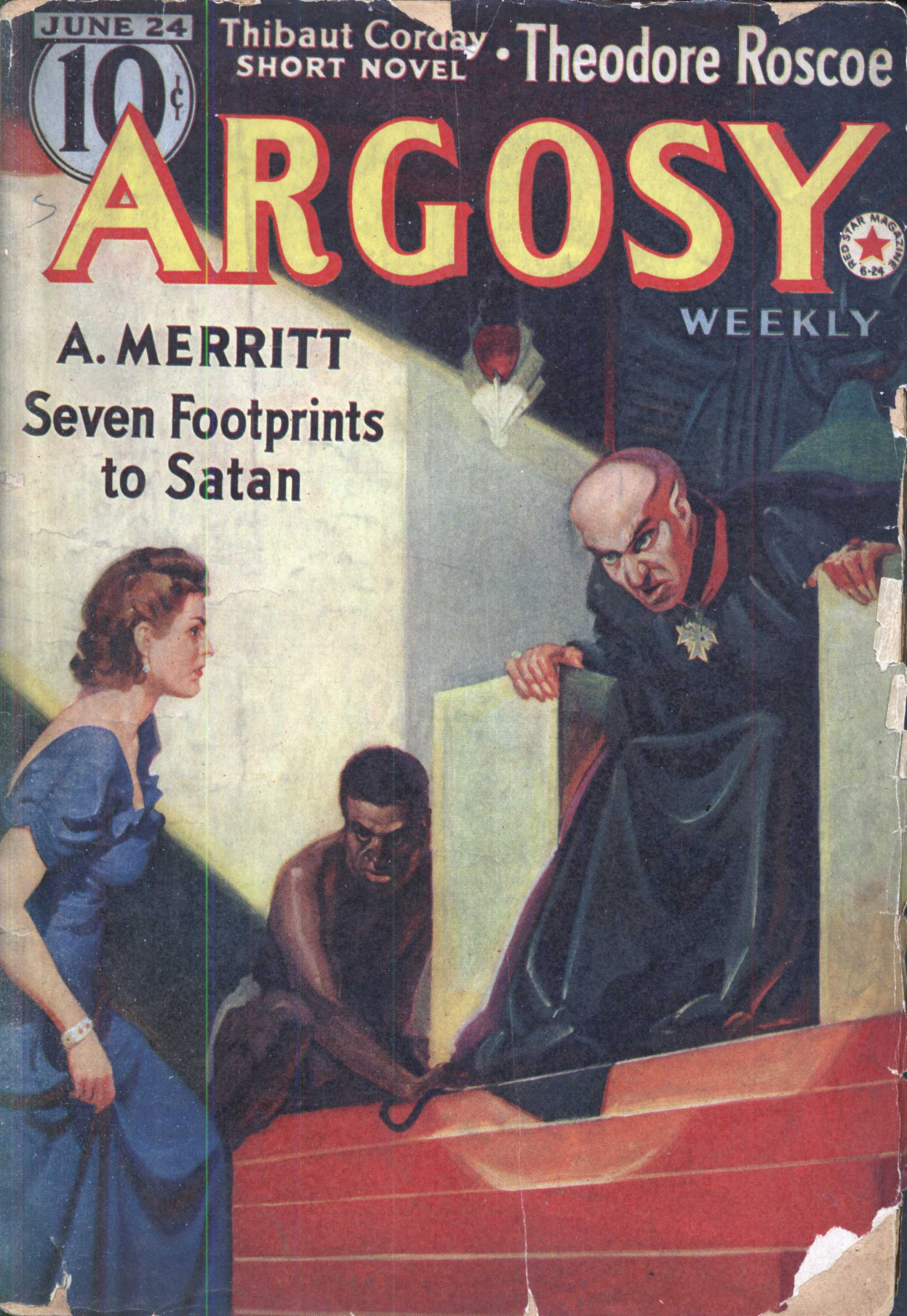
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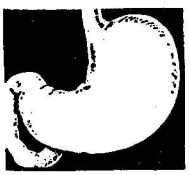

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Is This You?

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From the darkness they sprang up, and the night was suddenly alive with Touaregs

Corday and the Seven League Boots

Just try them for size, Monsieur le Legionnaire—they will not pinch or chafe, but if they carry you on fabulous flights into the realm of maniac adventure, you must not be surprised. For he who takes big steps will stumble. . . .

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "The Wonderful Lamp of Thibaut Corday", "Snake-Head", etc.

Walk Softly, Go Far—
Old Oriental Proverb

THE young British consular agent said he had done a lot of walking that day and his shoes pinched him. Old Thibaut Corday said the Englishman did not know anything about walking, or shoes either.

"Regard!" the old Frenchman thrust out a foot. "Observe that for a shoe! There is what one wears in the accursed Foreign Legion—what Legionnaires call a *brodequin*. Is that a dancing pump or oxford? You behold it is not. That is an engine, a ten-pound galley to enslave the toes!"

The Englishman remarked he had worn a similar boot playing Rugby.

"You did not!" Old Thibaut Corday declared. "A Legion *brodequin* would make your British football shoe look like a lady's slipper alongside. Today this boot is old, decayed, thin, the sole a mere tissue and the hobnails worn down like the stubs of an old lion's teeth. Years ago when that boot was new, it was a rock-crusher! That leather is hippopotamus hide; that bunion-bulged toe could have kicked to bits a brick wall; the sole was thicker than a carpenter's plank, and if in a fight I stamped down on a ruffian's hand the iron studs would have flattened it to a pancake.

"As for walking—?" The old Frenchman eyed his shoe with the veneration of the master praising an old hunting dog.

"Non, but in the Legion we did not walk. We marched! On hard earth. In mud. Tough gravel. Hot sand. A Legionnaire must teach his boots to drill, slog, parade, charge. They must trot him quick-step, *pas gymnastique,* or pace endless routines of sentry duty, or stand still on guard when there is a noise in the dark and his feet want to go.

"Sometimes, with the bullets nipping their heels, they must run like the wind, those boots. They are to a Legionnaire what a horse is to a cavalry man. It is not for nothing they call the Legion the Cavalry-on-Foot, and I would like a centime for every mile these clods have carried me. Twenty miles a day was nothing—thirty!—even forty these hellions have marched. That expression, 'die with your boots on'—that is from the French Foreign Legion, too. I would like a centime for every mile these boots have run to save me from dying in them. I would be a millionaire!"

The young consular agent asked Corday to tell him in seriousness the longest distance he had ever run in his boots without stopping. "I mean how far in one stretch, say, in a day?"

Old Thibaut Corday studied his shoe thoughtfully. "I will tell you," he agreed, pulling up an extra chair, propping up both feet and grimacing at his boots as if he had suddenly contracted the gout. "There is a story about a pair of boots—not these, but some others I wore—and I will tell it to you if you listen through to the end without blurting out that I am a liar. You agree?"

"Fair enough." The young Englishman grinned across the café table. "Forward march."

The veteran raked his cinnamon whiskers clear of his lips and stared at his footwear gravely. "I will strain your credulity at once," he advised. "The longest day's run I ever made in a pair of boots was from Tunis to India. That was only the halfway mark.

"From there I ran to China, Persia and Japan, pausing for breath in Cambodia and taking the long way around by Madagascar. In the end I landed in Hell.

"There were bullets nipping my heels all the way, and I could not have done it if each stride in those boots I wore had not carried me one hundred and eleven thousand and eighty feet!"

The young British consular agent looked worried. The Algerian sun blazed hot outside the café awning, and Old Thibaut Corday had walked in without his hat. He murmured, "I say, old boy. Now really!"

The old Frenchman gave him a glare. *"Zut!* Already you think I lie, although you are bound by contract not to say so. But I am not lying, and my scalp is too thick for the sun. I promise this is a true story—"

CHAPTER I

NEW BOOTS SWEEP CLEAN

NOW Napoleon was the world's greatest general, perhaps, and who am I to criticize his military tactics? But he made one error in his record, *monsieur;* he said an army marches on its stomach. Every soldier knows an army marches by its boots. A regiment can dispense with food for a week, but where could it march to barefoot, I would like to inquire? If I remember my schoolbook history, the American patriots who had the chilblains at Valley Forge could answer that. So could the men of MacMahon who died at Sedan, ill-shod in the patent leather boots and spats invented by some dancing master in the War Department of 1870. So could the grenadiers who killed their feet on that stroll back from Moscow.

An army is no better than its shoes.

Boots are as important to a soldier as hoofs to a horse. Give him a good dry pair. Roomy enough for a circulation of air between the toes, but snug, so that one's heel does not slide and blister. Staunch as a ferryboat for fording swamps, yet light as a canoe for speed. Armor-leathered to turn a ricochetted bullet, yet cool for marching in the desert. Hob-nailed for cobblestones. Gum-soled for

stealthy corners. Tough, but easy on the instep. Blunt-nosed, but not liable to stumble. Serviceable, yet smart. Where in the world is such a pair? Nowhere!

What do you get in the army? In the French Foreign Legion you get these *brodequins*. And a kick from the rat-faced supply sergeant who gives them to you.

"Here, Blue!" he calls when you enter the barracks at Sidi as a recruit. "Break these in on your pumpers!" Flinging a pair of those bull-killers at you.

You tell him your feet are size nine. "Nine, be blowed!" he roars. "Do you think this is a shoe shop on the Rue de la Paix? I am all out of nines and you are lucky to get eights. Do not worry, you will learn to march in them! Your toes are too long? You will see how those boots can cut them off!"

Or suppose that your feet are small; then you are swamped in those boats, size eleven. "Too big for you, Blue? Your tootsies slide around? Never fear, little man; your feet will swell into them!"

You are not issued socks in the Legion, either, and breaking in a pair of those hob-nailed, hippopotamus-hide boots is like trying to tame a couple of rhinoceri lashed on your feet. If you are not dead after five years service, you may re-enlist and get another pair. A batch of Legionnaires marching off in new boots resembles a parade of cripples hobbling to a hospital. Believe it, there will be plenty of growling and limping. Everyone tries to exchange with the next man, and everyone prays for a battle. Stealing the boots from a dead man is a little game long played in the Legion. You mark him off, if his feet are anywhere near your size; and there is a common understanding—first come, first served.

THAT company stationed at El Hamma in Tunis was a typical example. I think when I go to Hades I will see a close resemblance to El Hamma. It was not the place where you could repair your corns or cool your heels. Not that town of dirty Arab houses, twisty alleys and evil bazaars roasting under the North African sun on the edge of that fiery desert called the Grand Erg Orientale.

That was a villainous village! Hot? Merely to lift an arm caused you to break out in perspiration. The alleys were choked with blowing sand and dirty smells and a scum of Arabs and Negroes good for nothing but wickedness.

The thermometer was permanent at a hundred and ten in the shade, only there was no shade. No tree-cooled boulevards and pretty promenades in that town. You could not baby your feet in that place. It did not go in for footwear. There was one old blind cobbler in El Hamma.

I am all for giving Tunis to Mussolini after seeing that part of it. France ought to let him have it. He would probably make a lot of friends there; El Hamma would be a congenial spot for him to live. Besides heat and heathenism, the place was a hellhole full of drugs. Hashish and opium was the local diet. The Government would not have cared, but these narcotics were being sneaked to the tribal chieftains out in the desert, along with advice to fight the French.

Those Arabs who infested the Grand Erg Orientale were ugly customers at best; give them a whiff of the poppy, and they were dangerous as dynamite. Inspired with hashish and rebellion, the desert tribes were becoming unruly. Trouble was brewing in Tunis even in those days—El Hamma was the cookpot of the sedition. *Voilà!* The French Legion was sent down to police the place. We marched there, you comprehend. All the way from the railhead at Kairouan. In new boots.

You never saw a detachment of men as footsore. Groaning and cursing, we hobbled into the outpost at El Hamma.

"By the grave-slippers of my dead grandmother!" I remember Yankee Bill the Elephant swearing. "My dogs are killing me! Why does the supply department torture us this way? We spend five years breaking in a pair of brogans in Algeria, then the outfit is ordered into new shoes and told to make a forced march across

half of Africa! I am crippled for life!"

"You think *you* are crippled!" That from Christianity Jensen the Dane. "I am walking on boiled lobsters. Last night I had to cut the laces open with a knife. My toes refused to enter prison again this morning. I had to stuff them in with a spoon!"

"That is nothing, pigeon-toes!" cried another man. "Look at my heel! Achilles, himself, never had such a blister!"

"It is something new in the Legion! We are to bind our feet like Chinese women. Mine grow smaller every year. In this pair of sabots they will be reduced to stumps!"

"I am marking you, my friend," came the laugh. "Those eights of yours will be a relief after this boy's size I am limping in."

"Dirty German! You would like to kill me, yourself, just to get my shoes!"

"No danger of that," was the warning from our corporal, himself sitting on his cot with a foot in a tender hand. "The colonel will kill you fatheads before you know it. You think your hoofs are hurting you now, but wait! You do not know Papa Rolant!"

Ha ha, but we did know Papa Rolant. His reputation in the Legion was of the best—or of the worst—depending on how you looked at it. His personality was a blend of Tiger Clemenceau, Madame Dufarge, two bottles of cognac and a novel by De Maupassant. He was as French as the Three Musketeers. And he resembled Santa Claus, as plump as a chuckle, with merry red cheeks and a white-winged moustache and twinkling blue eyes.

But do not be mistaken about that little package. It could be explosive. All of us pretend we are someone else, and Papa Rolant had a secret yearning to be Napoleon. Emperor and Soldier—he fancied the role; genius of the battlefield, and dashing boulevardier! About anything military he had Napoleonic ideas. Honor! Valor! Discipline! He rubbed it in.

