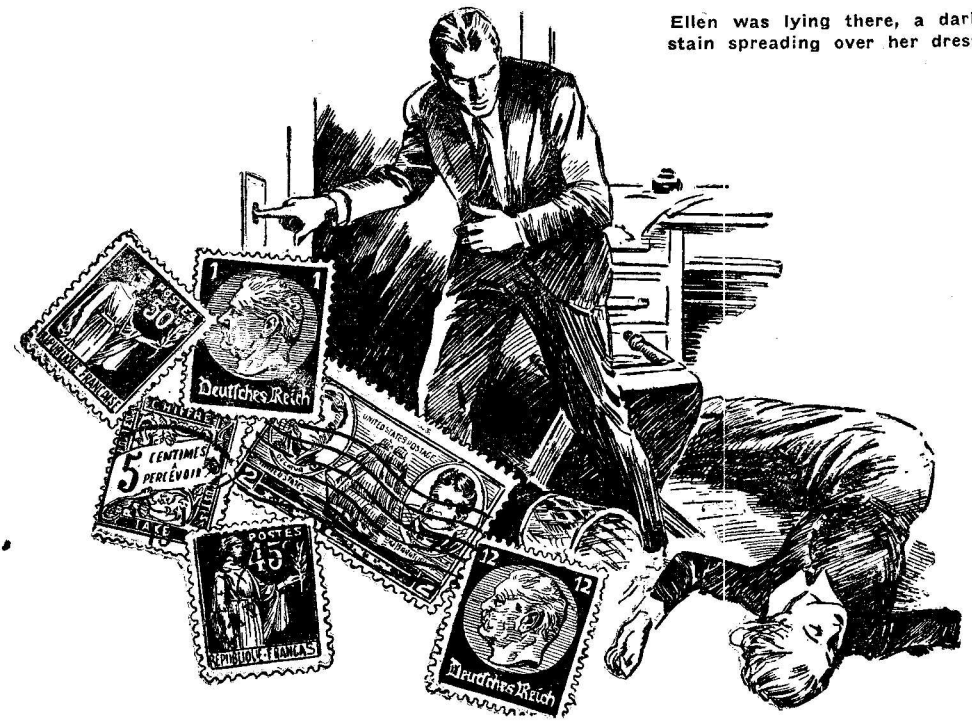
After it was over, Lem Knowles scratched his head in bewilderment because in that big dam he had taken only three medium-sized beavers. He thought that they must have found a hiding place somewhere along the run, but he searched it over and found only a broken stick about three feet long with feathers on one end and an iron point on the other. Probably another of Wayne McCloud's fool inventions.

He looked quizzically in Wayne's direction, but Wayne had been digging ditch all day as he could prove. Besides, hadn't Lem himself revoked his license? Lem shrugged, and went into the deputy's camp to while away the rest of the day over a few hands of blackjack.

But Al Ganley, who was hobbling around on crutches and must have done some fast and good trapping to take six big beavers on the last day of the season, called Lem up to Cub Hollow that night to stamp his catch. Ruth had six more, and nobody had even known that she was trapping. Moe Levinson went up with Lem, and bought all twelve pelts right after they were stamped.

And Wayne paid his fine the tenth day.

All Wayne ever observed about the whole affair was that they'd probably be in for an early spring. However, four months later when Ruth and Al named their son Wayne, he felt that even Jim Bridger might have liked such a thing.



Ellen was lying there, a dark stain spreading over her dress

Cancelled in Red

By HUGH PENTECOST

CHAPTER XXII

WARPATH

THEY crouched together behind the desk, scarcely breathing, straining to hear some sound from the intruder. The lights were still burning in Adrian's private office, but the rest of the suite was in total darkness.

Then, from the lighted room, came that ominous creak of shoe leather again.

Larry placed his lips close to Ellen's ear. "If I could get that other light turned off," he whispered, "we might dodge around in the dark till Rube gets back. I can't pop out on him, Ellen. He's undoubtedly got a gun, and he won't hesitate to use it."

Ellen was clinging to his arm. "Larry . . . please! If—if you get into the light—!"

"I can slip out into the waiting room and to the other door to the private office. The switch is right by it. I remember. But you mustn't move, darling . . . mustn't stir a finger."

The killer faced a problem, too. He did not know whether Larry was armed. The inspection room, with doors opening into the private office, and into the waiting room, offered an avenue of escape, no matter which entrance was used. Moreover, to shoot effectively, the killer needed light.

Both doors were open, and the glow from

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for May 6

the private office faintly illuminated one end of the inspection room. But if the killer appeared in the doorway, he would be a perfect target for Larry, if Larry had a gun. To come in the dark way on the chance of driving Larry into the light was equally dangerous.

There was no sound from the office.

"He's waiting for us to make a move," Larry whispered. "Well, here goes!"

"Oh, Larry, wait!" Ellen pleaded. "Rube should be here any minute."

"He must know that, too," said Larry, grimly. "I don't think he'll delay much longer. Chin up, baby."

Larry loosened the clutch of Ellen's fingers on his arm. He started toward the dark doorway leading to the waiting room. He crawled at first on his hands and knees. When he got outside the vague aura of light from the other door he sprang to his feet—charged for the door—and crashed noisily into a chair.

The man in the private office was not a fool. The sound of collision made it clear to him that a flank move was in progress. He acted quickly and boldly.

Ellen, crouching behind the desk, had one fleeting glimpse of him, muffled in a long overcoat with a dark hat pulled down over his face. He came swiftly into the light for a moment—running straight into the inspection room. He seemed to know his way because he made directly for the door through which Larry had gone. Coming up behind, he would have Larry at his mercy.

Ellen jumped to her feet and screamed.

"Larry! He's behind you!"

It was a fatal mistake. The light from the private office revealed her figure, shadowy, but clearly outlined. The killer turned at the door. There was the dull plop of a silenced gun, a short stab of flame, a strangled gasp of astonishment and pain.

"Ellen!" Larry's voice was hoarse.

He plunged recklessly into the lighted office. The killer was no longer there. He raced into the dark inspection room.

"Ellen!"

From beyond, in the waiting room, came the sound of running feet. He stumbled blindly toward the light switch again. Just as he reached it, he heard the slamming of the outer office door. He turned up the lights. He was poised on the balls of his feet, ready to chase after the killer. He took one backward glance and froze where he was.

Ellen lay stretched out on Adrian's thick Turkish rug, very still, very white.

"Ellen!"

HE HURRIED to her and knelt beside her. Her eyes were closed. There was an ugly dark stain near her left shoulder spreading out on the dark-blue dress she wore. Larry slipped his hand under her shoulder, cradling her head in the crook of his arm. His face was a mask of stone.

"Ellen! Darling . . ." He seemed to be in the throes of a kind of desperate helplessness.

He leaned forward and his lips brushed back a wisp of her fair hair which had fallen down across her forehead. He was trembling from the tension of taut muscles. Gently, quickly, he pulled the dress away from her injured shoulder with his left hand. The bullet had penetrated her flesh very close to the point of the shoulder.

"Ellen!" He lowered her back onto the carpet. He ran into the private office to the water cooler and returned with a dripping paper cup. He moistened his handkerchief in the water, bathed her forehead with it, dabbed gently at the bleeding wound.

"Damn him to hell!" he said in a voice of passionate anger. He lifted her again, held her close to him, and looked anxiously down into her white face. Then Ellen's fingers tightened on his arm and she opened her eyes.

"I guess I must have moved," she said unsteadily.

"You little fool!" Larry said.

"But, Larry, if I hadn't . . ."

"Shut up!" Larry said. "You got what was coming to you."

They heard the outer door being unlocked and opened. Ellen clung to Larry. Larry turned his head, and his eyes were blazing.

"Come and get it!" said Rube's cheery voice.

"In here, sap!" Larry called to him.

Rube appeared in the doorway. He was loaded down with paper bags and cartons which he was balancing precariously. At the sight of Larry kneeling on the rug with Ellen in his arms, he stared dumbly.

"Did you pass somebody on the stairs?" Larry asked, before Rube could speak.

"Why . . . why, a guy did pass me," Rube said.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Larry's voice was eager.

"Well, no," said Rube. "I was kinda loaded down. I was almost droppin' one of these cartons of coffee and I just pulled back against the wall and let him go by. I—I didn't look at him at all. What's happened, Mr. Storm? Who was it?"

"That, you brass-bound moron, was the murderer!" Larry said. "He tried to do a job on us and he's wounded Ellen."

Sandwiches, coffee and pickles cascaded onto Adrian's Turkish rug. In one lumbering movement Rube made for the hall door.

"Wait!" Larry shouted at him. "He's blocks away by now. Go downstairs and get a taxi. Then come back up here and help me with Ellen."

"I gotta report to the inspector," Rube said.

"You'll get a taxi and you'll come back up here on the run," Larry said, savagely, "or so help me, you'll think you've been put through a meat grinder!"

The fury in Larry's eyes evidently settled Rube. "Right," he said. "How about a doctor?"

"I'll attend to that," Larry said. "Do what you're told!"

Rube went off at a gallop. Larry reached behind him and pulled the seat cushion out of the overstuffed chair. He placed it carefully under Ellen's head.

"Don't want to move you till we can do it all in one piece," he said. "And if you get gay this time, I'm going to slap you down!"

"Yes, Larry," said Ellen, meekly.

He looked at her steadily for a moment, and then he spoke in a shaken voice. "Ellen, if he'd shot a little lower . . ."

"I'll be good," she said. She closed her eyes, and a faint smile played on her lips. A moment later she heard Larry's voice barking into the private office telephone.

"Donlin? Larry Storm speaking. Get your stuff together and come down to my apartment, pronto. Case of a gun-shot wound. . . . No, you blithering ass, I'm not tight. My secretary's been shot. . . . *No, I didn't shoot her!* Listen! It's a shoulder wound . . . it's bleeding, but not badly. We're in an office downtown. I think it'll be safe to move her, don't you? She'll have to be moved anyway. We should get to the apartment about the same time you do. Step on it!"

He paused to gather up overcoats and hats, and then went back to the inspection room. Almost at the same time, Rube, panting for breath, returned with the announcement that a cab was waiting.

Larry slipped into his overcoat, pulled on his hat, and then knelt beside Ellen. "I'm going to carry you," he said.

"I'm all right, Larry," she protested. "I . . . I can walk. I just feel a little giddy."

"You're going to be carried, and shut up about it."

He picked her up in his arms. He turned to Rube. "Bring the rest of our junk, bright boy! And when you call the Inspector, ask him if he ever bothered to check that key ring of Adrian's for the outside office key!"

DR. DONLIN, young and boyish-looking, was reputed to be one of the best surgeons in the city. He looked at Larry with a grave, expressionless face.

"It's quite serious," he said. "I think she may have to stay in bed till morning."

Larry looked down at Ellen, who was

lying in his guest room bed. "I've never cared for medical humor," he snapped at the doctor. "Can you stay here for about an hour, Don?"

"That patient would have to be a lot sicker," said Donlin.

"Because I'm going out. I don't want her left alone." The angry light was still burning in Larry's eyes and it checked any impulse Donlin had toward further wisecracks.

"Sure, I'll stay, Larry," he said. "But Miss Dixon is going to be all right. I've given her a sedative and I think she'll sleep presently."

Ellen looked at Larry, anxiously. "Larry, please stay out of this Let Bradley handle it. I . . ."

"I've been pushed around long enough," Larry said. "And there's one guy I want to check on personally, because if he hasn't got an alibi for tonight, there's going to be a third murder!" He turned to the doctor. "If Inspector Bradley turns up, tell him I said for you to examine his hand."

CHAPTER XXIII

BETWEEN SIX AND SEVEN-THIRTY

A TAXI pulled up in front of Jasper Hale's house on Fifth Avenue with a screeching of brakes. Larry sprang out of it. "Wait," he told the driver. He ran up the front steps and rang the door bell.

Halliday, the butler, opened the door. He gave Larry a look of resignation.

"I suppose you want to see . . ."

"I want to see Mr. Gregory and Mr. Hale—at once," Larry said.

"They're in Mr. Hale's study," said Halliday, "but I'm afraid—" He was talking to Larry's back, as Larry pushed past him, walked across the huge entrance hall and flung open the door of Jasper Hale's study. Hale was sitting at his desk, leaning against the arm of his chair. Gregory was sitting beside him, evidently taking notes on a shorthand pad. At the sight of Larry Jasper Hale stood up.

"Well, Mr. Storm, you seem to go in for high-handed informality."

"I couldn't stop him, sir." Halliday spoke behind Larry.

Larry wasn't looking at Hale. His gaze was fixed on Gregory who shrank back in his chair. Larry took a quick step toward the secretary and, reaching down, yanked him to his feet. The pad and pencil clattered to the floor.

"Where have you been tonight—*every minute tonight?*" Larry demanded.

Jasper Hale, tall and gaunt, stepped between them. He struck at Larry's wrist with such surprising force that Larry loosed his hold on Gregory, and the secretary dropped weakly into his chair again. Hale's eyes met Larry's steadily.

"I don't think I care for your manner, Mr. Storm. After all, you're not the police. If you have something to ask Gregory, do so in civilized fashion."

Larry's eyes didn't waver. "Somebody tried to murder me tonight, Mr. Hale—and came within an inch or two of killing my secretary. This punk," he nodded toward Gregory, "did his best this morning to get me to cover up some of his crooked operations. He didn't want me to go over and check Adrian's collection."

"Why?" asked Hale.

"Get him to tell you. I haven't got time," Larry said. "But I want to know where he was—I want an accounting of every moment of his time tonight."

"What kind of crooked deal are you talking about?" Hale persisted.

"Take time to examine your collection some day, Mr. Hale," Larry said. "I've got a hunch you'll be looking for a new secretary."

"Damn you, Storm!" Gregory's voice rose in a wail. "Damn you for a miserable squealer!"

"I've taken all I'm going to take from you, Gregory . . . *ever!* Start talking if you don't want me to drag you bodily to police headquarters so that some of the tough boys can go to work on you."

"I don't think I'm going to put up with this," said Jasper Hale. He reached for the telephone on his desk. "There's such a thing as going too far, Storm."

"Don't go off half-cocked!" Larry said. "This miserable worm has been double crossing you, stealing from you, betraying the trust you placed in him. He knew I was going to find it out and he was desperate. He tried to bribe me this morning—offered me ten thousand dollars to cover for him. When I refused he went into a rage—and later someone tried to shoot me. I just want to make certain it wasn't Gregory. And you can call the police commissioner himself, if you like!"

Jasper Hale was staring at Gregory, his beetling eyebrows lowered. "Is this true, Gregory?"

"It's a lie," Gregory shouted. "He's lying. I never stole anything. I . . ."

"I don't have to prove it," Larry said. "You can check for yourself, Mr. Hale. I've seen three or four stamps today that I'm sure belong to you. But I've waited long enough. Are you going to talk, Gregory, or do I drag you out of here?"

Gregory was sobbing hysterically. He couldn't talk. Jasper Hale spoke. "If what you say is true, Storm, I owe you something for telling me. But as for attempting to kill you, I must say that Gregory is in the clear. He hasn't been out of this house since six o'clock tonight."

"How do you know? Has he been with you all the time?"

"No," said Hale. "But I'm positive he hasn't been out. I saw him at six. At seven-thirty I had my supper served in here and Gregory joined me. I often dictate while I'm eating."

"It won't do," said Larry. "The time from six to seven-thirty is the vital time."

Hale turned to Halliday, the butler, who still stood at the door. "Did Mr. Gregory leave the house after he came in at six o'clock?"

"No, sir," said Halliday, promptly.

"How do you know?" Larry shot at him. "Were you guarding the doors?"

"No, sir," said Halliday. "But you can't open the front door without a bell ringing in the kitchen. If Mr. Gregory had gone out by the front door, or anyone else, sir, I'd know it."

"There must be other ways in and out of this house," said Larry.

"There's the back door, sir. But there're four of us in the kitchen. I can assure you Mr. Gregory hasn't been in or out that way."

"The only other entrance," said Jasper Hale, "is here." He pointed to the door at the far end of the study which Larry had assumed led to a lavatory. "He didn't use that because I haven't been out of this room for several hours."

Larry drew a deep breath and shrugged. It was a tight alibi. "I apologize for creating so much disturbance," he said to Hale. "But I had to make certain."

"I quite understand," said Jasper Hale, coldly. "And may I say, that if, upon investigation, I discover you're right about Gregory, I may be able to show my gratitude in some tangible fashion."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KILLER IS A KINDLY MAN

THE blank he had drawn at Jasper Hale's had not softened Larry's combative mood. When he walked into his own living room a little while later, he found Donlin and Inspector Bradley sitting by the fire.

"I might have known I'd find you here, Bradley, sitting around," Larry said. "You do nothing, and your fat friend, the Rube, steps politely aside and allows the murderer to skip past within six inches of him."