Twinkling and merry, he was nevertheless the very devil for military rules. In a battle he was as cunning as a fox, following orders from above to the letter, but in such a way that he never wasted the lives of his men. In the outpost he was murderous. He had a passion for pomp and circumstance. For bugles and drums. For military display. He loved dress parades!

Full-dress parades! At any time of the day he was liable to order one. Every Legionnaire must turn out completely equipped, down to the last trenching tool, the last sacred button. Uniforms must be perfect to the uttermost detail. Collars hooked. Buckles shining. Knapsacks ready for the field.

Woe to the soldier whose rifle wasn't clean. Let his *képi* be askew, and he would not soon forget it. A grease-spot on a tunic meant a week in the guardhouse. To be late for lineup or slouchy on the march meant such punishments as were ordinarily meted to criminals. Funny, was it not? A man could be a coward on the battlefield, and Papa Rolant would forgive him. But he would not forgive anything at parade.

"It is the high point of soldiering," he would say. "It keeps the men on their toes. It impresses the Arabs. It is excellent for morale. It keeps the Legionnaires from going *cafard*."

Cafard—that is when men go a little crazy from the sunshine and monotony of a desert outpost. The Legionnaires would have risked it a thousand times in preference to those parades. How they hated them. To line up at full regimentals in the blazing North African heat! To drill and wheel in the dust like West Pointers, like Prussians on Unter den Linden, like cadets at Saint Cyr! To march through those dirty alleys of El Hamma, colors flying, in a fanfare of bugles and drums, precise as tin soldiers! With Papa Rolant reviewing us from his horse, pretending to himself he was Napoleon! Even the under-officers loathed those daily parades, but that was nothing to the men. And do you know what that colonel was most stern and particular about? That the parade keep exactly in

step! And that every man keep a shine on his shoes!

NOW that was a nice situation—our boots being what they were, and Papa Rolant being what he was! Figure to yourself those Legion cripples keeping in step to begin with, much less putting a polish on their clogs. And then parading every day because the colonel liked military pageants. It was enough to have the whole garrison wild as a zoo.

Our happy colonel was patient at first. "I realize this company is in need of drilling," he announced during one review. "It is my intention to make this El Hamma garrison the finest company in the Legion. I will tolerate no clumsy-footed marching, no slovenly uniform. I understand there has been much grumbling about the order for cleaning boots. Boots are as much a part of the uniform as cummerbund or tunic. You will learn that I ask no more of my soldiers than I demand of myself. *Allons!*"

He referred to his own uniform which, for all his pudgy pod, was as smart as starch. He delighted in fine uniforms. I know. I had to brush them. I was his orderly.

After about a month of dressing up and parading, the garrison was savage. It began to seem as if something worse than drug-running and native insurrection might blow the roof off El Hamma. Those daily parades were brutal. The season got hotter. The colonel more strict. The Legionnaires madder.

"The garrison will mutiny," Yankee Bill the Elephant raged one night. "That dumpling colonel will drive us to revolt with these infernal parades. He thinks we are tin soldiers."

"It is not enough we must patrol this sink of iniquity for dope-runners," Jensen snarled.

"He expects us to look as trig as the King's Household Guard in these rags. Marches us quick-step through the sun for three hours, then yells because our boots are not like his, all polished up."

"As if he did not have a batman to dust him off twice a day. That pompous comedian! Do you ever see him marching? No, he is glued to the saddle like the statue of a general that he thinks he is!"

Well, we stumped and marched and paraded around that cursed Arab town until the colonel, himself, without lifting a foot, went a little lame. Corns did not dampen his passion for military reviews, but only put him in a temper. And that is where that old blind cobbler of El Hamma came in.

Imagine my lack of sympathy when I reported at headquarters one night and found Colonel Rolant sitting with his feet in a pan of water.

"They are blistered!" He glared at his swollen toes. "It is the perspiration! I am stout and I suffer from the heat! Do you know, orderly, I believe my shoes are too tight. Is there a cobbler in this mishap of a town who could stretch them for me?"

"There is a blind Arab cobbler in the Lane of the Three Thirsty Camels."

Presently we were on our way, the colonel puffing behind me as I led him through the evil bazaar, taking the long route around in the hopes that his touchy feet might teach him a lesson. Do you think it did? *Non,* he saw no connection between his own toes and those of common men. He was an officer. *His* feet were special. Corns were an indulgence not permitted to lowly Legionnaires.

As we entered the shop of this miserable cobbler the colonel's eye fell on a pair of remarkable riding boots that gleamed with fresh polish. Shinier, even, than the colonel's own. Unusual for a dingy Arab shop, they stood out in a litter of shabby sandals, scuffed clipper-cloppers and old native slippers as surprisingly as though they had just walked in from an expensive bootmaker's in London.

Papa Rolant was on them at once, admiring them, testing the leather, turning them in his hands. The soles were at least an inch thick, yet the boots seemed light. The workmanship was extraordinary. The calf was soft and pliable as buckskin.

They were not as short as Arab riding boots, nor as tall as British riding boots, nor as thick as cavalry or field boots. A beautiful pair!

NEXT to wine and women, your average man has a weakness for good leather—there is something about its smell of leather, its feeling. Those beautiful boots had them both. I would have given my soul to own them. I could see a hungry twinkle come to Papa Rolant's eye. Those boots were just made for him. Such boots any general might wear. They were magnificently military.

"Corday, I want to buy these boots. Strike a bargain."

That was funny. As the colonel spoke, the old blind cobbler who had been sitting cross-legged at the back of the shop jumped up as if he had been kicked. Dropping awl and thread and a piece of leather, he somehow glared at us with alarm in the vacant sockets of his eyes. He was an ancient and withered scarecrow, more a skeleton in rags and turban than a man; and his voice came out like the yell of a ghost.

"What boots do you mean, Sidi? Which pair would you buy?"

"I want to buy this fine black pair," the colonel puffed. "I am the *commandant* of the garrison here. How much for these black boots?"

Sacred pipe! the ancient blind man tottered forward and snatched the boots out of the colonel's hand. "No, no! Do not touch them! These boots are not for sale!"

Papa Rolant looked astounded. He was not used to having a native snatch anything out of his hand. "How much are they, old rascal? Quick, I have no time for your Arab bargaining. I offer one hundred francs!"

"A hundred francs?" the blind cobbler wheezed. "No, no, Sidi. I could not sell them to you for five hundred francs. For five thousand!"

"What is the matter with this crack-potted scamp?" the colonel yelled at me. "Does he not know who I am? Speak to him in Arabic, Corday. Tell him I want to buy those boots, and mean to have them! Nor will I pay him any such fantastic price. Does he think they are made of gold?"

"But I cannot sell them," the old scarecrow wailed, hugging them to his chest. "They are not for sale, Sidi! They were only brought here to be polished. I do not own them."

Disappointment sulked across the colonel's face. His corns gave a twinge, and he snapped, "Who owns them, then? Who in this dirty desert town could afford such a pair?"

"Ah, Sidi," the old cobbler bowed, "I do not think the owner would sell them to you, either. He is so fond of them that every evening he brings them in for me to polish. It is the Italian, Sidi. The Italian who rides every day from El Hamma to dig in the sands of the desert, seeking the Past."

A jealous gleam came to Papa Rolant's eye. He knew who was referred to. The archaeologist living in El Hamma, a pale scholar from Rome who was digging excavations a few miles from our outpost in search of Carthaginian ruins. Papa Rolant had been annoyed by him, for it was the duty of the French Government to afford such people protection. The Italian had refused any military escort, saying he would risk any trouble with the desert tribes and preferred to work alone.

"So he owns these fine boots? *Zut!* Where did he get them?"

"He bought them from an Arab trader," the old cobbler whined. "At a tremendous price from a caravan sheik out across the sands."

Well, the colonel could not have that. He wanted those boots, and he pouted like a woman who had missed a bargain. He was the *commandant* of El Hamma, and it would not do for someone to wear a better pair of boots than he. Particularly some fool scholar, some Italian.

"Attend!" Papa Rolant ordered the cobbler. "If I cannot buy this particular pair, I will have a pair as good. I want the same

quality of leather and workmanship. You can make me a pair exactly like those?"

The blind cobbler bowed. "With my eyes shut I can copy them, Sidi. You wear the same size? That is well. By Saturday you may have a pair of such likeness that you could not tell the difference. The price at only five hundred francs."

Who could have guessed what astonishing things were in shoe-leather? And that is when the real trouble began. That Saturday when the colonel ordered a dress parade and turned out to review us in his fine new boots.

CHAPTER II

BOOTMARKS IN THE SAND

I WISH you could have seen the faces of the men when the colonel stalked out that morning in those boots. Even the captain and the two lieutenants looked as if they would like to cut his throat. *Sapristi!* it was the hottest day of the year. That, or any year.

Since sunrise the garrison had been on patrol, and that was warm and nasty work. Divided into squads, the company scouted along the edge of the desert looking for suspicious guerilla bands, or combed the town, examining and searching suspicious characters for drugs. Since every tribesman in that desert was suspicious and every native in town was equally suspect, you can figure the job.

Looking for narcotics in an Arab town is like hunting a wisp of straw in a haystack. We found plenty of hashish and opium. Those natives were full of it. But it was inside them when we found it, and where it came from and how it reached them was something else again. It was dangerous work, too, searching those wolves. Your Arab drug-fiend will go berserk with a knife as soon as not, and those dope-maddened desert chiefs were just waiting for a signal to start a revolution.

Very good! After you spend a few hours searching a batch of African drug addicts in a place where such dope is dynamite, you are hardly in the mood for a parade. *Tiens!* There was the bugle tootling the assembly. The sun almost at noon. Orders for full regimentals and all equipment. Parade call!

The men were ugly that noon, I can tell you. Lined up on the drill field in full marching equipment, they were weighted down like camels. Who wanted to carry extra cartridge belts, water canteens and kits of food just for the exercise? Already they were footsore from patrol; sweating like horses in the heat. But you had to scour the dirt of the bazaar off your *brodequins* and play tin soldier for Papa Rolant. And then to have him stalk out for parade inspection in that pair of beautiful boots—!

On my word, there was not a sound on that field when the colonel stomped into view. A hundred pairs of eyes were on his feet. Angry eyes. Envious eyes. Bitter eyes. You could see them following his steps as he advanced down the line to front and center. Those men were like tigers fascinated by a pair of taunting black cats.

Have you ever seen a small boy showing off a new pair of shoes? The colonel was like that. He was brisk and jovial. He pretended he did not care about his new boots, but he could not help looking down once a minute and admiring them. He would stoop and flick off a speck of dust. He could see his apple-cheeked reflection in the toes. The toes were like black mirrors; the night before, I had spent three hours polishing them.

The blind Arab cobbler had promised delivery Saturday morning, but the colonel had not been able to wait. Friday midnight he had been there at the blind cobbler's shop to try them on. Ah! What comfort! He had wanted to break them in so they would not squeak, but those boots were wonderfully pliable from the first. All night he had kept them on, as a child sleeps with a delightful toy. He had scarcely been able to wait for the parade. Now he strutted out like a gamecock. He was playing Napoleon to the hilt. All he lacked was the paper hat and the wooden sword.

Silently the men writhed and snarled. Their own boots were torturing them. He enjoyed them so much that he wanted to walk in them. Instead of riding at the head of the column as was his custom on parade, he walked at the head of the column. I followed at his heels, leading his horse.

OUT of the barrack-ground we marched, and down through the twisting bazaar of the town. Flags flying. Drums rolling. Bugles blaring out *La Casquette de Père Bugeaud*. The colonel was putting it on, I can tell you. You would have thought he was leading a crack Chasseur regiment down the Champs Elysée to the Arc de Triomphe. He wore all his medals, and his braid gleamed in the sun. He held his sword at half salute off his pouting chest, and he lifted his new boots high. He would show this stupid Arab village a thing or two, and he went through the whole parade routine—company, right oblique!—left oblique!—column right!—column at fours!—company at quick-step!—halt!—squads left!—company march! If only French marching regulations included the goose-step, his happiness would have been complete.

Behind him came the sweating color-bearers, and behind the sweating color-bearers came the sweating buglers. Then came the sweating drummers with water flying off their wrists; and behind the drummers, the sweat-soaked column of marching men, with sweat-soaked officers up and down the line and bringing up the rear.

Through the stifling alleys of El Hamma the parade wheeled and pivoted and executed pretty maneuvers, for the benefit of sneering Arab merchants, sullen riff-raff and barking dogs

Drums and bugle tunes drowned out the cursing and complaining, but I had only to look behind me to see every dripping face enraged. Yankee Bill told me he heard one of the lieutenants snarling, "The vain little popinjay would march us to Hell just to show off his new boots!"

So it seemed.

At the south end of El Hamma there was an Arab gate—a Moslem arch that gave view to the miles of emptiness and sand, that burnt-copper wilderness of the Grand Erg Orientale that stretches down to the Nowhere of the Sahara. Ordinarily our good colonel would end our daily parade at this gate-arch, lining us up for inspection before the arch and dismissing us with lectures and punishments.

Not so this Saturday!

Straight on out through the arch strutted the little rooster, dragging the whole parade after him. Out we marched into the blazing desert—the flags, the bugles, the drums, the sweating column, parading across the sand as if the town was too confined and the colonel needed all that vast emptiness to maneuver us in. The column lagged a little and one of the buglers slid off-key. The colonel bawled an order to smarten us up.