"I had to get the story from someone," said Bradley, meekly. But his eyes were twinkling. "I'm waiting for you because Donlin wouldn't let me talk to Ellen. She's asleep."

Donlin stood up. "Dr. Donlin is going home, fascinating as this company would certainly be. I operate at eight in the morning." He dropped a hand on Larry's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about Miss Dixon, Larry. If you *can* keep her in bed tomorrow, which I very much doubt, it would be better. Send her to see me Saturday."

"She'll stay in bed!" said Larry. He went out to the foyer to help Donlin with his coat and hat. When the doctor had gone he rejoined Bradley.

"I owe you an apology," said Bradley. "Rube gave me your message about the key ring. You were right. The key to the outside door was missing. The murderer must have taken it when he left so hurriedly on Tuesday night. He wasn't leaving anything to chance. He wanted to be able to get back in if necessary. If I'd had the brains to notice that key was missing, we could have baited a trap for him."

"You put the bait there," said Larry, sourly, "but no trap. When I think of Rube letting that guy go calmly past him—!"

"You didn't get a look at him, Storm? You have no idea who it was?" Bradley asked.

"I never even saw his shadow," Larry said. "Ellen did. Tall. Overcoat—hat—creaky shoes. Less than nothing!"

Bradley nodded. "Find anything at Adrian's before the fireworks?"

"Nothing illuminating," said Larry. "I found one or two more of Lon's stamps. There can be no doubt about the fact that it was Adrian who posed as Oscar Rivero and robbed Lon. I found some stamps I'm sure belonged to Hale, but Gregory had told me I would find them. Incidentally I've just come from Hale's. It wasn't Gregory who visited us tonight. His alibi is water-tight, unless both Hale and the servants are lying. And they have no reason to."

"How about the stamps from the Warren collection?"

Larry snapped open his cigarette case, took out a cigarette, and lit it. "Not one," he said. "Not a smell of one." He scowled down into the fire.

"Isn't that odd?" asked the inspector.

"It's damned odd," said Larry. He shot Bradley a quick glance. "Do you like being made a sucker of, Bradley?"

"Mercy, no!" drawled the inspector.

"Neither do I," said Larry.

Bradley looked at him meditatively. "But we're on the right track, don't you think? Definitely, the murderer didn't want you messing around with Adrian's stock."

"I wonder," said Larry. He reached out with his foot and kicked a log in place on the fire. A shower of sparks swirled up the chimney. "He gave me plenty of time, Bradley—all day, to be precise. If I'd found anything, I'd have telephoned you at once. He must have guessed that, but he waited. Why?"

"I been thinking about that, too," said Bradley. "You know, Storm, the announcement in the papers said you were going over both Adrian's and Luckman's stamps. Do you suppose it's Luckman's collection he's worried about?"

LARRY stared at the inspector, his eyes narrowed. Then he laughed, mirthlessly. "If that's the case, the way he gets in and out of places, he'll have been to Luckman's and destroyed whatever it is he doesn't want us to find."

"No," said Bradley, "he won't. Because I sealed up that apartment after Luckman was killed and I've had a man there to see no one went in. Nothing's been touched."

"Then I think you've hit it," Larry said, a touch of excitement in his voice. "I'm too tired or I'd go over there tonight."

"It can wait," said Bradley. "We've got our fingers on all our suspects. None of them is going to leave town."

Larry laughed. "Our suspects! Who are they? Lon's cleared. Gregory seems to be cleared. Luckman is definitely cleared. I refuse to believe Lucia Warren is a murderess. Who, please, *are* our suspects?"

"Had you realized," Bradley asked, "that we've never considered Mr. Louderbach very seriously? Yet he was most anxious to keep you from going over that stock of Adrian's. He has a key to the office!" Bradley shrugged. "As for motive—well, everybody who ever had anything to do with Adrian seems to have had a motive. Why not Louderbach?"

"Have you any evidence against him?"

"Not a shred," said Bradley, cheerfully. "Of course, we haven't any real evidence against anyone excepting the people who are cleared." He tapped out his pipe against an andiron and dropped it in his pocket. "But things have happened today that I haven't had a chance to tell you about. We picked up Slick Williams!"

"The safe breaker who rented the next office?"

Bradley nodded. "We wangled a confession out of him. Incidentally, he *did* pull that job in Philadelphia you were talking about. Mr. Williams is going to jail for a nice long stretch. But his story is interesting.

"He worked in the evenings, cutting through the wall. Naturally, he had to wait till everyone had gone home from Adrian's office. Tuesday night he was waiting, impatiently. People were coming and going all evening, he said. Along about seven-thirty he heard a shot fired in there. That got his wind up. He waited a minute or two and then started out of his place. Just as he stepped into the hall somebody—a man—ran out of Adrian's office with blood streaming down the side of his face."

"Gregory?"

"I guess so," said Bradley. "Well, Williams waited for a bit, and then started out again. This time he almost ran head on into Lucia Warren going in. He couldn't see from his office door very well, so instead of going back in there he ducked into the men's washroom at the end of the hall. It commands a straightaway view of the corridor." Bradley looked at Larry and smiled, faintly. "There was someone in the washroom."

"Who?"

Bradley chuckled. "A kind of nondescript, brown-haired little guy," he said. "Slick's description isn't much to go on . . . except for one detail. The man was being violently sick at his stomach!"

"Holy smokes! Howard Stevens?"

"In person," said Bradley. "I had him picked up this afternoon. He says he went to Adrian's Tuesday evening. He was going to plead with Adrian to let him have a fair price for his collection. He walked in, and there was Gregory lying on the floor, with blood all over the place. Mr. Stevens ducked into the washroom because he can't stand the sight of blood." Bradley sighed. "It must be quite a life he leads."

"The whole town was there that night!" Larry exclaimed.

"Looks like it," said Bradley. "The hell of it is, the stories we've got all dovetail as far as time goes. They could all be true. In other words we have all the pieces of the puzzle except the essential one—the murderer. Or one of them can be lying—in which case we just haven't put the pieces together right. Frankly, I'm hoping you'll find something at Luckman's that will give us a straight lead." He sat gazing into the fire for a long time. Finally he looked up at Larry. "Don't hit me if I ask you a simple question, will you, Storm?"

"What?"

"Have you ever thought of your friend Mr. Julius as a possibility?"

"Mr. Julius?"

"I WAS afraid you'd take it that way," said Bradley. "But in my job we have to consider everything. He can't account for his time, Storm. At least I don't think he can. Nobody knows who's in and who's out of that house where he lives. There's nobody to check."

"My dear Bradley . . .!"

"Now, wait," said Bradley. "It isn't just that I doubt that Mr. Julius can produce an alibi for the times of the murders. But there're a couple of other points. The murderer must be a man with some decent impulses. If he weren't, he'd have wiped out that kid of yours. The kid nearly spilled the beans for him. Mr. Julius is fond of the boy, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is," Larry admitted.

"Now, has it ever occurred to you that Bones was a dangerous and bothersome encumbrance to the murderer? He had to get rid of him somehow. He'd want the

boy found under circumstances that wouldn't point to him."

"But, Bradley—"

"You can't get away from the fact that Mr. Julius *found Bones,*" Bradley said. "You thought his idea of a house-to-house canvass was crazy. And it *was* crazy! Yet it worked. Mr. Julius found him without too much difficulty. I'm only saying that possibly we'd better look into Mr. Julius."

"But Bradley, you've got nothing to connect him with either Adrian or Luckman!"

"Have we tried to connect him? No, we haven't. But we have stamps. They tie everyone into this case, as Mr. Julius himself said. Mr. Julius is an eccentric. If somebody harmed him, it would be quite in character for him to take justice into his own hands. And he wouldn't stand for blackmail—not that old bird!"

Larry nodded slowly. "No, he wouldn't."

"And he wouldn't hurt the boy," said Bradley. "Yet he had to have him found." Bradley shrugged. "So, he found him!"

Larry stood staring into the fire. Bradley got up from his chair.

"This isn't a nice case, Storm," he said, gently. "We come up against 'em now and then. From all we know about Adrian he had murder and more coming to him. But it's my job to run down the killer."

"I know," said Larry.

"But it isn't yours," said the inspector. "If you want to back out, I won't hold it against you. It might not be pleasant if what you find at Luckman's should clinch the case against someone you're fond of."

Larry didn't look up for a minute, but when he did the flame of anger was rekindled in his eyes.

"Whoever it is nearly did for Ellen tonight," he said. "He was out to get me. I'm sticking."