"Close up, men!" the tired officers relayed the order. "Close up!"

I could feel the line jolting down its length behind me like a string of bunted freight cars. On we marched through thick dust and blinding sunshine. The town began to dwindle out behind.

Company right oblique! Column at fours! Left shoulder arms! Forward march!

Name of a name! we were heading straight into the desert.

THEN it came to me what the colonel was up to. Of course. He had to march us out to that archaeologist's excavation to show him that a French *commandant* had boots as splendid as those of an Italian ditch digger. But that sand-grubber did not seem impressed.

About two miles from the town there he was at his hole in the dunes, a thin and scholarly-looking bird with a sun helmet and near sighted spectacles, standing in the door of a tent with a book under his arm and a couple of lazy Arabs shoveling around.

I recognized him by his fine black boots

which were exactly matched by those on Papa Rolant. He merely waved at us as we marched by. Passing the excavation, Papa Rolant strutted like a drum-major, looking neither right nor left. On went the parade. No order steered us back toward the town. The colonel was enjoying his new boots so much he was going to parade them all afternoon on the sand.

Now the thing grew ridiculous.

What good is a parade where there is no one to watch it? Deeper and deeper we marched into that ocean of sand—right oblique!—left oblique!—double file! —*pas gymnastique* and dead march!—executing all manner of intricate parade-drills and getting farther into the desert at every mile.

Was the colonel trying to punish us with this grueling drill? Forced marches were one thing, but parade maneuvers in full dress and regimentals in the desert were something else again. The buglers were winded. The drummers were panting. The Legionnaires, loaded with baggage and full equipment, sweaty, gasping from the heat, looked ready to drop in their aching boots.

By mid-afternoon the colonel himself looked exhausted. El Hamma had long since disappeared in the dust behind us. The sun was murder. Sweat trickled down the colonel's apple cheeks and soaked his tunic across his fat shoulder blades. But although his lungs were puffing his spirit was spry. As I, leading his horse, humped along at Papa Rolant's heels, I had an idea he was trying to show us how a French officer could outmarch his men. The contest was unfair. In the lead he was not eating any dust. He carried only his sword and his medals. We Legionnaires were clumping in nail-studded hoppers, not in natty and princely boots.

The colonel would not let up. When he wheeled around to flourish his sword and bark an order, the column had to step along. His eye was sharp for any flaw. After a halt he would step off again, lifting his plump knees with unexpected vigor.

To my surprise I saw the afternoon was waning and we were still marching south. Were we going to parade all day? What of garrison duty, the evening patrol, mess? Just before sundown he barked the order that lined us up for review inspection. Away out there in the desert he inspected us. Then, break ranks! Time out for a swig of wine, some hardtack and chocolate. Then to our consternation, parade call again! Bugles, drums and all the rest of it. In the twilight we continued to march south.

Well, we did not get back to El Hamma that night. Not with Puss-in-Boots for parade-master! We maneuvered on south in the desert until darkness; just when the column was ready to go down like a line of tenpins, came the order to pitch camp. Orders from the colonel were orders, but that black and unknown desert seemed hardly the place to bivouac like that, alive as it was with roving bands of nomads.

I saw officers were uneasy as they gathered around the colonel's tent, but no one dared to question the colonel's judgment. Papa Rolant was a famous tactician, an expert on military strategy. That night he was also jovial. He chuckled a lot to himself as if he had some secret joke, and his eyes were merry and sly. He sat at his campfire beaming down at his boots. No staff officer would have dared interrupt his good humor.

THAT march had just about finished the men. They and their feet were tired and sore as boils. "The devil!" Jensen groaned to me in passing. "Never have I made such a march. My left foot is dead. My right foot is dying. All because that poodle wants to promenade a pair of new pumpers!" Yankee Bill the Elephant growled, "I have just enough strength left to kick out his brains with these clogs, and for a cigarette I would do it."

A Belgian snarled, "You would think he was a *cocotte* in high heels, the way he swanks. What I would not give to be in his shoes."

And the American laughed, "Not I, Dog-Face. If this keeps up, I don't think Papa will be wearing them long."

There was a mutinous atmosphere in camp that night, but the colonel was as gay as Old King Cole. He called me into his tent to shine his boots, and I found him waiting with his feet propped up on a camp chair. "Ha, orderly!" He astonished me by a comradely nudge. "Shine them up for me, my boy. Are they not beauties? Ah, you do not know the satisfaction of a fine pair of boots, so easy and luxuriant. I tell you, Corday, I never have known such pleasure. I feel as if I had been walking on air."

I wondered if he was drunk. There was wine at his elbow, and before I left he was asleep. His boots were on and his expression was blissful. Conceive a colonel addressing an orderly like that.

Then conceive this! An hour before daybreak, and the bugles were squawking again. Again the men were on their feet. Again parade call! *Oui,* camp was broken at the double quick, and again the column was tramping across the sand—colors flying—bugles and drums—full dress parade!

We Legionnaires were not walking on air. Do you think the colonel cared? He did not. He was out there once more at the head of the column, swanking like a Julius Caesar and striking still farther into the desert.

We were in more than dangerous territory that morning. There were Touaregs reported in that part of the wilderness—the most deadly fighters in Africa. It was no place to announce our arrival with blaring bugles and bright flags. On we went, marching and counter-marching, wheeling and pivoting and parading all over the sand, and working deeper into Nowhere under the murderous sun.

That noon the officers began to look at each other. I had glimpses of them frowning at Papa Rolant's back. During a halt they grouped around the colonel, their expressions reflecting anxiety. I heard Papa Rolant's voice explode in temper, "If I am not tired, why should the men be tired? What I can do, my soldiers can do. March on!"

That second day's march was an ugly business, take my word for it; I know my comrades would have revolted that night if the colonel had not reached the end of his parading. Listen! Tents pitched and bivouac-fires lit, the colonel ordered assembly. He strutted out of his tent and confronted the wilting line-up of Legionnaires. His eyes, in the firelight, twinkled.

"Soldiers of the Legion! I wish to congratulate you for the heroic way with which you have thus far carried out this campaign!"

What was that? We were on a campaign? What campaign?

"I have just received orders from the Paris War Office that the campaign is to continue!"

Just received orders! But our detachment had no wireless!

"We are to march at dawn to the relief of the garrison at Timbuctoo!"

The whole line staggered. Timbuctoo! Across the whole Sahara!

"There is to be no more dallying with these dancing girls we have encountered along the line of march. Naturally," the colonel laid his finger at the side of his nose and grinned at his startled officers, "men will be men."

"Dancing girls?" That was Captain La-Salle, his mouth gaping. "Did you say dancing girls, *mon commandant?*"

"Do not pretend you did not see them, Captain. Lovely little vixens they were too. The three blondes who beckoned to me last night as we went through China were the nicest. Too bad we are on this campaign with such pretty ladies about. That Japanese geisha girl was most charming!"

NAME of Jehovah! what was the colonel talking about? Certainly this was most irregular. You can see those Legion dogs drawn up in line, their lips ajar, their ears sticking out in amazement. You can see the under-officers staring in stark bewilderment at the colonel,

then eyeing each other. Picture us there in the middle of that desert, the tents, the shadows, the firelight, our colonel standing there in a rosy glow with the night behind him. *Non,* but I wish you could have seen his smile.

His eyes were bright as nails, but his smile had become dreamy. He regarded his officers with the cheery amusement of a father pleased with stalwart sons.

"Ah, yes. Where was I? Japan. And midnight in India—!"

One of the officers said huskily, "Do not you think you should go into your tent now, Colonel Rolant?"

"What? Are you suggesting orders to your colonel? I am in command here!"

In quick anger the little man's face purpled and swelled. Beads of sweat glittered suddenly on his forehead. He brushed them away with his sleeve, frowning down at his boots. "Perhaps you are right, Lieutenant. The dancing girls last night, they tired me out. I must preserve my strength for this campaign. Tomorrow we march to Timbuctoo. Please post a guard before my tent. I expect to go to Bagdad tonight; there are some lovely dancers awaiting me there."

The captain also had sweat-beads on his forehead. "But you cannot go to Bagdad tonight, *mon commandant.* You are here in Tunis."

The colonel smiled softly. "Obey orders, Captain. Do not argue with a superior. Bagdad is not far when I can go twenty-one kilometers with every step I take in these boots."

Bones of the Little Corsican! You could have heard your hair grow after the colonel said that and strutted back into his tent, forgetting to dismiss the company. It was scary at night out there in that desert. More than scary. The captain's eyes were like candles as he ordered the assembly dismissed. The lieutenants looked sick and pale. A sergeant shrugged and tapped his forehead. It was the *cafard!* The terrible *cafard!*

"Can you equal that?" Jensen snarled to me. "This marching in the sun has driven the little fathead mad. The heat has sent him looney!"

"Off his conk!" Yankee Bill echoed angrily. "Went crazy over those new boots of his. Plain nuts! Did you hear him? Thinks he's been waltzing with dancing girls. Taking steps twenty-one kilometers long!"

If there was an ironic justice in it, it was not amusing. No joke at all to be there in the middle of the desert with a colonel gone stark out of his head. What could the under-officers do? There is nothing in the Legion rule book that tells a captain what to do when the colonel apparently goes crazy. Timbuctoo! Dancing girls! Boots that went twenty-one kilometers a step! I could see the worry on the captain's face when he told me to stand guard that night at the door of Papa Rolant's tent.

Much good that precaution turned out!

I could hear the colonel within snoring gently as a babe, but along after midnight a sandstorm blew up, and I could not hear anything. It was a thick, blinding night. Yankee Bill relieved the watch, and I took over again at dawn. I looked into the colonel's tent to see if he was still sleeping. The tent was empty. The back flaps were open to the rising sun.

We found one track, the track of his right boot there in the sand beyond the opened tent-flaps. It was headed northeast in the direction of Bagdad. Maybe the sandstorm had obliterated the other tracks. Maybe not. At any rate, we came up with the colonel at noon. Papa Rolant was lying dead in the sand. His face was jolly, but black. His left boot was twisted under him, the ankle broken as if he had landed on that foot after a tremendous leap. He was about twenty-one kilometers from the place where we had camped.

CHAPTER III

NIGHT WIND

THE captain had the boots. He was a tough officer, this Captain LaSalle. A gaunt, black-haired Gascon. Not in the

least sentimental. He had buried the colonel there in the sand with full military honors, but, after all, why bury a pair of beautiful new boots that had cost their owner five hundred francs? Especially when they were a fairly comfortable fit on the march-blistered feet of Captain La-Salle. They were his by right of being second in command. A proper symbolism that he should now step into the colonel's boots.

There was none of your Napoleonic complex about Captain LaSalle. He wanted to get out of that dangerous area of desert and back to El Hamma as quickly as possible. Our machine guns, food stores and water supply were in El Hamma. Heaven knew what might have happened during our absence while the colonel paraded us around the desert in crazy maneuvers. Accordingly, all pomp was dispensed with. Flags were furled and lowered. Bugles and drums were packed up. Scouts were deployed. Having stepped into the colonel's boots, both literally and figuratively, the captain ordered us home on the *pas gymnastique.*

Once more the Legionnaires found themselves tortured in their hobnailed rock-crushers. Strung out under the broiling sun, the column puffed and panted along like a weary freight-train. At the Legion quick-step one canters fifty minutes and rests ten. It is a punishing pace, not intended for dress uniforms with full marching equipment. Sweat poured down the jaws of the gasping men, soaking their garments, blistering their ill-shod feet.

At first the men did not care.

They were anxious to get back to base. They wanted to get out of the desert, and more particularly they wanted to get away from the grave where they had buried Papa Rolant. The colonel's death had sobered their tempers a trifle. There is something weird about madness, something a little unnerving to sane men. It makes one aware that the mind is a delicate instrument, somewhat beyond one's control. Your own little flywheel may slip without your knowing it. It had not been nice to hear the colonel prattling about dancing girls and Timbuctoo—an old officer of supposed military genius. Our trust in authority was shaken a little; and if a learned colonel can go batty, what of one's self?

"You know what I feel like?" Yankee Bill the Elephant whispered to me during a ten-minute halt. "I feel like I been on a train run by a loony engineer. Here we were full speed ahead off the main line out here, switching around and running through red lights, half the time off the track with the colonel gone nuts in the cab and none of us knowing there was a madman at the throttle. God knows what we might have run into."

"It is not the first time I have seen a soldier go *cafard,*" I said. "It is this cursed infernal heat, this African sun. That black look on Papa Rolant's dead face—as if a blood vessel had burst."

"That was something more than apoplexy," Jensen panted in. "Myself, I do not like it."

"What do you not like, Monkey-face?"

The little Dane rolled his eyes. "I do not like the way Papa Rolant said he could walk twenty-one kilometers at a step. Well? He was on his way to Bagdad, was he not? One boot-print behind his tent. And when we found him, twenty-one kilos exactly. I myself counted the paces from camp."

HA! WE did not like that either. We did not like the little Dane reminding us of it. It was one of those peculiar coincidences that had better not be examined too closely away out in a lonely ocean of sand. The sun that afternoon was too hot for heavy thinking, and the sooner we got away from the colonel's lonely grave the better for our peace of mind.

So we did not object to marching for El Hamma at the *pas gymnastique.* Only as the afternoon wore on, our hobnailed clogs began to pinch. Quick-step in that dust and heat was cruel. We were going straight north; El Hamma ought to presently be in sight.

Captain LaSalle could ease the pace, one would think. This was harder on your hoofs than parade drill. Of course, it was not hard on the captain's bunions. He was wearing those magnificently comfortable boots he had snaffled from the dead colonel. The dirty corpse-robber, little he cared if the men were suffering. Besides, he was riding the colonel's horse. All these Legion officers were brutes!

Little by little the feeling against the captain changed that afternoon. We began to hate him almost as much as we had hated the colonel. This forced march was cooking us, and we hated him because our feet were exhausted and his were not, because our legs were breaking and his were on a horse, because of all of us he had the only comfortable pair of boots.

With night coming on and El Hamma nowhere in sight, the men were looking tigerish again.

The captain, himself, had begun to look peculiar. He must have misjudged his pocket map and gone off his bearings a little, and he started to take it out on the column, cursing us for lagging, lashing at us as if we were slaves.

At nightfall he ordered a "Column right!" and sent us at a tangent to the east. A little while later he did an about-face, and we were trotting west again. Just as the moon came up he called in the scouts, and we knew that we were lost.

That night he tramped up and down among the campfires, swearing and fuming and kicking at the men with those expensive boots as if he thought he was the King of the Beasts ruling a jungle. Ah, he was working himself into a fine rage.

Nothing in camp suited him. The tents were unmilitary. The rifles incorrectly stacked. This was wrong. That was wrong. "It is the colonel's fault!" we heard him squalling at his lieutenants. "When he started off for Bagdad he took his compass with him and left me in the soup. His compass was gone when we found him. The only one we had!"

That was something for the outfit to hear. And this was something else! Suddenly Captain LaSalle called for his horse. Out of camp he rode at a gallop, disappearing in the night. The poor lieutenants eyed each other. They waited a while, then ordered taps because there seemed like nothing else to do. An hour later the sleeping men were awakened by a shot. Then another! Rushing out over a dune, we found Captain LaSalle with a bullet in his back, his horse dead beside him. Captain LaSalle was dying.

"I saw them!" he panted, loud enough for all to hear. "I dismounted and was walking. Suddenly I was there. I saw them."

"Who?" Lieutenant Blanc cried. "Who did you see, *mon capitaine?*"

"The dancing girls. Doing the Dance of the Seven Veils." Great globes of sweat stood on the captain's forehead. His eyes were black and shiny, like dots of enamel. "I was in India. They were beautiful—!"

With that, the captain closed his eyes and died. A night wind was scurrying the sand in ghostly whirls through the moonlight, and we found no footprints. We could not tell if it was a soldier with a grudge or some roaming Arab marksman who had crept up in the night and shot him. That did not bother us half so much as the fact that the captain, too, had gone mad!

CHAPTER IV

THE CHINESE BLADE

LIEUTENANT BLANC had the boots. He was a greedy little man whose mentality went no farther than the rule-book and keeping a full stomach. He was dull, mean and piggish, the typical product of years in a military routine of colonial outposts and border garrisons. He would do his job stubbornly, driving the men; and he had the body of Captain LaSalle underground before you could say an Ave Maria.

Scouts were sent out, and the guard was doubled around the camp. Then he walked to his tent with those boots he

had taken from the dead man, and set them upright in the tent door to air them out, saying, "Whew!" Lieutenant Blanc had no imagination.

But we Legionnaires had imaginations.

There was little slumbering in camp the rest of that night, for all our tired feet; we were bivouacked too close to the captain's grave—the colonel's madness and death was still fresh in memory, and the captain dying a lunatic was too much of a bad thing.

Scouts came in to report no trace of Arab or any other tracks. But it was not the unsolved murder which unsettled our thoughts; tough officers had been shot before.

"Can you beat it?" Yankee Bill rolled over in his blankets to whisper to me. "Two officers go nuts within twenty-four hours. This *cafard* stuff gets on my nerves. It's like the sun is a hot cigar and your head pops like a toy balloon." He glared nervously at the night, face uneasy.

"There was an officer once went mad in Oran—" I began.

"But did you ever see two men go mad the same way?" Jensen, on my other side, interrupted. "Both with the same crazy illusions? What? Well, the dear captain, too, went traveling. India! Dancing girls!"

"Doubtless it was the colonel's death which affected LaSalle's mind. That and the heat. You might say the colonel had given him ideas. Those puffs of whirling sand made him think he was seeing dancing girls."

"But, Corday, have you thought about the twenty-one kilometers? The colonel said he had been in China. LaSalle said India."

"Shut that off, Jensen!" the American Legionnaire snarled. "The colonel went off his trolley—a man off his trolley is liable to think anything. The captain went goofy, too, and someone shot him for it. Try to make anything more of it than that and you'll have us all seeing dancing girls!"

Lieutenant Blanc was not worrying about any dancing girls; he was worrying about Touaregs and Arabs. Up at the crack of dawn, he had the column under way, determined to get the men to El Hamma that day. He was not making the same mistake as Colonel Rolant and Captain LaSalle.

He hung his coat over the top of his blunt head as a sunshade, and he stomped along in those big black boots, careful to keep on the shady side of the dunes. He did not march us quick-step, and he carried his revolver in his hand, on the lookout for trouble. Unfortunately he did not look for it in the right place.

We did not come to El Hamma. Two crazy-headed officers had led us on a fox-and-goose off the map, and, at best, trying to locate a town in the desert is like trying to locate a lost ship in mid Atlantic.

We did not know where the town was, and we did not know where we were.

Along about midday Lieutenant Blanc was calling frequent halts, taking a position off by himself on some dune, and staring around like Columbus looking for land. With that coat draped over his head he was sweating like a work-horse, and he called for and drank a lot of water. Then he would scowl at the horizon in a queer way. You could see he was boxing the compass.

Well, I do not know at exactly what time the belt slipped off Lieutenant Blanc's fly-wheel; as Yankee Bill said afterward, he didn't look as if he had enough brains to go crazy.

He drank too much water certainly—especially when our canteens were running low—but he seemed all right that evening when he ordered us to pitch camp. Nobody thought it queer when he retired into his tent without eating; all of us were too worn out to chew our hardtack.

Then all at once, he rushed out at us, his eyes like black flames, cheeks livid, lips dripping foam.

Straight at his junior officer he rushed, catching Lieutenant Delacroix unawares and by the throat. He was choking the junior to death before we realized what was happening. Raving like an animal.

"Keep away from my women, you

scoundrel! Try to doublecross me while I am just now in Madagascar, will you? Those dancing girls are mine! Mine! I will share them with no snooty cadet from Saint Cyr!"

Delacroix was down and Blanc was kicking him to pieces with those fine black boots when Sergeant Gonse drew a pistol and shot the mad lieutenant through the head.

JUNIOR-LIEUTENANT DELACROIX had the boots. Poor Delacroix. He was young and unseasoned—it was his first year in the Legion—and besides those boots he had an imagination. I will bet you he wished he had neither. His three superior officers had died in those boots—the Colonel of a brainstorm; the captain insane and murdered; Lieutenant Blanc shot like a mad dog. I will bet you young Delacroix never wanted to put them on.

But he had been limping from a hole worn through his own boot; these hand-me-downs of the colonel's were certainly of fine workmanship and quality; in a way, too, they were symbolic of authority. Discard them, and the men would think he was afraid to step into the boots of command. He must not let these Legion scoundrels think he was afraid. He called for me to shine them up, and he wore them that night as we marched out to that third lonely grave in the desert.

"Men!" he addressed the company, trying to look like a veteran commander—but the boots did not fit him very well, and he only looked like a frightened cadet—"as your *commandant* I warn you I intend to keep discipline. There will be no more forced marching; we will proceed at early morning and after midday; we will get to El Hamma. I am not forgetting Captain LaSalle was murdered, and when we reach our outpost I shall order a strict investigation."

He set his jaw in an attempt to look stern and confident. "Meantime, there will be no more risk of *cafard,* not if every man does his duty. I would put a stop to the rumors whispered among you. There is a lot of nonsense going around, superstitious talk. Insanity is not contagious. Your officers were overworked, merely. Their hallucinations signify nothing, and there is nothing in this nonsense about their having been in India, China or Madagascar; all of us have such day-dreams. If I am not afraid, what have you to fear? I thank Sergeant Gonse for saving my life. Company dismissed!"

That was a brave speech from a nervous young shavetail out there in the middle of the African night.

"The little Blue is all right," Yankee Bill applauded as we huddled around our camp fire. "Trying to pretend he doesn't wish he was safely back home at training school instead of out here in this desert of Nowhere with a company on his hands."

"That is nothing to what he has on his feet," Jensen murmured.

"Now look here you piece of Danish pastry!" Yankee Bill caught and wrung his little comrade's wrist. "Quit rocking the boat! It's bad enough being camped out here with that grave out there in the dark and maybe an Arab attack any minute, without you pulling a face like a ghost story. The kid lieutenant was right. Put a stop to it."

The Dane smiled queerly. "Colonel Rolant. Captain LaSalle. That stupid Blanc. Does it not strike you, big Elephant, as funny?"

"Funny like a bughouse!" the American snarled. "Cut it off!"

Instead, the little Dane turned to me. "Corday," he murmured, "you were there at the blind cobbler's when the colonel was fitted for those boots. You have tended them, polished them. What are they like?"

My faith! his expression sent mice-creeps through my hair. The night was too black around us for this sort of talk. The moon had gone down, and out in the desert there was not a sound. I snarled, "They are like any pair of boots, you fool. I saw the cobbler making them, copying them from a pair that cursed Italian digger at El Hamma had bought from

some caravan sheik. The colonel wanted the same kind for his own sacred corns. They are excellent boots of fine leather, no more. I tell you, I would like to wear them myself."

The Dane gave me a look. "You have a sergeant's rating, Corday. The way things are going—you may get a chance to wear them."

NAME of Saint Francis! it gave my nerves a twinge. The other squads grouped around their camp fires were muttering the same speculations; I knew the nerves of every Legionnaire in camp that night were twinging like zithers.

Beyond the fringe of the firelights the sentries were tramping over-loudly, like boys whistling on their way past a cemetery; and the desert that night was one vast graveyard, what with the colonel and the captain and Lieutenant Blanc out there under the sand

Taps sounded like a funeral call. The men did not want to sleep in their dog-tents, yet nobody dared sleep outside by the dying fires. I felt sorry for the young lieutenant alone in his officer's tent. I shared a tent with Yankee Bill and little Jensen, and even so I kept waking up out of cold-sweat nightmares, fancying I heard prowlers.

I do not know what time it was when I heard the scream. It screeched through the night like the passing of your Lost Soul, and it flung the camp out of its blankets to a man.

In the dark there was wildest confusion. We piled from our tents in a terrified stampede, bumping into running guards, knocking each other down in a race for the gun-stacks. Non-coms squalled. Torches flared. Legionnaires milled in panic, waiting for a word of command. It became evident that Lieutenant Delacroix was not there.

Someone pointed to his tent, and we went for it in a rush. It was surrounded by a yelling swarm, afraid to enter. Tracks, if there had been any, would have been smudged out by that seething jam.

Then thirty men crushed into the tent, and we found Lieutenant Delacroix.

In the camp chair which he had inherited from Colonel Rolant, he was slumped down. His eyes stared sightlessly at the ridge-pole. His mouth was open and full of blood. He was half undressed, his tunic unbuttoned, belt open. One boot was half off, and both boots were dusty—as if, Jensen pointed out, he had just returned and was retiring after a long journey. So it seemed.

For when we turned him over we found a knife in his back. No Legion knife, or Arab blade. But an Oriental knife—a wavy-edged dagger—the hilt inscribed with Chinese writing!

CHAPTER V

THE COBBLER WAS BLIND

SERGEANT GONSE had the boots. He did not wear them. He was a shrewd red-whiskered Picard, Sergeant Gonse, and the boots had come down to him, along with the command, from poor dead Lieutenant Delacroix; but as he rushed our column across the desert through the dawn, he carried his new footgear slung on his shoulder. Himself, he wore Legion clodhoppers, and he was hobbling on blisters as big as anybody's, but he refused to put on those fine black boots.

He declared he was keeping them only to pawn in the bazaar at El Hamma. He said they did not fit. Ha-ha.

That was a day we marched like fools.

We got into a stretch of wilderness nobody had ever seen before, a desert of red sandstone hills and burning rocks and sharp stones like flint on the feet. We trooped around in that for a number of miles, and we were not the smart parade which had marched out of El Hamma four days before.

Sack of paper! The color bearers dragged their flags in the dust. The bugles were full of sand. Some of the drummers had dropped their clumsy instruments by the wayside.

The men were slop-shouldered, drooping, uniforms disheveled, plastered with sweat and dirt, limping and stumbling and out of step, quarreling together like a pack of mangy wolves. Canteens were drying, lips were cracking, nerves tightening like fiddle-strings.

The company knew it was lost; if a colonel, a captain and two lieutenants had not been able to find the way back to El Hamma, how could a top-sergeant? Blood-rimmed eyes glared suspicion and hatred at Sergeant Gonse—would he go crazy, too?—or had those other officers *been* crazy?—that Chinese dagger in Delacroix's spine—in the middle of an African desert—was the whole company going crazy, or what?

Now insanity can be infectious, not so? Look how one maniac has maddened Europe today, as one bad apple spoils the barrel. Well, our company of lost Legionnaires was not a very big barrel, and there had been four bad apples. Something had to happen pretty quick, or the entire outfit would resemble the glee club of an insane asylum. It happened. *Tiens!*

At dusk the column staggered out of that red patch of desert, topped a high, sun-baked ridge—there, miles to the north, for all the world a mirage in the twilight, huddled the walls of El Hamma. That was not all we saw. On a dune not far below the ridge there appeared with startling suddenness a band of wild Touareg tribesmen.