Bradley smiled. "I had an idea you would, Storm. But I thought I'd give you the chance. What time will you be ready to go to Luckman's tomorrow?"

Larry's lips tightened. "I've got one little personal job to do in the morning," he said. "I'd like to put off going to Luckman's till around noon."

"Okay," said Bradley. He was belting up his trench coat. "That personal job hasn't anything to do with Miss Warren, has it?"

"It has," said Larry, grimly.

Bradley put on his hat and gave it a little downward jerk. "It's none of my business," he said, "but I wonder if you've ever stopped to consider what a swell kid that one is in there." He pointed the stem of his pipe in the vague direction of the guest room.

"Who? Ellen?" Larry sounded startled. "Oh, sure."

AT HALF-PAST eight the next morning Larry, an apron tied around his waist, opened the front door of the apartment to Bones Kelley. Bones took one look at him and burst out laughing. There was a faint aroma of charred toast and burnt coffee grounds in the air.

"Gee, boss, you turned housemaid," Bones caroled.

"Yes, and shut up!" Larry grinned at him.

"How's Ellen, boss? When you told me over the phone about her . . ."

"She's too damned well," said Larry. "It's going to be your job to sit on her head and see that she stays in bed today."

Ellen was sitting up in bed, wearing bright blue silk pajamas of Larry's. The sleeves were rolled up to her elbows.

"You and I are going to start a club of people the murderer *didn't* get!" she said to Bones.

"I'd like to get my hands on him," Bones said. "Tryin' to shoot up you and Larry! That don't go with me."

Larry picked up his coffee cup which stood on the table beside Ellen's bed. He had moved her tray to a chair by the door. He took a sip of the coffee and made an anguished face.

"You could cure leather with that!" he said. "Bones, you're going to be general

handy man and dishwasher this morning. Rustle this stuff away."

"Okay, boss."

Ellen looked up at Larry. "Are you going straight to Luckman's? Really, Larry I'm quite well enough to go with you. You'll need me. All that cataloguing."

"There won't be any," said Larry. "Luckman was a collector, not a broker. Everything will be neatly mounted. Besides—I'm not going there now."

"Where are you going?"

Larry's expression was obdurate. "I'm going to see a man named George Walpole," he said. "And then I'm going to see Lucia."

"You'd better put her wise to kissproof lipstick," said Ellen.

"It's an idea," said Larry.

"I have to get shot for you to make any passes at me," said Ellen.

"Who made any passes at you?"

"You did," said Ellen. "When you thought I was unconscious, you kissed me on the forehead—though I blush to admit it."

"I was worried," said Larry. "It didn't mean anything."

"Yes, Mr. Storm."

"Well you were shot, weren't you? If you think you can put the hooks in me just because in a moment of stress . . ."

"When the time comes, darling," said Ellen, "the hooks will be painlessly applied. Who is George Walpole?"

"I think you're sidestepping an important issue," Larry said suspiciously. "George Walpole was Colonel Warren's lawyer and executor of the estate. I think I know where Lucia fits into this picture, Ellen, and if I'm right— Well, it's going to be an interesting morning. After that, Luckman's—and then I'll be back."

"If you can avoid making a target of yourself," Ellen said, "Bones and I would have a pleasanter day."

"Our pal Rube is down in the lobby," he said with a grin. "The killer won't be able to see around him." He stood up. "We may find what we need at Luckman's to end this thing. You'd better be ready to face the possibility that we won't like it, you and I."

CHAPTER XXV

AND THE LADY IS A LUG

RUBE SNYDER was waiting in the foyer of the apartment building when Larry got downstairs. He looked very businesslike. His coat collar was turned up, and his hands were sunk in his pockets. There was a bulge on the right side which was quite obviously made by a service revolver.

Larry looked at him and laughed. "No slips today, eh, Waldemar?"

Rube growled something unintelligible. They walked out onto the street, side by side, Rube casting a searching look in both directions as they got into a taxi which drew up at the curb.

Larry gave the driver a Wall Street address and twenty minutes later they pulled up in front of a dingy-looking office building. Rube would not wait in the cab. He had orders this time. So they went up to the offices of Mr. George Walpole together. The switchboard operator announced Mr. Storm, and a moment later Larry was told that Mr. Walpole would see him.

"This is as far as you go, sweetheart," Larry said. "Mr. Walpole is harmless."

"I got orders," said Rube, stubbornly.

"You wait here," said Larry. "You can shoot anybody who tries to interrupt us if you're so anxious to use that blunderbuss." He went into Mr. Walpole's private room.

Rube sat on a bench, wriggling restlessly, and scowling with black suspicion at everyone who walked by. After about half an hour Larry came out of Mr. Walpole's office. He didn't seem to see Rube. The muscles along the line of his jaw were bulging and his eyes had an angry glitter in them. Rube got up hastily and followed him.

They picked up a cab on the street and Larry gave an address.

"That's the Warren dame's dump, isn't it?" Rube said.

Larry's lips tightened. "Quite right, Waldemar. That is the Warren dame's dump!"

"My real name is Arthur," said Rube, hopefully.

But Larry was silent. He did not speak once on the trip uptown. His eyes stared out the window, cold and unseeing.

In the foyer of Lucia's apartment house Larry had himself announced and was promptly invited to come up.

"This is where we part company again," he said to Rube.

"I ought to come up," said Rube. "The inspector . . ."

"Wait here!" Larry said, so sharply, that Rube took an involuntary step backward. Then Larry was in the elevator and the door closed on him.

Lucia was waiting in the doorway of the apartment for him. "Larry, this is too good to be true," she said, warmly. "I didn't expect to see you for days . . . not till you'd finished experting for the police."

"There's nothing like a surprise to start the day off right," Larry said. He walked past her into the apartment.

"What's gone wrong, Larry?" Lucia asked. She followed him into the living room. She was wearing the scarlet housecoat.

"Nothing," Larry said. "Things are just starting to come right." He smiled, but his eyes were bleak. "I haven't been able to forget my last visit here."

"Nor I," said Lucia. "Sit down, Larry . . . here on the couch."

He sat down. "You were so sweet, Lucia. You were so concerned about me and the dangers I might be running into."

"You know how I felt, Larry. There *were* risks."

"Oh, there were risks, all right," Larry said. "As a matter of fact, somebody tried to murder me."

"Larry!"

"From your point of view," he continued coldly, "his failure was a bad break."

"Larry, what are you talking about?"

"God, Lucia," he said calmly, "what a two-timing little tramp you turned out to be!"

She stared at him.

"It's going to be fairly painful to go through this," he said. "Perhaps we can avoid it if you'll just hand them over."

"Hand what over, Larry?"

"The stamps you stole from your father's collection," Larry said.

"Larry, are you out of your mind?"

LARRY sighed. "I see you insist on playing out the string," he said. "Well, I hate to be suckered in my own business, Lucia. I've just come from seeing George Walpole. I'm working for him now—for your father's estate. I want those stamps."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lucia said. Her voice, too, had grown suddenly hard. "And I don't think I like the way you're behaving."

"You don't like the way I'm behaving! Well, you'd better think fast, baby, or you'll wind up behind the bars charged with grand larceny . . . maybe murder."

"I don't think I'll listen to any more of this," said Lucia. "You'd better go."

"You'll listen and like it," said Larry. "I'm prepared to give you a break because I'm human enough not to want this story made public. If you'll give me those stamps to return to Walpole, I'll see that he doesn't ask any questions. If you don't come across, I'm going straight back to him and tell him the truth and I may have some information for Bradley that'll entertain him. You can't get away with robbery even if the victim is dead and was your father!"

Lucia stood up. "You'd better go." she repeated.

"Adrian never stole any stamps from you," Larry continued. "It's probably the one lousy thing in the world he *didn't* do! *You* stole those stamps out of your father's collection and replaced them with inferior items. You, who pretended to be so naïve about stamps!

"And then when Mr. Walpole became

suspicious of the salvage value of the collection, you had to put the blame on someone. It was a tossup between Adrian and me. You came to see both of us and decided that Adrian's reputation made him the best bet.

"His death was a break for you, until you found out that I was going to go over his stock. You didn't want that because you knew that I wasn't going to find any of the alleged stolen items. I wasn't going to find them because you had them here. And so you became sweetly and tenderly worried about my personal safety."

"Stop it!" Lucia cried.

"You got another break," said Larry. "When Bradley's men searched this place they weren't looking for stamps. They were looking for a gun. It's going to be different this morning, my pet. I'm going to give you about thirty seconds to turn those stamps over to me, and if you don't, *I'm* going to do the searching. If you make it tough, you'll have to take the consequences."