Guns cracked, and bullets purred over our caps. As if produced by magic, Arabs charged from a dune at the left. On all sides of that ridge the sands sprouted black and bronze fiends. That battle was as instantaneous as spontaneous combustion. Gunfire flashing. Horsemen charging in a flutter of robes through dust. The *spank-spank-spank!* of Lebels. Oaths. Shrieks of the wounded. *Zip* and *plink* of flying lead.

We were ambushed, surprised, surrounded; El Hamma, an anthill on the horizon, was cut off.

But there is nothing like a battle to cure a stale army; the whistle of Arab bullets can clear a Legionnaire's head of mopes as a slap from a doctor can cure a hysterical woman of tantrums. Unhappily, Arab bullets can also perforate a Legionnaire's head.

Five of our men were fatalities before Sergeant Gonse could get us into a battle position. Defensively speaking, our position was good—we were on high ground where the enemy must charge upslope across open sand—but those desert fiends did not give us much chance for defensive speaking.

They had been waiting for the parade to come back, resting on their rifles, and if it was hard for them to take the ridge, it was as hard for us to get off it.

By Saint Anthony's fire! I never thought we could withstand that first charge. Formed in hollow triangle, we dug in behind a barricade of knapsacks, baggage, whatever we could flatten behind. Here they came! That was a hot scrap then, *mon ami*. Those Arab horsemen went over us—right over us like a wave!—and there were more of my comrades scattered dead around me afterward than I like to remember. We drove off that charge with God's help alone, bayoneting horses and riders as they jumped us, piling up the dead for a higher barricade.

A second wave charged, and we met it with a stunning fusillade. A third we drove back. A fourth. Those horsemen were not so reckless about attacking after that; our stacked cadavers made higher walls, not so easy to charge. But at the same time they made less men and there were plenty of those Arabs and Touareg; too many!

OUR Lebel rifles scorched our hands after we repelled that last assault; I tell you, the fight had been terrific. We had slaughtered a couple of dozen Arabs and wounded a couple of dozen more, but a couple of dozen Arabs were cheap in that part of the country. After the smoke and dust cleared away we counted our dead at twenty, and Legionnaires were expensive. That was pretty stiff medicine to keep our outfit in sharp mental condition.

Parbleu! I think it was an overdose.

Those desert fiends retreated. But not far. They sneaked off in the twilight and appeared to melt away, but we knew they were hiding behind the dunes, waiting for nightfall to blot out the scenery. Then they would attack from all sides and try to blot *us* out. They could wait. They had plenty of time.

Who was it said anticipation was worse than realization? If you want something nerve-racking, try sitting still in the desert with the night gathering around and the knowledge that out there in the darkness a horde of tigers are crouching to spring. We could not see them, but we could feel their presence.

A thin lemon-rind moon cruised in the sky, but its pale shine could not penetrate the blackness that lay like a sea of tar across the sands. That darkness was enemy camouflage. You could hear the zero hour approaching on tiptoe. Yet the only sound was the pounding of my own heart and the sobbing of a German Legionnaire who was dying with a bullet in his stomach—*"Mütterchen! Ach du lieber—! Wasser, kleines Mütterchen—!"* It did not help that the moon-lit walls of El Hamma gleamed white and tiny on the far edge of the night, distant and unattainable as the Gates of Pearl.

After a half hour crouching behind a dead horse with my Lebel aimed across its reeky flank, my eye looking through the gun-sights at nothing, I could stand it no longer.

Groping my way over bodies alive and dead, I sought Sergeant Gonse. Presently I found him in the middle of our hollow triangle, surrounded by a little group of mutterers who did not know what to do about him. The men stood like shades—I recognized the mammoth silhouette of Yankee Bill the Elephant—and the sergeant was a shadow on the ground. Yankee Bill held a match in cupped palms for me to see. All I could see of Sergeant Gonse was the grinning red head on one end, and the shine of black boots on the other. There was not much in between. From knees to collar Sergeant Gonse had been riddled.

The American seemed surprised by my appearance. "We were wondering who would take command. Jensen and me couldn't find you. We thought you had been killed."

That gave me a shock. You bet it did. I had forgotten that as Papa Rolant's orderly I rated a top-sergeant's stripes. Holy Sebastopol! with Gonse dead, I was next in line for the company; and what a fine moment to win advancement.

"I was out there sniping behind a dead horse. I didn't know Gonse—"

"It was that last attack. He'd sprained his ankle that first charge in a hand-to-hand fight. He thought those boots would be a support. He changed into them, and stood up. Right in the face of a fusillade."

NOW that did not sound exactly propitious. Not a bit, in fact. I should say it did not do a thing toward giving those boots a good reputation. But it was no time for any kind of nonsense.

"Give me those boots," I said.

Yankee Bill showed me the whites of his eyes. "A lot of good men have died with those boots on, Corday."

"Then at least they have died with their feet in comfort," I snarled. "I would rather walk to Hell in those than in these hobnailed clogs which are murdering me. You will die with your own on, if you do not give me those boots. This whole sacred company will be wiped out."

They looked at me, those Legionnaires. Three days ago every mother's son of them would have marked the corpse jealously, battled each other tooth and nail over the right to scavenge such footwear. Now they did not want to touch those boots; they thought me crazy for wanting them.

"Do not take them, Corday! Those pumpers are unlucky!"

"Not so unlucky as our being trapped on this ridge," I snarled. "Listen, you jackals. Our only chance is for a man to get through to El Hamma and bring help.

There are two machine-gun squads left on garrison duty there; doubtless they believe by now that we have all been slaughtered. The Arabs cannot have taken the outpost or the town would be in flames. A runner must get through to them. I am going to be the runner."

"Alone?" Yankee Bill gasped. "I will go with you."

"Every man will be needed here," I snapped. "One runner is necessary. As I am now in command, I pick myself."

"It's suicide, Corday. At least twenty miles. You'll never make it."

"Not in these clogs," I thrust out my heavy hobnailed rock-crusher. "*Non*, they are crippling me. But in those fine boots I will try—!"

SO I had the boots. That is how I got them. How I, a penny-a-day Legionnaire, came to own a pair of hand-made pumpers as fine a grade of leather and workmanship as any in a millionaire sportsman's club—light boots—staunch boots—snug, yet comfortable—stout, yet easy on the instep—serviceable, yet smart—truly a perfect pair.

Ah, that leather had the texture of the best Morocco. The soles, an inch thick, weighed light as birch wood. I carried them over to my dead horse and secretly examined them.

Their history may have been evil, but their last was well-shaped and the insole of felt as inviting as a carpet slipper. My feet ached in relief as I let them out of their hobnailed prisons.

Cautiously I tried on the boots. They were a little damp and sticky, but they might have been made for me to order. I experimented a step or two. Of course that colonel had been mad. Never had a soldier's feet enjoyed such luxurious comfort. By my oath! I would give these chic hoofers a run for their money.

"Corday—!"

The whisper came at me from behind, and I spun around.

Jensen's eyes, peering at me, were spectral. "Corday! Name of God! Yankee Bill told me, but I did not believe. You really mean to wear them?"

"Have I not got them on? Get back to your post, comedian!"

His anxiety for me was unsettling. He caught my sleeve. "Think, my friend! Think what happened to those officers! Rolant — LaSalle — Blanc — Delacroix —now Gonse. Always it happened when they wore those boots."

"Do you see any connection between men going *cafard* from the sun, a man's brains, and shoeleather?" The Dane's popping eyes and jittering infuriated me. "Keep on guard for the Arabs. Be off!"

"Wait," he begged. "Delacroix—! That Chinese dagger—!"

"What of it? A curio some veteran of us brought from Tonkin."

"Papa Rolant said he had been to China!"

"So! And LaSalle to India? But he was killed with a European bullet."

"Blanc spoke of Madagascar. Doubtless if Gonse could have told us he would have said he was starting for—"

"For the moon!" I choked the Dane off, catching him by the throat and shaking him till his teeth clacked. "Idiot, are you trying to tell me you believed those madmen —they actually went to those places—?"

"Are there any dancing girls in this Tunisian desert? Did you see any out there in that waste?" Jensen rolled his eyes. "No, but those officers—those who lived to tell it!—saw them. Oriental dancing girls! And you heard what Papa Rolant said about those boots. And he was on his way to Bagdad—!"

"On his way to a madhouse, you mean."

"But he was twenty-one kilometers from that place where we camped. A single footprint outside his tent. Then we found him exactly—"

"How do you know it was exactly? Did you measure it with a tape? That sandstorm had swept away his other tracks. He had brain fever, and ran off in the night. His heart must have collapsed."

"Or did it burst, Corday? Burst from the speed he was traveling. And that tough

Captain LaSalle, did he look the type to go insane? A man the most hard-headed! But he, too, wanders off in the night and tells us he has seen India. Then Lieutenant Blanc with a skull of solid ivory, raving of Madagascar. Well, any numbskull might go berserk from the shock of suddenly finding himself at the other end of a continent.

"Young Delacroix, however, was no numbskull; but look at what happened to him. We saw him retire in his tent—even as Blanc had retired—then what? Five hours later we find him. He has not been to bed; he is just undressing. His boots are thick with dust—they had been shiny when we saw him turn in, remember—and there is a Chinese dagger in his back. Who among us would have wanted to stab that helpless cadet? No, Corday. It is those boots."

I DID not like that up there on that ridge in the darkness with Death in ambush all around us, the night like a loaded rifle waiting to go off and kill us all. I could have knocked that Dane over the head with my pistol-butt. "You jackass," I snarled, "are you trying to tell me there is some sort of sorcery in these kickers? Some magic that whisks the wearer to far-off places at lightning speed?"

He grasped my arm, and his voice came low through the tight-strung dark. "Listen, Corday. When I was a little boy my grandfather used to take me on his knee and tell me a story. He was a sea captain and had sailed to distant shores. This story, it concerned a wonderful pair of boots that had been made in Denmark for an ancient king. That king was lame, you comprehend; for years he had been confined to his castle. Always he had wanted to travel.

"One day there came to his door an old white-bearded cobbler, a man from the East who had crossed the world, mending boots. The castle guards arrested him and were going to behead him as a spy, but hearing the old wanderer's cries, the Danish king took pity.

" 'Hear this!' he told the cobbler. 'You, a miserable shoemaker, have walked around the world, while I, a king, am unable to take a step, for the very touch of the earth causes my feet to cry out in pain. Always I am stepping on sharp stones or pebbles. But if this earth were covered over I could walk anywhere. If you can cover the whole earth with leather I will grant you your life!' "

Jensen paused for breath. Me, I was in a sweat to get away. Vibrations of emergency were tightening in the blackness; around me dead men were stiffening while the living crouched tense for the shock of assault; there was a smell of burnt powder and blood and doom, and it hardly seemed the time to be listening to a Danish bed-time tale.

But the Dane's clutch held me. Something in his low voice fastened me by the ears.

He went on fiercely, "That cobbler took a look at the Danish king's feet, and smiled. The king was wearing rope sandals. The man went into his cell, and in a week appeared before the king with a pair of magnificent boots which he had fashioned. The king tried them on. Ah, they were wonderful.

" 'But have you covered the earth?' he asked the cobbler.

" 'Sire,' answered the cobbler, 'in those fine boots you can walk anywhere. To him who wears boots, it is as if the whole world is covered with leather.' "

"Jensen," I snarled, "you are seven kinds of a fool!"

"Wait!" he gasped. "That is not all of the story. The king was so pleased that he let the shomeaker go. But that shoemaker was no ordinary shoemaker. He was from the East. Old men from the East can do marvelous things, and in return for the king's kindness, that cobbler put a sorcery in those boots.

" 'You have not many years left to travel,' he told the king. 'To see all the world you must walk fast and far. I have made you a pair of boots that go seven leagues at a stride. But only at night, for

the pace would be too swift in the heat of day.' Well, that king took a step, and to his astonishment found himself in Germany. And that is where the Seven League Boots came from, Corday. You have heard of the Seven League Boots—?"

Again I had the Dane by the throat. "You waste my time with this fairy tale—this Danish version of Mother Goose—?"

"My grandfather told it to me," he panted. "He said it was true. In a week that king had circumnavigated the globe, and he died from the excitement—!"

"I will circumnavigate you!" I gritted at him. "You dunce—!"

"The boots were captured by Chinese bandits," he gurgled on, ignoring the pinch on his windpipe, "who wanted them for their marvelous power. Then the Russians had them. They fell in the hands of the Britons where Mother Goose heard the story. It is said Magellan wore them—gave them to Marco Polo! Finally the Arabs got them, Corday. The Arabs—!"

"What a fairy tale! What a fable!" I was remembering how I had once fallen for a woman's recital of *Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp,* and I shook him as you would shake an old coat full of lice. "We are about to die, and you spin me a yarn. Magic boots, indeed! Fool! What has this fairy story to do with boots I saw handmade last week in a blind cobbler's shop?"

Jensen gave a last gasp. "They are not the same boots!"

I dropped my hands, staring.

"That cobbler in El Hamma is blind!"

"Well, what in the devil has that—?"

"You saw him copying a pair. The pair owned by that Italian professor who digs for ancient history in the sand. The pair which that Italian claimed to have purchased from an Arab caravan sheik in the desert. Or did he dig them up, Corday? Look at them. Do they look like Arab boots?"

Mère de Dieu! he was pointing at my feet. I whispered. "Are you trying to tell me—?"

"That cobbler is blind. He made those boots for the colonel to match the Italian's. I am trying to tell you, the blind cobbler got them mixed and gave the colonel the wrong pair of boots, the Italian's boots. I am trying to tell you, when the colonel took a step in those boots at night he found they went twenty-one kilometers. So with the others who wore them afterward. To the Orient. India. Madagascar. China. It would not be impossible—a fast trip—running—when every step carried one seven leagues. Corday! Twenty-one kilometers is seven leagues. The pace is too fast, a speed that burns out one's brain. And you are standing in the Seven League Boots—!"

I wanted to kick him. Boot him seven leagues straight up in the air. There I was poised for a death-race across a desert infested with invisible murderers, and this little clown telling me I wore boots that went so fast they would blow out my lights.

I batted him off with an elbow. "To your post, *coquin!* Your grandfather and the Seven League Boots be damned! Pray to God I can travel seven paces in these pumps; and dig yourself under the sand, hoping you will be alive in the morning when I get back. Off with you, and warn the men not to shoot me by mistake. I am no officer for them to murder. I am going now. *Va-t-en!*"

He scrambled away, and I could hear him warning the sharp-shooters. I called a low-voiced farewell, spat four times for luck, crawled over the dead horse, picked a hole in the darkness blacker than the night, and started out for El Hamma. I did not know it, but I was beginning the strangest journey I ever made in my life.

CHAPTER VI

THE MAD JOURNEY

I WASN'T taking any seven-league strides when I started out, either. You know I wasn't. Belly to the ground, I went crawling down the ridge like a lizard, inching my way down the slope of sand and pausing every few minutes to rear my head and hold my breath and listen.

I was not going to do any sprinting until I got through those Arab lines, which meant I was probably not going to do any sprinting.

I could not see the Arab lines; I did not know where they were. In the thick dark ahead of me I could see nothing—only a sea of blackness stretching miles to the limits of the night where the tiny moon-washed walls of the town were clustered like a pale mirage. The intervening desert was black, I tell you. So black I felt as if I had been absorbed. Five yards down the ridge I looked back, and my companion Legionnaires had been absorbed, too. And silent? That darkness was like cotton stuffed in the ears. The moans of that German boy with a lead pill in his stomach only emphasized the surrounding hush. The pressure of that silence made me sweat.

Oui, the perspiration ran on my forehead as I crawled through that deaf-and-blind darkness. It was just like crawling toward a jungle alive with savage beasts. Any minute they might catch my scent. I had responsibility on my shoulders too, heavier than any knapsack. I had to crawl carefully, very slowly and carefully, and that weight of responsibility and the strain of it made every pore in my body a leaky faucet.

Believe me, I was sweating like a Turkish bath when I crossed the valley under the ridge and started up the dune, knowing those Arab butchers were on the other side. Or maybe they were Touareg, black desert fiends drugged with hashish and hate of the French. The thought turned my Turkish bath into a cold shower.

I am not lying when I say I was soaked in a dew of fear as I crawled on hands and knees up over that dune.

I knew those devils were around me then. Their nearness sent electric currents through the little telegraph wires under my skin. Fear stalled me, and for at least ten minutes I lay flat in the sand, afraid to go on and shaking like a wet leaf. But time was sifting away, *mon ami*—sand running through the hourglass—the lives of fifty men were at stake, you comprehend—my comrades, Yankee Bill and Jensen—trapped up there on that ridge they might outlast a midnight attack, another, perhaps a third, but help had to reach them—they could not last long after sunrise.

I pulled my belt tighter and crawled on. Nearby an invisible horse whickered. Gripping my pistol, I flattened. Was that formless shade ahead of me a Touareg? I was sure I could hear breathing. Teeth clenched, I crawled at the shade and through it. My imagination!

But certainly that was a movement off at the left. Again I flattened, not daring to breathe. The strain and cold sweat was making me a little sick.

No, that movement, too, was my imagination. But then I ran into something that was not imaginary. Crawling over a hummock of sand, I put my hand down squarely on a nose, mouth and beard. Wow! that hummock of sand rose up like an earthquake and turned into a screeching black man. Everywhere around me the dark sprang to life with a violence.

Nerves snapped in my head, and I fired in panic, and the night exploded with a bang!

IT WAS foolish of me to let off my gun like that. Mighty foolish. It was just what I had planned not to do. I should have bashed that sentinel's head in before he could give another squawk; that pistol shot roused the entire ambush. Firing blindly, I rushed through a mob of grabbing hands, dodged a spurt of gun-flame and raced in headlong flight toward that far off mirage of the town.

A river of bullets whistled after me, but those desert demons could not see me any better than I could see them, and I guess my presence in their midst had taken them by surprise. I heard shouting, howls to Allah, horses rearing, rifle shots. I did not loiter. I did not do any careful crawling. Take my word, I set a bee-line for that town on the rim of the night, and I tore through the black as fast as my legs would carry me.

That was not very fast, considering that mob at my heels. By the sound, every fiend in North Africa was coming after me. *Mère de Dieu!* do you know what I was wishing then? My thoughts went to the story that fool Dane had told me, and I was wishing for a fact that I had on Seven League Boots.

What a laugh that was! Those pumpers I was wearing, they were better than hobnailed clogs, but they were not a bit faster than my knees, and with twenty miles to go that would not be fast enough. Besides, they were sweating my feet.

Still, they were curiously light for such thick soles; after my first mad dash, when I had settled into a stride of running, I could not seem to feel them at all. I was keeping a lead on those fiends behind me, *oui.* Horsemen had scattered, and I could hear them off at my flanks, spreading out in an attempt to circle and head me off, but I was still alive, amazingly alive.

I do not know at what moment I began to sense in myself an odd vitality—I had run a couple of miles, I was sure—instead of tiring, I seemed to have found a second wind. My head felt dizzily clear, if you can understand me—light and a little balloonish—that sensation you have in a high altitude.

At the same time, I experienced a queerish nausea, a nausea that was not unpleasant, something like too much champagne. That taste in my stomach I could not identify, or the pleasant numbing in the top of my head. I was dripping wet, yet I had no feeling of fatigue. Strange, I had no sense, either, of passing time. Now I must have been legging it at top speed for a half an hour, but it seemed like only a few seconds.

I wanted to laugh as I ran. Really, this race to El Hamma with that demon-pack at my heels was rather delightful. Some of my senses had blurred and others had quickened; I felt as charged with energy as an electric battery. For two cents I would have turned around and fought that whole desert mob. What were a few hundred Arabs to one good Frenchman!

I sprang along over the sand and it seemed to have turned to rubber. I sailed over a dune. My feet were not touching the ground at all. Name of Jehovah! what had come over me?

Turn me into a pepper mill! I had taken a stride and swooped right off into space. I tell you, I went like a gull on wings.

The odd part of it was, the back of my consciousness knew I had never left the ground at all, I was running like hell across the sand; and my physical self had become elastic, beyond the laws of gravity, I could feel myself flying. That gave me a sensation. You can wager it did! I liked that flighty feeling, and I let go again.

That time I went farther. *Sacré!* that was great. How did I do it? I had never been able to fly before. With the knowledge of this rare accomplishment, a tremendous self-assurance came over me, a sense of superior cunning. I would show these Arabs a thing or two now. Ah, I was a fox. I started cutting crafty tangents, dodging at smart angles to throw them off, then zooming on the straightaway again. No Arab rats were going to catch me. I could outsmart any Touareg horsemen. I was Thibaut Corday, one of the greatest soldiers of France, fighter extraordinary, capable of any feat—look!—in these boots I could fly!

In these boots—! That was when I looked down, my friend, and saw the desert far below me. My knees were pumping like a runner's, but I was not down to earth; *non,* I was winging high in the air. I knew it then, when I found myself running in the clouds. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cheer in exultation.

"Holy Saint Cristopher!" I could hear myself crying out to myself. "The little Dane was right! You are in them! The Seven League Boots!"

A REMARKABLE feeling of power coursed through me. Nothing could hold me down. What exhilaration! A mountain of sand rose in front of me and I went over it in three strides. No danger of Arabs now; single-handed I could

conquer the whole Arab world. "Why," I thought to myself, "I could jump over Arabia. A few leaps in these boots would take me to Asia—India—!"

Now I am coming to a part of this story difficult to describe.

Sensations are hard things to find words for, and my brain was in a whirl of sensations. As I thought of India, I seemed to be projected through space at rocket-speed. Wind whistled in my ears, dust and darkness streaked past me, the moon sailed off at an unexpected arc—*voila!*—before my eyes was the Taj Mahal, exactly as I remembered the picture from my school-book geography; then palm trees, elephants, fantastic rajahs, snake-charmers—suddenly I was in a harem full of dancing girls, nautch dancers from Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay.

Scenery formed and faded like views flashed dimly on a screen, but the dancing girls were clear; they writhed and spun around me, laughing at me, singing strange songs, gesturing at me to catch them.

All this time I was running through the air in my magic boots, and all this time, far in the distance ahead of me, beyond that scene of India, was the mirage of El Hamma's white walls gleaming in the moon-wash.

Can you make anything of that? Then what can you make of this? "There is plenty of time," I said to myself. "I would like to see China!" Almost at once I was there.

Shanghai, exactly as I had last seen it from a troopship deck. Office buildings and pagodas. Alleys lit by paper lanterns. Screechy music. Mandarins in slippers eating rice with chopsticks. Again dancing girls—slant-eyed maidens in pantaloons weaving at me, beckoning, inviting. Ah, they were beautiful. I would have stopped. I would have made love to one under a saladang tree, but far in the distance there was that cursed view of El Hamma, and if I wanted to see those other wonderful places I must hurry on.

So I jumped Afghanistan for Persia to see the dancers of Teheran draped like goddesses about the Peacock Throne. Ground fled away and I was in Nagasaki encircled by dark-eyed geishas in bright kimonas who held out their toy-like hands to me and begged me to stay. The little Japanese maids sent after me a tinkling laugh, but I was going too fast to see much of their country; I wanted to return to the strange leopard-skinned ladies I had glimpsed beating tom-toms on a dark Madagascar beach, and the lotus-perfumed beauties I had passed in crossing Cambodia.

Enfin, you can see I made quite a tour of the world in those Seven League boots. Talk about that Danish king or Magellan! There were girls in every port, charmers of every race and hue and of marvelous beauty, who tried to wrap me in their arms, pleading with me to linger. Somehow I had to go on, although I would have given my soul to dally. But always ahead I saw those moon-washed walls of El Hamma, drawing me on past those alluring ports of call, hurrying me up like Conscience.

I took those few last miles into El Hamma planing from dune to dune like a flying fish hitting the crests of waves. Believe me, in my Seven League Boots I was covering ground. What enraged me was that the town kept drifting ahead of me, so that no matter how fast I ran it remained beyond reach on the skyline.

But I got there.

CHAPTER VII

WHAT BOOTS A MAN . . .?

THE soldiers who saw me from the outpost wall said I came out of the night at a bounding zigzag, like a jackrabbit with five hundred wolfhounds after me. They said Touareg horsemen were riding me down on either flank, and those horsemen would have cut me to pieces if a batch of Arabs had not piled over me and blocked the sword-swipes of the riders. They said I came out from under that pile-up of men, knives and horses as a diver rising out of surf; that I was laugh-

ing and shooting and throwing those Arabs around as if they were straw dummies. Then, they said, I came into that town like a one-man cyclone.

Me, I felt like a complete hurricane.

Those Legionnaires who saw me said I raced in through the gate-arch; came up the bazaar on a slow spin like a dervish, howling unearthly yells and firing at everything in sight. Arabs dropped on me from balconies. Black men charged me from dark doors.

All those wild men from the desert came rioting after me; dust and gun-smoke fogged the moonlight; the shrieks, screams, explosions, hoof-clatter and clang of hurled blades was like the din of Hell.

They saw me climb up walls and jump down from roofs. Ten times I disappeared in the heat of bedlam. Racing from barracks to rescue me, they saw me standing in an alley-mouth, calmly loading my pistol and hooting with laughter while bullets tore through my hair and every hellion in town whirled around me. They said my tunic was in ribbons, my britches in shreds, I was dirt and blood from head to foot, my face was a scarlet mask. But my eyes were like opals, and I leaped and dodged and charged at my attackers as if my life were charmed. They said it was a miracle I was alive.

But they did not see what I saw.

I saw I was in Hell, all right, but in my Hell there were more than Arabs. All those dancing girls from far places, they had come there with me. Around me they danced, leaping and twisting, clinging to my arms, running cool fingers through my hair, twining soft arms about my neck, imploring me with kisses to save them.

Like rainbows they flashed, girls in veils and girls without veils, anklets twinkling, bells shining on their feet—geisha girls, nautch dancers, the leopard women of Madagascar, the lovely maids from Persia, China, Tonkin. Bracelets jangled. Tom-toms roared. Cymbals crashed.

Savage hordes of natives charged at me to take my girls away, villainous devils who grabbed out and rushed, trying to catch my women. Do you think I was afraid of those curs when the most beautiful ladies I had ever seen were clinging to me for protection? Do you think I was afraid in my Seven League Boots?

I did not climb the walls in that town; I walked over them. I did not jump down from roofs; I stepped down. What were a hundred Arabs to me—what were a thousand?

Those Legionnaires rushing to my rescue, they saw no mere man in rags and dirt battling a native mob. They saw a giant, a knight in invincible armor, a great conqueror surrounded by the world's loveliest harem, beating off with ease and supreme confidence all the devils in Hell. What a fight you can put up when every step you take covers seven leagues.