Lucia walked over to the table and picked up the phone. "There's a man annoying me," she said calmly. "Please send someone up to get him out of here." She put back the receiver and gave Larry a defiant look.

Larry brushed past her and picked up the phone himself. "There's a city detective in the lobby. Put him on." His eyes were on Lucia as he waited. "Rube? Come upstairs to 14B and stand outside the door. If anyone tries to come in, keep 'em out. I don't want to be disturbed." He replaced the phone on the hook with a bang and stood staring at Lucia.

"Lord, what a sweet fool you made of me!" he said bitterly. "You dragged me into a murder case and endangered the lives of the two people who are dearest in the world to me. You let me patiently explain the stamp business to you when you know as much about it as I do. You let *me* dope out the situation, guessing exactly what conclusion I'd come to. And all the time you knew stamps! I got that from Walpole. He said you were as keen and as competent as your father . . . that you used to trade for him."

"Mr. Walpole is wrong," Lucia said. "He knows nothing about stamps himself. Naturally, I know *something* about them. I couldn't help it with Father talking stamps morning, noon, and night."

"You knew stamps, all right," said Larry. "I suppose you've figured out a motive to back up this idiotic charge?"

"YOU supplied the motive at the very beginning," said Larry. "Mr. Walpole filled out the details for me this morning. Money! Your father always supported you lavishly. You thought when he died you were going to be able to continue on the same scale. You thought you were going to inherit your father's estate in cash. I wondered about those expensive furs you've been wearing. Even eight thousand a year wouldn't pay the freight for those. You'd charged them of course, run up enormous bills."

"How do you know that?" Lucia asked.

"Mr. Walpole. Your creditors have been making polite inquiries as to when your father's estate will be settled. You were sunk, Lucia, when you found out that instead of inheriting the estate in cash you were only to have the income from it. You had to raise the money to pay those bills or be up to your ears in debt for the rest of your life. So you hit on a bright scheme."

"You're quite mad," Lucia said.

"Mr. Walpole knew nothing about stamps," Larry went on, "but you did, my precious Lucia. You knew how to buy. You acquired a flock of inferior replacements for your father's collection. And Mr. Walpole never had a suspicion until after the auction. Meanwhile, you have those valuable stamps ready to dispose of when things quiet down a bit. It's a beautiful swindle . . . one that would have done credit to Adrian himself." Larry stood up. "Well, do you hand them over or do I look for them?"

"I haven't any stamps," Lucia said unsteadily.

"Do you want me to go to Mr. Walpole and tell him this story in detail?" Larry asked. "Would you like me to point out to Bradley how opportune Adrian's death was for you? You could have murdered him yourself, you know."

"I don't care what you do. I haven't any stamps," said Lucia doggedly.

"Nuts!" said Larry.

He walked over to Lucia's desk, pulled out the drawers, and dumped their contents. He pawed everything over, but he did not find what he was looking for.

There was some sort of disturbance in the hall outside and he could hear Rube bellowing. He paid no attention.

He went into Lucia's bedroom. He pulled out the bureau drawers and spread her clothes and private belongings around the room. Suddenly he came up with a jewel case. He picked out the top tray. Rings and necklaces clattered to the floor. He emptied the bottom half. He heard Lucia give a little gasp and his lips tightened.

His fingers explored. At last something gave. An envelope lay in the false bottom of the leather case.

He took it out, throwing the case into a corner of the room. He ripped open the envelope and glanced at its contents.

"Are they all here?" he demanded.

Lucia was sagging against the doorway. She was beaten.

"They're all there," she said, dully.

Larry slipped the envelope in his pocket. "You can thank your lucky stars that I only like favorable publicity," he said. "I'm turning these over to Walpole and I'm not telling him where I found them. Nor am I taking any fee for my services. I've already been paid off in experience."

He walked past her without a word, went to the front door and flung it open. Rube was facing a couple of bellboys, a man who looked like a janitor, and a man in a morning coat who was evidently the manager of the apartment hotel.

"They can go in now," said Larry to Rube. "Miss Warren will need their help. Things are a bit messed up."

CHAPTER XXVI

WATCHMAN, TELL US OF THE NIGHT

TWENTY minutes later Larry arrived at Luckman's apartment. He had hoped to find Bradley, but the inspector was not there. However, the detective watching the apartment was waiting for Larry and admitted him.

Some of the angry energy had deserted Larry. He seemed reluctant to begin his examination of Luckman's collection. It was in no sense as complicated a process as going over Adrian's stock. Luckman had been a specialist, interested only in Newfoundland issues.

There were several cardboard letter-files filled with stamps—some of them lying loose in the boxes, some carefully put away in envelopes and labeled. An inspection of these showed Larry that the loose stamps were damaged, mostly cancelled items. In such condition they had very little value.

The ones in the envelopes were in better shape, but none of them, Larry saw, were first-rate. They were all saleable, however.

Luckman's possession of these dubious items was presently explained when Larry took a large, morocco-bound album from the drawer of Luckman's desk. This was the works—the real collection. Like so many enthusiasts Luckman had had this album specially prepared. There was a space in it for every known Newfoundland issue. Each space was carefully labeled, and each space contained a stamp—a faultless specimen of its type.

Larry had a feeling for this sort of thing, and his manner, as he handled the album, was almost reverent.

Here were mint-condition items, unblemished in every respect. Where there were rarer colors of certain issues, Luckman had them. Evidently he had bought in the beginning simply to fill the book, but gradually he had replaced and replaced until the collection was flawless. Larry realized that all the stamps in the boxes and envelopes were duplicates of the perfect specimens which Luckman had laboriously acquired.

He finally turned to a page where a single prepared square was not filled. It was the only empty space in the book. Under the square was the printed label: *#10,1860 one shilling, orange,' on laid paper.*

This was the stamp which Adrian had sold to Paul Gregory without giving Luckman the chance to bid. Luckman's fury was understandable. His collection was one of the finest Larry had ever seen. Larry sat staring at the vacant space.

There was a little torn piece of a stamp hinge attached to the square, and Larry's fingers fiddled with it. He looked at the detective who sat stolidly in the corner of the room, thumping through a magazine.

"If he could have filled that square, I suspect he wouldn't have minded dying," Larry said.

"Huh?" The detective looked up.

"Perfection is a rare thing," Larry said. "This is perfection—but for one missing stamp. You ought to look at it, officer, because you may never see anything like it again."

The detective got up and came across the room. He glanced over Larry's shoulder, scratching his head. Larry sat still, his fingers playing idly with the torn piece of gummed hinge.

"How guys can spend the dough they do on them things is beyond me," said the detective. "Have you got anywhere, Mr. Storm?"

Larry sighed. "That's the hell of it, my friend. I haven't. We expected big things from this collection, but I'm damned if I can see anything that helps us. I'm going through it all again."

HE DID. Someone brought him lunch. He went carefully over the loose stuff in the boxes. There was nothing that gave him the slightest clue. In the end he came back to the leather-bound album. It was a thing of beauty; it would have thrilled any stamp enthusiast; but if it held a hint to the identity of a murderer, Larry could not see it.

It was about six when Larry gave up. He called police headquarters on Luckman's phone, but Bradley was not there and no one seemed to know where he could be reached.

Larry left the apartment, picked up Rube in the hallway downstairs, and went home. Bones greeted him at the front door. The boy's face looked white and drawn. Larry patted him on the back.

"Still feeling a little rocky, fella?"

Bones turned away quickly. "It isn't that, Larry." His voice shook, as if were close to tears.

"Ellen!" Larry said, sharply. "Is something wrong with her, Bones?"

"No, no, Larry, she's all right. She's in the living room."

Larry stepped past the boy into the room beyond. Ellen was stretched on the couch near the fire, a pale blue quilt drawn up over her. Larry went to her, knelt beside the couch. He saw that she had been crying.

"Ellen, what on earth—?"

She put her cheek against the lapel of his coat and for an instant her arm clung to him.

"I didn't know what you meant this morning, Larry, when . . . when you said we might not like the way things have turned out. Oh, Larry, I can't believe it. He was so—so real, so human. I—"

"Ellen, what are you talking about?" He pushed her gently back against the cushions.

"Haven't you been in touch with Bradley?" she asked.

"No, I haven't seen him all day. What's happened?"

Ellen turned her eyes away. "It's Mr. Julius, Larry. Why didn't you tell me that Bradley suspected him? It would have prepared me."

"Tell me what's happened!" Larry said.

"It's all in the afternoon papers," Ellen said. "Bradley put a man to watch Mr. Julius. This morning Mr. Julius went out. He went into a restaurant for a late breakfast. During breakfast he went into the washroom. He didn't come out. The de-

tective finally went in after him. Mr. Julius had gone . . . escaped through a window at the back. Bradley says it's as good as a confession. They've got a general alarm out for him."

"So he ducked out on them?" Larry stood up, frowning. "Now why would he do that? Bradley had no real evidence against him."

"But you, Larry. He was afraid of what you'd find today. Was there—was there something to incriminate Mr. Julius at Luckman's?"

"That's the devil of it, Ellen. There wasn't anything to convict anyone. I . . . I think we must have gone wrong on our reasoning. Luckman had a beautiful collection, perfect except for that missing Number 10, but as far as a clue to the killer goes, there was—" He stopped short, staring at Ellen. "My God!" he said.

"Larry, what is it?" she asked anxiously. "Was there something after all?"

HE STRODE over to the sideboard and poured himself a drink. His eyes were suddenly bright. The neck of the scotch bottle rattled against the rim of the glass.

"I've got to think," he said. "I've got to think it out, Ellen. There was something, right under my hand, and I didn't see it at the time. But if I'm right—"

"Mr. Julius?"

"Not Mr. Julius! Lord knows why the old devil has given the police the runaround. There's no case, Ellen. He was fond of Bones! He found Bones pretty easily! He has no alibi! But they haven't connected the gun with him. They haven't explained why, if he was so soft-hearted about Bones, he would try to kill us. No, Ellen. I wouldn't put murder past Julius, if he thought he was right. But I think he'd take his medicine if he were trapped, and not go around taking pot shots at people." He drained half his glass at a gulp. "And Moses—if I m right . . ."

He walked up and down the room, puffing at his cigarette. Suddenly the phone rang and he walked over and picked it up.

"Hello? Yes, this is Storm. . . . What's that? . . . I see. And who are you? . . . Very well, I'll come at once."

He put down the phone. He put down his glass. He turned to face Ellen, his eyes shining with excitement.

"It seems," he said, slowly, "that someone's broken into our office downtown. They want me to come and see whether anything of value's been taken."

"Gee, boss," Bones cried. "That's terrible! I got a lot of important stuff there, too. Can I come with you?"

"You'll stay here with Ellen," Larry's voice sounded far away, yet tense.

"Who called you, Larry?" Ellen asked.

A faint smile flickered on Larry's lips. "The night watchman in the building."

Ellen looked at him, frowning. "But Larry, there isn't any night watchman in the building! That's why we—"

"I know," said Larry softly. "There isn't any night watchman."

He walked slowly out into the foyer.

"Larry!" Ellen cried. "Larry, don't be a fool! It's some kind of a trap."

Larry came back into the room buttoning up his coat. He stood beside the couch looking down into Ellen's face. "Traps aren't dangerous when you know about them ahead of time," he said.

"Don't be an ass," Ellen said. "If there's somebody waiting there to get you, you haven't a chance. Call Bradley. Let him handle it."

"Bradley can't be reached."

"Then don't go. You're just playing into the murderer's hands."

"I think I can persuade him that the game is up," said Larry, "—that there's no use in more killing. He isn't going to polish me off until he finds out what I know and whom I've told. Just take it easy. I'll be back—soon."

He left them.

"Larry, you idiot!" Ellen called after him. Her answer was the sound of the front door closing.

In the elevator Larry spoke to the operator. "Take me all the way down to the basement," he said. He gave the boy a

wink. "I don't want that flat-foot in the lobby to know I'm going out."

"You can count on me, Mr. Storm."

LARRY got out of a taxi about a block from his office and paid off the driver. He stood for a minute, looking up and down Nassau Street, almost deserted at this hour of the night. Offices had closed. A few lights showed that a handful of stragglers remained at their desks. A damp, cold wind whipped round his legs and flapped the tails of his overcoat. Then he walked slowly toward 64½.

The entryway was dark. George, the elevator man, had gone home. Larry began the long climb up the winding stairs . . . six flights of them. When he reached the seventh floor he paused. There was not a sound in the building.

Slowly Larry walked along the corridor and turned down the passage that led to his office. There was no light burning behind the plate glass door. It was so black that he felt his way along, one hand on the wall. Outside the door he stopped. Then he tried the knob. The door was unlocked, and he opened it.

The office was pitch-dark. Larry's gloved fingers crept along the wall till they touched the light switch. Again he hesitated, straining to hear some sound. Then it came to him—the faint creak of shoe leather. Larry's muscles tensed, but his voice was quiet and steady when he spoke.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Hale," he said. "I'm going to turn on the lights."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE CANCELLER CANCELLED

THE switch clicked. Jasper Hale, gaunt, gray, his lips drawn together in a thin blue line, was standing with his back against Ellen's desk. He wore a long dark overcoat and a dark felt hat pulled forward over his pale eyes. In his gloved right hand he held an automatic which was leveled steadily at Larry.

Larry, looking at the creases in that gray glove, saw that Hale's trigger finger was dangerously contracted. Larry's eyes shifted to meet Hale's. There was contempt there—and a kind of reckless determination.

Larry reached for his cigarette case.

"Don't!" said Jasper Hale, sharply.

Larry moistened his lips. The hinged section of the counter was up and he walked slowly forward.

"That's far enough," said Hale.

Larry stopped. "This has to end, Mr. Hale," he said. "You can't cover murder with murder forever."

"Why did you come—if you knew?" Hale asked. His voice was tight, strained.

"Because the game is up," said Larry, quietly. "I thought I could persuade you that further killing is useless."

"You're a fool," said Hale. "D'you suppose I got you here just to talk?"

"No," Larry said, slowly, "you hoped to get rid of me before I told someone about that stamp hinge in Luckman's collection."

"Yes," Hale said. It seemed incredible that his finger could tighten without firing the gun. "That was the only mistake I made," he said.

"Missing me at Adrian's office was another," said Larry.

"That," said Hale, "can be remedied—now!"

"Wait!" The urgency in his own voice shocked Larry. He struggled to keep it steady. "It won't do any good, Hale. Bradley's not a fool. He's bound to arrive at the same conclusion. He—"

From outside came the wail of a fire engine screaming its way along Nassau Street. There was nothing in Hale's eyes to suggest that he could be swayed. They were determined, relentless. Only ten yards separated Larry from the automatic. Hale's finger flexed.

"Drop it, Hale!"

Larry's heart jammed against his ribs. The voice came from behind him—Bradley's voice.

For one instant Hale's pale eyes turned away from Larry and in that instant Larry moved. He charged at the gaunt figure of

the millionaire, head down, in a flying tackle. The whole room seemed to explode in his face. There was fire from Hale's gun—a jarring blow on the side of his head—a million bright lights snapping on in front of his eyes—and darkness.

LARRY opened his eyes. He moved his head and groaned. There was an incredible confusion of excited voices. Larry closed his eyes. He heard Ellen's voice, calling his name. He heard Bones, and Mr. Julius, and Bradley and a dozen other voices. They all seemed to be shouting.

He opened his eyes again, tentatively. A man was bending over him. His face looked like a great swollen balloon with a gray mustache.

"He's all right," said a strange voice.

"Oh shoot, yes, I'm wonderful," said Larry.

"Larry! Larry! You fool!" That was Ellen. She placed a cool hand against Larry's cheek.

He was sitting in the leather chair in his own private office. Ellen was kneeling beside him. The man with the gray mustache was snapping shut a black bag.

"Just creased him," he said to someone. "Nothing to worry about."

"Thank God for that," said Inspector Bradley. He came into the line of Larry's vision. He was smiling, but his face was white. "Feel better, Storm?"

"I guess so," Larry said. He saw Bones. He saw Mr. Julius, peering over Bones' shoulder.

"When you put on that charge of the Light Brigade I thought your goose was cooked," said Bradley.

Larry tried to sit up. It was a painful business. He looked at Ellen. "What's going on? How did you get here?"

"I called the inspector when you left the apartment," she said. "I couldn't reach him. So—I called out the fire department." She laughed. "The inspector was here all the time. Had the building surrounded."

"The fire department "

"I couldn't think of anything else," Ellen said, defensively.

"Smart girl," said Mr. Julius. "She couldn't know that Bradley was playing games. I was a decoy."

"Oh, please shut up," said Larry, wearily. His eyes turned to Bradley. "How the hell *did* you get here?"