The Devil, himself, came at me. I saw his face. On a black horse he came through the sulphur smoke, leaping from saddle on top of me. My side-jump had carried me to Italy. Satan was swearing in Italian. He had a thin, ascetic face and a bald head, and he was lashing criss-cross strokes at me with a whistling sabre. *"Corpo da Bacco!"* Veiled women clung to me, screaming in a thousand plaintive tongues. I hurled myself at this enemy. I never felt the slash that cut me to the shoulder-bone. He went down, and I was stamping on his face—

Tom-toms sounded like the thudding of machine-guns. Cymbals were rifles smashing. Dancers and veils dissolved in bronze, swirling fog. Red lights banged on all sides; there was a smell of burnt powder, hot metal, salty sweat; suddenly in the smoke before me appeared Yankee Bill, Jensen, a squad of Legionnaires. Those fools, their shouts and bayonets had scared my dancers. A delightful creature in gauzy raiment beckoned from a roof-top, turned and sped like a rainbow for the moon.

Soaring in my boots, I went after her; together we fled across the sky. But my boots were heavy with caked, bloody mud —I was slowing down—the moon went

out—her veils tore through my clutch, and I lost her.

Then I was falling—falling through endless night.

BARE feet. I could see them, toes upturned, sticking up beyond the horizon of the blanket. That bunion looked familiar. So did a corn. Could those miserable appendages be mine? I wiggled the toes. They were mine.

"The boots!" I whispered. "Where are my Seven League Boots?"

The face wearing a doctor's Van Dyke looked down and grinned. "Boots, indeed! From the way you have been talking I would have expected dancing slippers. For three days now you have been waltzing. What a dance! And with such women! Tut, tut! You have shocked the good nuns of this hospital, I can tell you; they have been saying hurry-call prayers for your soul. They are not used to the confessions of such a roué, such an adventurer, such a lady-killer."

I gasped out, "The dancing girls—!"

"You brought them to the hospital with you. What a subconscious! Was it imagination or memory? You have been in our Asian colonies? I envy you. I knew that stuff inspired a man. But you, *mon brave!* I have heard of nothing like it since I read the impressions of De Quincy."

"My Seven League Boots!" I panted.

He chuckled, shaping his beard with pointed fingers. "So that is what they were? Seven Leaguers! Well, I can believe it from what they tell me of the race you ran. Eighteen miles across the desert in five hours; dodging all over the map under cover of night, and outstripping a hundred Arabs and Touareg. How you outsmarted them, decoying them after you like that, so your comrades could escape that ambush trap. Do you know you saved your company? Your comrades reached El Hamma only a half hour behind you. It was wonderful strategy. The general will be here soon. All the way from Kairouan to give you the *Croix de Guerre.*"

I struggled to rise. "I do not want a medal! I want my Seven League Boots!"

"No, no!" the doctor lowered me back. "Your shoulder, *mon gars!* The stitches! But wait!" He tinkled a bell near my cot and a nun came in. After whispered words the good sister went out, to presently return with a parcel wrapped in paper. A very spruce lieutenant, one I had never seen before, was with her. He saluted the doctor and unwrapped the parcel.

"My boots!" I wailed. "Torn to pieces! Some villain has slashed them like that! The Seven League Boots that belonged to a Danish king and—"

Overwhelmed by the tragedy, I could not go on. As the lieutenant held up those ruined wonders, I could only weep. Ah, those marvelous boots. The calves had been cut to strips. The heels were split open. The magic soles had been ripped loose from the welt and hung down with nails showing like jagged teeth. The felt insole flapped out like a tongue, and the vandal who had worked this infamy had gouged out the bottoms and arches.

"Show him," the doctor said to the lieutenant.

Fumbling in a tunic pocket, the lieutenant produced a small packet of tissue papers. I could see scrawled lines and fine writing.

"Show him the rest."

The lieutenant held up a brown, flat gum-like slab of something about a half inch thick and six inches long—it was shaped as a bootsole, but it looked like an unwholesome, moist plug of chewing tobacco.

"Corday," the doctor shook his head, "those weren't any Seven League Boots belonging to any Danish king. They belonged to that Italian who was around here passing himself off as an archaeologist."

"I know," I cried. "And he bought them from a sheik in the desert—or he dug them up in the sand—!"

"Too bad for him he didn't," the lieutenant said grimly. "No, *mon brave,* he had them made to order—to very special order by that cur of a blind cobbler in

the Lane of the Three Thirsty Camels. Then every night when he returned from his diggings he gave them to the cobbler to polish up; what choice boots that they must be shiny for his morning ride into the desert!"

"That cobbler made a pair to match for Colonel Rolant!" I moaned. "He got them mixed up! Switched! He gave the colonel the Italian's pair."

"*OUI,* and he gave the Italian the new ones he had made for the colonel. But attend! The match is close but not exact. The boots made for the colonel, they have solid leather soles and heels. These of the Italian? Well, every day when he rode into the desert he carried imbedded under that insole these nice brown slabs to pass out to nomad chiefs. Only he was more than a dope-runner, this *agent provacateur.*

"Here are maps of our whole Tunisian border, the deposition of our troops, a plan of our El Hamma outpost and the instructions for a secret uprising—on tissue paper concealed in the hollow heels. You can see how badly he wanted those boots of his; why he trailed your detachment and finally ordered a bold attack. Those spy-maps meant his life, if discovered. The drugs to bribe the desert tribes—that blind cobbler had bushels hidden under his shop."

I pulled my bare feet under cover in horror. "You mean there were drugs hidden in the soles of those boots?"

"Under the felt insole," the doctor pointed at the brown, gum-like slab that resembled chewing tobacco. "Concentrated opium and hashish with some native hell-oil mixed in. Just the fumes are enough to knock you silly. Believe me, those boots were ripe, Corday. I do not wonder the colonel felt it when his feet began to perspire. That felt insole soaked up the stuff. That spy never walked far in them. *Sacré!* Imagine marching!"

Eyes raised, the doctor called upon heaven to imagine it. "Out in Tonkin," he told the lieutenant, "I have seen native soldiers smuggle a pill of opium under an armpit and go sky high. Conceive of absorbing a drug through the bottoms of your blistered feet! Especially hashish! No wonder those officers saw strange countries and dancing girls. Hashish is the most violent of narcotics; always it conjures up visions; the user loses all sense of time and space, temporarily goes mad, and is liable to run amuck. It is the drug of the assassins; only a little will drive one wild. And here was Corday steeping his toes in it; taking a foot-bath in the stuff. *Ventre bleu!*" he shuddered at me. "Never in my life have I seen such a colossal, world-beating jag!"

I did not want to hear any more, and I turned over on my pillow. I am afraid I did not appreciate the humor when the general walked in to give me a decoration and a speech in which he called me a hero and applauded the way I had brought to a victorious termination Colonel Rolant's brilliant campaign.

OLD Thibaut Corday swung his feet off the chair and tenderly lowered them to the floor as his story came to a halt.

The young British consular agent, who had dropped into the café for tea, decided to cancel the jam muffins.

Algiers hurried by in the afternoon sunshine on Boulevard Sadi Carnot, and the old Legion veteran's eyes were fixed bleakly on the procession of sandals, slippers and boots which made a passing show on the pavement beyond the *brasserie* entrance.

"And that," he snorted finally, "is what our French generals considered a brilliant campaign. A colonel loses himself, his mind and his men in a desert—every officer of the company and twenty soldiers are killed—it was the dope that went to Rolant's head to begin with—but it is brilliant!" His shoulders made that shrug only possible to Frenchmen.

"But what would you, of the military? The Arabs, you comprehend, they could not make head or tail of our parading out

into the desert like that. They thought we must have been an entire army. Those crazy maneuvers scared them. Where a logical campaign would have failed, that insane parade for Timbuctoo frightened an overwhelming enemy force and broke up a cunningly planned rebellion."

Old Thibaut Corday sat back and made a wide gesture. Then he was silent, staring off into a great distance, as if his eyes were seeking the past which he had just recounted.

The young British agent exclaimed, "But those officers that were murdered, Corday! Captain LaSalle, and that chap killed by a Chinese knife?"

"The Italian snake! He had to have those boots of his, *non?* Think of his surprise when he saw the colonel strut by in a similar pair, only to discover he was wearing the colonel's and the Legion *commandant* had his. So he set out after us.

"By the time he caught up with the column, Papa Rolant was in his grave, the boots were on Captain LaSalle. When LaSalle wandered off that night, the spy shot him, but we got there before he could retrieve his footwear. The next night he waited his chance, sneaked into camp and caught Delacroix in his tent.

"Doubtless the youngster, uneasy, had been walking around, sleepless, and was just retiring when he got that knife in the back. Again we were there double quick, and the Italian had to run for it without the boots. In the dark we never saw him. The knife was probably his—a gift from Chinese dope-smugglers. I do not know.

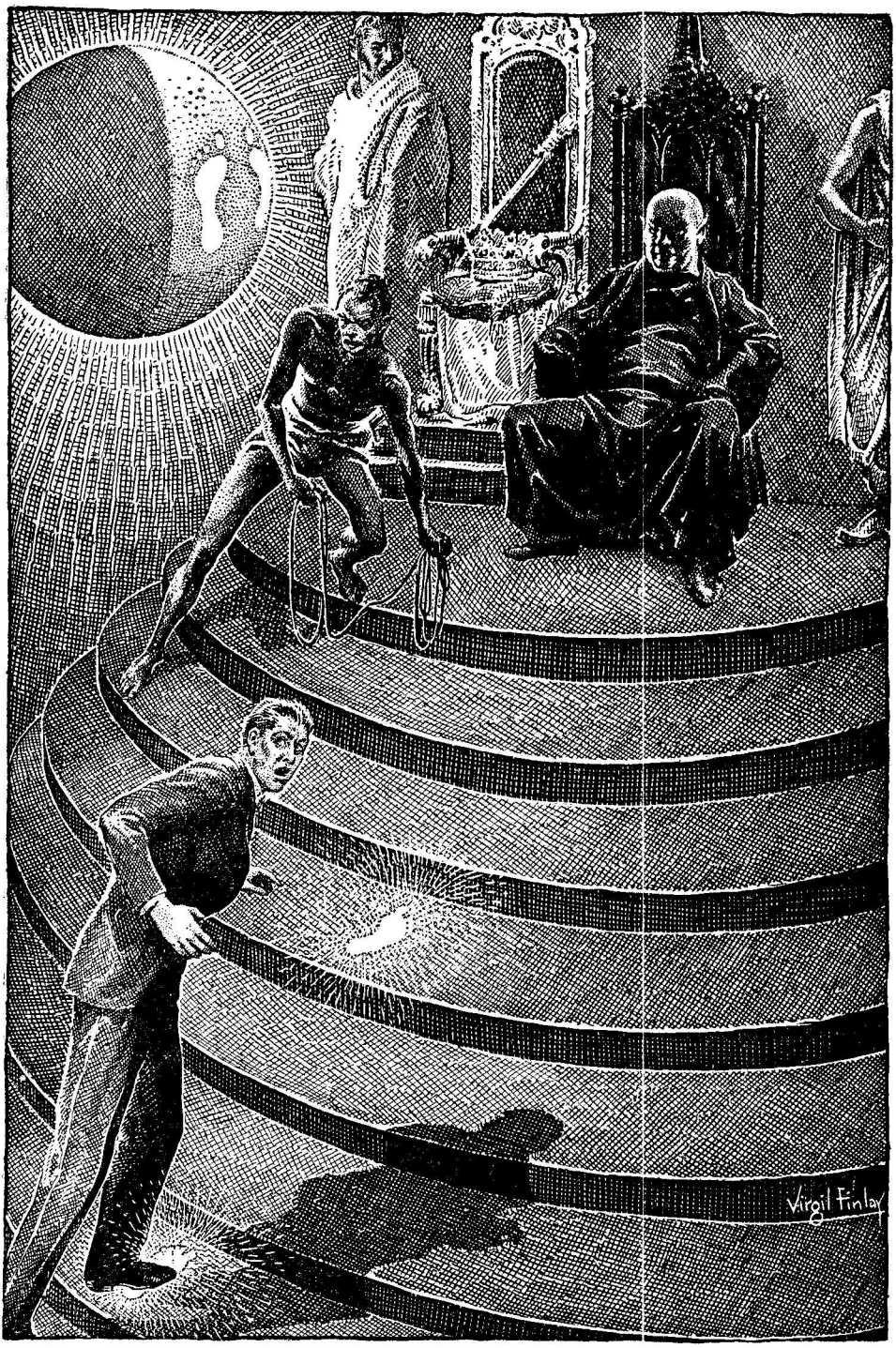
"There in El Hamma I killed him. He was out there in that ambush with those devils, understand, and the whole pack chased me when they saw I was in those boots."

"What of the old blind cobbler?"

Corday shrugged.

"Murdered for his mistake. But since, I have often wondered. Could the pattern of those boots have reached Europe? What are these dictators wearing? Did you ever see one in shoes? Regard their gestures, delusions of grandeur, narcotic eyes! Listen to them talk of how they are going to go across the world. They are steeping their blisters in hashish? All of them think they are strutting in Seven League Boots!"