Bradley shrugged. "I went to see Mr. Julius to question him about his alibi for the time of the murder. You know how I felt about him, but I couldn't make much headway."

Mr. Julius chuckled. "Tried to trap me . . . lot of words . . . very funny."

"Then we got talking about the case," Bradley continued. "The murderer had made it quite clear that he was afraid of you, Storm . . . wanted to get you out of the way. It occurred to me that if he thought our attention was directed somewhere else, he might make a move. Mr. Julius agreed to help. We gave out the news that he was wanted . . . had given us the slip. Actually he spent the day in my apartment."

"Worst collection of books I ever saw," grumbled Mr. Julius.

"But how did you get on to Hale?" asked Larry.

"He was the one person we hadn't checked thoroughly. Yet I knew it had to be someone interested in stamps and someone in the group of people we'd connected with Adrian or Luckman. Hale was a long shot, but I played him. I trailed him personally all day. While he was waiting for you to come down here after that telephone call I had time to throw a cordon around the building. I could have arrested him for breaking and entering, but I wanted to make a murder charge stick. There was no evidence against him—until he tried to get you."

"But there *is* evidence against him!" Larry said. "Where is he?"

Bradley moved toward the office door. "Mac, bring the prisoner in here."

A PLAINCLOTHESMAN came in from the outer office leading Jasper Hale by the arm. Hale's right hand was swathed in bandages.

"A little fancy shooting," said Bradley, modestly. "I wanted to be sure to get him into court."

The millionaire stamp collector's lips were twisted in a ghastly smile. His forehead was drenched with sweat. He was obviously suffering an agony of pain. "You must lead a charmed life, Storm," he said.

Bradley cleared his throat. "You don't have to talk, Hale. That's your privilege."

"Why not? It'll take my mind off this hand."

"You'd better sit down," said Bradley.

Hale dropped into the swivel chair by Larry's desk. The plainclothesman stood directly behind him. "I underestimated you, Inspector," Hale said. "I didn't dream you were on my trail."

"I wasn't—till today. If you are prepared to make a statement, Hale, I wish you'd explain what all that talk about hinges was you had with Storm before I broke in."

"That's simple enough," said Larry, "and it's the evidence that'll hang him. When I went over Luckman's collection I found it complete except for one stamp—the Newfoundland Number 10 which Adrian had sold to Hale. But in the empty square marked for it was stuck a fragment of hinge. Now Luckman would never have put any other stamp in that square, and only the day before he'd told me he didn't have a Number 10. There was only one conclusion to draw from that. Since I'd talked to him he'd acquired one and mounted it."

"But what does that prove?" Bradley asked.

"You had figured that Luckman was killed for attempting to blackmail the murderer," Larry said. "But Luckman didn't want money. He wanted that Number 10—and apparently he'd gotten it! So it had to be Hale!

"He gave Luckman the Number 10, and Luckman mounted it in his book. The next day Hale met him in the Park and killed him. He took Bones and the gun to Luckman's apartment. He couldn't afford to leave that stamp in Luckman's album, because too many people knew the story of his buying it over Luckman's head. So he took it—but he ripped it out carelessly, leaving a piece of the hinge. That was the giveaway. When I figured it out I knew Hale was our man." He looked at Hale. "Isn't that substantially correct?"

Hale nodded. "If the police had found the Number 10 in Luckman's book, even they might have guessed," he said.

"Thanks!" said Bradley.

"I had to remove it," said Hale, "but it wasn't till I got home that I realized I'd left part of the hinge behind."

"That was bad," said Larry.

"Very bad," said Hale grimly. "I knew if you saw it, Storm . . ."

"So you tried to knock me off in Adrian's office."

"Precisely," said Hale. He laughed harshly. "You seem to have been the cause of all my trouble, Storm. It was on your account that I was forced to murder Adrian!"

"*My* account?"

"You frightened Adrian half to death . . . you and your friend Nicholas," said Hale. "He thought you were on the verge of catching him with the goods. He was preparing to skip town. I couldn't have that."

"*You* couldn't have it?" Larry was genuinely puzzled.

"YOU fool, Storm, don't tell me you haven't tumbled to the truth?" Hale's pale blue eyes were blazing. A little nerve twitched high up on his cheek. "Adrian and I were in the racket together. I was the brains; he was the front. Haven't you realized how well I knew my way around his office? Haven't you realized that I knew his habits? Did you think I carried that kid of yours out the front door onto Nassau Street? I knew where the back entrance was. I'd used it thousands of times."

"Then your collecting was just a blind?" Bradley asked.

Hale shook his head. "No, it wasn't a blind. I started out legitimately enough.

But stamps get in the blood . . . Storm'll tell you that. I didn't want to wait till items I needed came on the market. That's how I first met Adrian. He could get what I wanted without waiting. Storm, when you see my collection you'll realize there's never been anything like it before!"

"I'll be damned," said Larry softly.

"A retired oil man . . . that's what I'm supposed to be!" Hale was talking rapidly now, almost breathlessly. He seemed eager to tell them just how clever he had been. "My original fortune *did* come from oil. But I've made another one since in stamps. Hundreds of thousands of dollars . . . all in stamps. That ought to make you and your dime-a-dozen business look sick, Storm!"

"Then your frequent trips to Europe were on stamp business?" Bradley was making notes in a small black book.

"Naturally," said Hale. "The papers called me a world traveler! Well, I was . . . a traveling stamp salesman. I've sold thousands of dollars' worth of stolen items to European and Far Eastern collectors."

"Stolen items which Adrian acquired for you?"

"Yes, and in a hundred different ways," said Hale. He gave Larry an ironic look. "It was I, Mr. Storm, who thought of 'Oscar Rivero.' Adrian carried out the idea profitably—but it was *my* idea! Your friend Lon Nicholas was only one of many brokers all over the world who fell for Mr. Rivero."

"You and Adrian!" Larry sounded dazed.

"What a laugh we had," said Hale, "when that poor fool Gregory began stealing from me! He didn't know the truth. He didn't know that he was stealing from me and then selling back to me through Adrian. We let him go on. We thought it might be wise to have something on him sometime."

"So that's why you didn't kill him that night at Adrian's?" said Larry. "You planned to use him later?"

"Your mind is beginning to function!" snapped Hale. "I had to kill Adrian. I couldn't risk having him skip town. Sooner or later he would have talked. He would have sold his own grandmother down the river for money. I had to get him that night, because he was planning to leave the next day."

He cleared his throat, and his eyes glittered angrily. "So I went to his office. He didn't know I was coming. When I arrived I found Gregory already there. I went into the inspection room to have a look. That bottle was standing on the cabinet in the corner. I picked it up and went back into the waiting room. I was standing behind the door when Gregory came out and I slugged him."

"I've never been able to figure that out," said Larry. "Why didn't you just hide till he was gone?"

"Don't be a fool!" said Hale. "I wanted to delay him. I didn't want him getting home too soon. He might have ruined my alibi. I used the side door in my study to go in and out. The servants wouldn't know. But if Gregory came to my study and found me missing—no alibi. I had to delay him."

"I get it," said Larry.

HALE moistened his lips. "Then I walked into Adrian's office. He saw the gun in my hand—he knew what was coming. He got up from his chair, slobbering for mercy. I shot him. I never even spoke to him."

There was silence as Hale paused. Larry's face looked frozen.

"Then I took his keys and opened the safe. There was something there I had to have. Not stamps, Mr. Storm. No, not stamps. Adrian and I had a written agreement of partnership. He had one and I had one—just to make it safe for both of us. I had to have his. That's why I stayed so long. I knew he kept it hidden in one of his stock books. I had just found it when that Warren girl turned up.

"That was a tight spot. I had foolishly left my gun on the desk. If she'd discovered me, she might have had the upper hand. But she didn't. She ran. Then I had

to leave in a hurry because I was certain she'd notify the police."

"And then," said Larry, "you met Bones."

"Yes, the boy!" Hale laughed. "I know all about all the brokers in town. I can tell you the approximate size of your bank account, the names of your employees, your habits—a surprising amount of information. I couldn't be certain the boy had seen me, but I hit him with the butt of my gun.

"I carried him out the back entrance to my car. I wasn't afraid of the police, Storm, but I didn't want stamp experts meddling in this. I thought the boy, held as a hostage, could be useful to me."

"It might amuse you," said Larry dryly, "to know that we put that down to a streak of kindliness in the murderer. And what about Luckman?"

Hale's face clouded. "I hadn't counted on Luckman. I had the greatest shock of my life, when I got out to my car. Luckman was sitting in the front seat, calmly smoking one of those cigars of his. He had me cold. It seemed he'd been trailing me for days, hoping to get something on me. He wanted that Number 10. I had to give in.

"He came back to the house with me—helped me carry the boy in through my private entrance. I gave him the stamp and promised to meet him in the Park Wednesday with money. Mr. Luckman had gotten too bold for his own good."

"And the boy?"

"He was there, in the little foyer outside that private door, when you and the inspector called later that evening," Hale chuckled. "A large dose of chloral had quieted him."

"You played it very coolly," said Bradley.

"Why not? I've been playing dangerous games all my life. But I saw the way out then. Luckman! I would make Luckman the villain. The next day I went to the Park. The boy was on the floor of my car, covered by a robe. I met Luckman. I didn't give him money. I gave him a bellyful of lead.

"The rest you know. I took his keys, went to his apartment, left the boy and the gun. I had to work fast. I couldn't risk being caught there. I took the Number 10, but in my hurry I messed it up by leaving that piece of hinge. When I knew the police had engaged you to examine his collection I had to prevent it." He shrugged. "Well, I failed. I had to silence you. Unfortunately I fell into the inspector's little trap. I thought he really suspected Julius."

"I wanted you to commit yourself by some action," said Bradley. "Frankly I didn't put much faith in Storm's finding something at Luckman's. So I got Mr. Julius to play ball with me . . . and that was that. But I had counted on your talking longer to Storm when he got here. I didn't think you'd act so quickly."

A plainclothesman appeared in the door. "The wagon's here, Inspector."

"Take him away," said Bradley.

As the plainclothesmen lifted him to his feet, Jasper Hale turned to Larry. "Don't go off with the idea that you've been so smart, Storm. You were just lucky. I've been making suckers of you and the rest of the boys in the trade for years! When Adrian's stock and mine are appraised, you'll realize that you're operating a penny-ante business here."

"But my method is safer," said Larry. He closed his eyes as Hale and the plainclothesmen disappeared.

Ellen spoke in a practical voice. "You're going home now, Larry. You're going to bed and stay there. For once you're going to do as you're told."

Larry opened his eyes. "I want to ride home on a fire engine," he said.

"You're going home in an ambulance," said Ellen.

Larry looked helplessly at Bradley. "You got me into this—you and your murder," he wailed. "Goodbye freedom! Goodbye individuality! Goodbye Lawrence Storm!"

"Mercy," said Bradley. "What a loss."

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THIS week we move ourselves out of the way with the alacrity of a pedestrian dodging a big Mack truck. If you'll take a glance at the length of the letters from two gentlemen who seem to be involved in an altercation *re* our stormy petrel, Theodore Roscoe, you'll see why.

DON WILKINS

All hail the new ARGOSY! As an old, old reader, let me give you my present impressions.

Thanks, first of all, for eliminating the bloody streak on the covers. The new covers are 100% improved. My only criticism is that at times they lack imagination and do not faithfully portray the story they illustrate. But mostly they are mighty attractive; sketches heading stories aren't so hot but then ARGOSY is not a picture mag.

Biggest improvement, of course, has been in serials. Forester, Short, Foster, Elston, Zagat, Chase, North, Davis and the rejuvenated Brand —all splendid. I want to especially congratulate you on Captain Hornblower, "Three Against the Stars" and "Lost House." I greatly appreciate an original, well-written adventure yarn and these writers all have what it takes. Too many of the old ARGOSY writers depend on gore, violence and hackneyed plots.

On the less cheerful side: I thoroughly agree with Mr. Gordon Pugh. Roscoe is louzee! His style is hysterical high-blood-pressure stuff that seeks to thrill and dither and succeeds only in nauseating the intelligent reader. Your printers must run out of exclamation points when setting up his tripe. And oh, his insufferable conceit in employing unusual polysyllables. Childish! And his hectic, horrible, complex "mysteries" that are either only too obvious or else so complicated that they flatten out without adequate solution. Yes, sir, Roscoe always invariably dependably disappoints and disgusts. I hope he'll swoon his last swoon so far as ARGOSY is concerned. Roscoe should study Elston. There is a guy who can evolve a real mystery with a faithful complete, logical solution. But Roscoe—bah!

And Burroughs! His Tarzan was something different and really interesting years ago. But today's fantastic fiction must have a genuine scientific background to be interesting. Burroughs has failed to keep up with the improved style of his own type of stories. He very evidently lacks a scientific understanding and his stories as a result are pretty common, dreary stuff, as compared with Zagat, North, etc.

Chidsey is another dud. His jewel thieves and similar criminals set against the same tropical background are all monotonously alike in their trashy bloodthirstiness. He can write swell Scotch historicals. Why not set him at it?

I sincerely hope you've definitely abandoned the old "staff writer" policy. Brand's "Dr. Kildare" shows what a writer can do when not busy rushing out unworthy "pot boilers." Glad you've cut Bedford-Jones. He was "office staff" at its worst. I note you wonder why Philips isn't more generally praised. I believe this is because his yarns while fairly interesting are juvenile college-sports stuff.

Most of your novelets and shorts are splendid. I don't believe enough recognition has been paid Detzer's "Costello" stories. They are immense. Let us have lots of them. Also No-Shirt McGree and Templeton stories.

I'd like to see more good historical and fantastic serials and a constant quest for the new and best writers.

But on the whole the new ARGOSY yarns hit me right where I live.

Chicago, Ill.

WHILE Mr. Wilkins devoted merely a bitter paragraph to his displeasure with the author of "Six Hours to Go," the next writer dedicates his entire inkbarrel to praise of him.

HARRY ROSENSTEIN

I am writing this letter because I believe it is time that someone gave a great amount of praise to one of your writers. I only started reading ARGOSY a few years ago, but I have begun to enjoy it so much that I can hardly do

without it now. The reason for this enjoyment depends upon one man. This man is Theodore Roscoe. Without him ARGOSY would not be ARGOSY. He is the very life of the magazine as far as I am concerned. His stories, long or short, are the best pieces of literature that I have ever read.

The first story I ever read which had been written by Theodore Roscoe was "Evil Beach." I can tell you that I began to hunt for Theodore Roscoe's stories.

There are a few other good writers in the staff of ARGOSY but Theodore Roscoe is absolutely the best. Ever since I read that first story, I have been consumed by a desire for all of his stories. I found beneath the titles of some stories, titles of others, and I went to the magazine shops and second hand shops to find more of his stories.

I have always enjoyed the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. In fact, I considered him one of the greatest writers who ever lived. But since I have read "Evil Beach," "I Was the Kid with the Drum," "The Heads of Sargent Baptiste," "Ghoul's Paradise," "Z Is for Zombie," and all the rest I say that Theodore Roscoe is the greatest writer of fiction who ever lived.

I ask you to look at Edgar Allen Poe. His stories were sometimes so fantastic as to be childish. They were sometimes ridiculous. But Theodore Roscoe has a plot behind every one of his stories. Something vital and lifelike.

I do not understand, why, with all the awful plots they have for motion pictures these days, plots that really smell to high heaven, they do not look in ARGOSY and discover Theodore Roscoe. They must be entirely blind. Someday they will find "Ghoul's Paradise," I hope, and make a movie out of it. Talk about "Frankenstein" or "Dracula!" Why that story made into a motion picture would astound the world.

If they decided to make "Two Hours to Go" into a movie it would be a most marvelous combination of humor, adventure, horror, and just real life that has ever been put upon the screen.

I have written this letter to inform Mr. Theodore Roscoe that he is in reality a genuis. A genius of Literature. A master of mystery. Miami, Florida.

Looking Ahead!

THE MAN FROM MADRID

Did he come from the grave—this man the four American buccaneers thought they had killed—with his madman's eyes and his demand for vengeance? "I have to get even," he told them coldly. "I can't live again until I've paid you back." They didn't know how he could do it; they were only sure that he would. . . . Beginning a distinguished new novel of Spanish gold and the personal warfare that moved from Madrid to Manhattan, by

WALTER RIPPERGER

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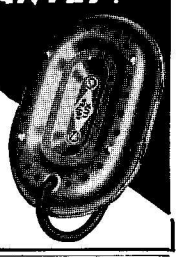

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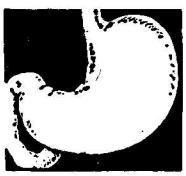

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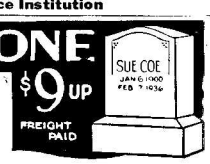

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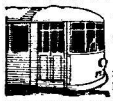

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