Old Thibaut Corday spat fiercely. "Give me the *brodequins* of common men. I was glad to get back into my clodhoppers, I can tell you. In these I am squarely down to earth. No more of your fine boots for me; they make me sick. Which reminds me," he glared off, "I was sent home from El Hamma on sick leave. What do you think? My little niece in school had learned to speak English. What a prodigious accomplishment! Proudly my sister produced the tiny scholar. Recite for Uncle Thibaut. Me, I could not stand it. I had to get up and leave. Can you hear that child reciting Kipling? That poem! *'Boots! Boots! Boots—!'*"



Slowly he climbed the magic stairway, knowing that to look behind meant death. Thus has it always been

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CHAPTER I

THE WATCHERS UNSEEN

THE clock was striking eight as I walked out of the doors of the Discoverers' Club and stood for a moment looking down lower Fifth Avenue. As I paused, I felt with full force that uncomfortable sensation of being watched that had both puzzled and harassed me for the past two weeks.

It is a queer sort of a sensitivity that I have in common with most men who spend much of their time in jungle or desert. It is a throwback to some primitive sixth sense, since all savages have it until they are introduced to the white man's liquor. A curious, prickly, cold feeling somewhere deep under the skin on the side that the watchers are located, an odd sort of tingling pressure. A mighty useful thing for a man like me to have.

Trouble was I couldn't localize the sensation. It seemed to trickle in on me from all sides. I scanned the street. Three taxis were drawn up along the curb in front of the club. They were empty and their drivers busy talking. There were no loiterers that I could see. The two swift side-rubbing streams of traffic swept up and down the avenue. I studied the windows of the opposite houses. There was no sign in them of any watchers.

Yet eyes were upon me, intently. I knew it.

The warning had come to me in many places this last fortnight. I had felt the unseen watchers time and again in the museum where I had gone to look at the Yunnan jades I had made it possible for rich old Rockbilt to put there with distinct increase to his reputation as a philanthropist. It had come to me in the theater and while riding in the park; in the brokers' offices where I myself had watched the quite tidy sum the jades had brought me melt away in a game which I now ruefully admitted I knew less than nothing about. I had felt it in the streets, and that was to be expected. But I had also felt it at the club, and that was not to be expected and it bothered me more than anything else.

Yes, I was under strictest surveillance. But why?

That was what this night I had determined to find out.

AT A touch upon my shoulder I jumped and swept my hand halfway up to a little automatic under my left armpit. By that, I suddenly realized how badly the mystery had got on my nerves. I turned, and grinned a bit sheepishly into the face of big Lars Thorwaldsen, back in New York only a few days from two years in the Antarctic.

"Bit jerky, aren't you, Jim?" he asked. "What's the matter? Too much hooch perhaps?"

"Nothing like it, Lars," I answered.

"Too much city, I guess. Too much damned continual noise and motion. And too damned many people," I added with a real candor he could not suspect.

"God!" he exclaimed. "It all looks good to me. I'm eating it up after these two years. But I suppose in a month or two I'll be feeling the same way about it. I hear you're going away again soon. Where this time? Back to China?"

I shook my head. I did not feel like telling Lars that my destination was entirely controlled by whatever might turn up before I had spent the sixty-five dollars in my wallet and the seven quarters and two dimes in my pocket.

"Not in any trouble, are you, Jim?" he looked at me more keenly. "If you are, I'd be glad to—help you."

I shook my head. Everybody knew that old Rockbilt had been unusually generous about those infernal jades. I had my pride, staggered though I was by that amazingly rapid melting away of a golden deposit I had confidently expected to grow into a barrier against care for the rest of my life—make me, as a matter of fact, independent of all chance. I did not feel like telling even Lars of my folly. Besides, I was not yet that most hopeless of all things, a beachcomber in New York. Something would turn up.

"Wait a minute," he said, as someone called him back into the club.

But I did not wait. Even less than bearing my unfortunate gamble did I feel like telling about my watchers. I stepped down into the street.

Who was it that was watching me? And why? Someone from China who had followed after the treasure I had taken from the ancient tomb? I could not believe it. Kin-Wang, bandit though he might be, and accomplished graduate of American poker as well as Cornell, would have sent no spies after me.

Our, well—call it transaction, irregular as it had been, was finished in his mind when he had lost. Crooked as he might be with the cards, he was not the man to go back on his word. Of that I was sure. Besides, there had been no need of letting me get this far before striking. No, they were no emissaries of Kin-Wang.

There had been that mock arrest in Paris, designed to get me quickly out of the way for a few hours, as the ransacked condition of my room and baggage showed when I returned—a return undoubtedly much earlier than the thieves had planned, due to my discovery of the ruse and my surprise sally which left me with an uncomfortable knife slash under an arm.

But I had undoubtedly left one of my guards with a broken neck and another with a head that would not do much thinking for another month or so. Then there had been the second attempt when the auto in which I was rushing to the steamer had been held up between Paris and the Havre.

That might have been successful had not the plaques been tucked away among the baggage of an acquaintance who was going to the boat by the regular train, thinking, by the way, that he was carrying for me some moderately rare old dishes that I did not want to trust to the possible shocks of fast automobile travel, to which the mythical engagement on the day of sailing had condemned me.

WERE the watchers this same gang? They must know that the jades were now out of my hands and safe in the museum. I could be of no further value to these disappointed gentleman, unless, of course, they were after revenge. Yet that would hardly explain this constant, furtive watching. And why hadn't they struck long before? Surely there had been plenty of opportunities.

Well, whoever the watchers were, I had determined to give them the most open of chances to get at me. I had paid all my bills. The sixty-six dollars and ninety-five cents in my pocket comprised all my worldly goods, but no one else had any claim on it. Whatever unknown port I was clearing for with severely bare sticks and decks, it was with no debts left behind.

Yes, I had determined to decoy my ene-

mies, if enemies they were, out into the *open. I had even made up my mind where* it should be.

In all New York the loneliest spot at eight o'clock of an October night, or any night for that matter, is the one which by day is the most crowded on all the globe. Lower Broadway, empty then of all its hordes, its cañonlike cleft silent, its intersecting minor cañons emptier and quieter even than their desert kin.

I walked down the block and crossed to Washington Square. As I went under the Arch a man passed me, a man whose gait and carriage, figure and clothing, were oddly familiar.

I stood stock still, looking after him as he strolled leisurely toward the avenue; stood there until he was hidden from view by other pedestrians.

Then, queerly disturbed, I resumed my walk. There had been something peculiarly familiar, indeed disquietingly familiar about that man. What was it? Making my way over to Broadway, I went down that street warily, always aware of the watchers.

But it was not until I was opposite City Hall that I realized what that truly weird familiarity had been. The realization came to me with a distinct shock.

In gait and carriage, in figure and clothing, from light brown overcoat, gray, soft hat and strong Malacca cane that man had been—

Myself!

CHAPTER II

WHEN DESTINY SUMMONS

I STOPPED short. The natural assumption was, of course, that the resemblance had been a coincidence, extraordinary enough, but still—coincidence. Without doubt there were at least fifty men in New York who might easily be mistaken for me at a casual glance. The chance, however, that one of them would be dressed precisely like me at any precise moment was almost nil. Yet it could be. What else *could* it be? What reason had any one to impersonate me?

But then, for that matter, what reason *had any one to put a watch on me?*

I hesitated, of half a mind to call a taxi, and return to the club. Reason whispered to me that the glimpse I had got had been brief, that perhaps I had been deceived by the play of light and shadow, the resemblance being only an illusion. I cursed my jumpy nerves and went on.

Fewer and fewer became the people I passed as I left Cortlandt Street behind me. Trinity was like a country church at midnight. As the cliffs of the silent office buildings hemmed me I felt a smothering oppression, as though they were asleep and swaying in one me; their countless windows were like blind eyes. But if they were blind, those other eyes that I had never for an instant felt leave me, were not. They seemed to become more intent, more watchful.

And now I met no one. Not a policeman, not even a watchman. The latter were, I knew, inside those huge stone forts of capital. I loitered at corners, giving every opportunity for the lurkers to step out, the invisible to become visible. And still I saw no one. And still the eyes never left me.

It was with a certain sense of disappointment that I reached the end of Broadway and looked out over Battery Park. It was deserted. I walked down to the harbor wall and sat upon a bench. A ferryboat gliding toward Staten Island was like some great golden water bug. The full moon poured a rivulet of rippling silver fire upon the waves. It was very still—so still that I could faintly hear Trinity's bells chiming nine o'clock.

I HAD heard no one approach, but suddenly I was aware of a man sitting beside me and a pleasant voice asking me for a match. As the flame flared up to meet his cigarette, I saw a dark, ascetic face, smooth-shaven, the mouth and eyes kindly and the latter a bit weary, as though from study.

The hand that held the match was long and slender and beautifully kept. It gave

the impression of unusual strength—a surgeon's hand or a sculptor's. A professional man certainly, I conjectured. The thought was strengthened by his Inverness coat and his soft, dark hat. In the broad shoulders under the cloak of the coat was further suggestion of a muscular power much beyond the ordinary.

"A beautiful night, sir," he tossed the match from him. "A night for adventure. And behind us a city in which any adventure is possible."

I looked at him more closely. It was an odd remark, considering that I had unquestionably started out that night for adventure. But was it so odd after all? Perhaps it was only my overestimated suspicion that made it seem so. He could not possibly have known what had drawn me to this silent place. And the kindly eyes and the face made me almost instantly dismiss the thought. Some scholar this, perhaps, grateful for the quietness of the park.

"That ferryboat yonder," he pointed out, seemingly unaware of my scrutiny; "it is an argosy of potential adventure. Within it are mute Alexanders, inglorious Caesars and Napoleons, incomplete Jasons each *almost* able to retrieve some Golden Fleece —yes, and incomplete Helens and Cleopatras, all lacking only one thing to round them out and send them forth to conquer."

"Lucky for the world they're incomplete," I answered, "since all the world would be too small to hold even a thousandth of a ferryboat of such superfolk."

"No," he answered. "Life is an infinite number of circles. You could have a Napoleon of a group, a village, a city, a state, a nation—Caesars for others, Cleopatras for still more and on and on—indefinitely."

"And how long would it be before all these Napoleons and Cæsars and Cleopatras and all the rest of them were at each others' throats—and the whole world on fire?" I laughed.

"Never," he said, very seriously. "Never, that is, if they were under the control of a will and an intellect greater than the sum total of all their wills and intellects. A mind greater than *all* of them to plan for all of them, a will more powerful than *all* their wills to force them to carry out those plans exactly as the greater mind had conceived them."

"The result, sir," I objected, "would seem to me to be not the super-pirates, super-thieves, and super-courtesans you have cited, but super-slaves."

"Less slaves than at any time in history," he replied. "The personages I have suggested as types were always under control of Destiny—or God, if you prefer the term. The will and intellect I have in mind would profit, since its house would be a human brain, by the mistakes of blind, mechanistic Destiny or of a God who surely, if he exists, has too many varying worlds to look after to give minute attention to individuals of the countless species that crawl over them.

"No, it would use the talents of its servants to the utmost, not waste them. It would suitably and justly reward them, and when it punished—its punishments would be just. It would not scatter a thousand seeds haphazardly on the chance that a few would find fertile ground and grow. It would select the few, and see that they fell on fertile ground, and that nothing prevented their growing."

"Such a mind would have to be greater than Destiny, or if *you* prefer the term, God," I said. "I repeat that it seems to me a super-slavery and that it's mighty lucky for the world that no such mind exists."

"Ah!" He drew at his cigarette thoughtfully. "But, you see—it does!"

"Yes?" I stared at him, wondering if he were joking. "Where?"

"That," he answered coolly, "you shall soon know—Mr. Kirkham!"

"You know me?" For one amazed moment I thought I had not heard aright.

"Very well," he said. "And that mind whose existence you doubt knows—all of you there is to know. He summons you! Come, Kirkham, it is time for us to go!"

So! I had met what I had started out to find! They, whoever *they* were, had come out into the open at last.

"Wait a bit." I felt my anger stir at the arrogance of the hitherto courteous voice. "Whoever you may be or whoever he may be who sent you, neither of you know me as well as you seem to think. If you did, you'd know I go nowhere unless I know where it is I'm going, and I meet no one unless I choose. Tell me then where you want me to go, who it is I'm to meet and the reason for it. When you do that, I'll decide whether or not I'll answer this, what did you call it—summons."

He had listened to me quietly. Now his hand shot out and caught my wrist. I had run across many strong men, but never one with a grip like that. My cane dropped from my paralyzed grasp.

"You have been told all that is necessary," he said coldly. "And you are going with me—now!"

He loosed my wrist, and shaking with rage I jumped to my feet.

"Damn you," I cried. "I go where I please, when I please"—I stooped to pick up my cane. Instantly his arms were around me.

"You go," he whispered, "where he who sent me pleases and when he pleases!"

I felt his hands swiftly touching me here and there. I could no more have broken away from him than if I had been a kitten. He found the small automatic under my left armpit and drew it out of its holster. Quickly as he had seized me, he released me and stepped back.

"Come," he ordered.

I STOOD, considering him and the situation. No one has ever had occasion to question my courage, but courage, to my way of thinking, has nothing whatever to do with bull-headed rashness. Courage is the cool weighing of factors of an emergency within whatever time limit your judgment tells you that you have, and then the putting of every last ounce of brain, nerve and muscle into the course chosen.

I had not the slightest doubt that this mysterious messenger had men within instant call. If I threw myself on him, what good would it do? I had only my cane. He had my gun and probably weapons of his own. Strong as I am, he had taught me that my strength was nothing to his. It might even be that he was counting upon an attack by me, that it was what he hoped for.

True, I could cry out for help, or I could run. Not only did both of these expedients seem to be ridiculous, but, in view of the certainty of his hidden aids, useless.

Not far away were the subway stations and the elevated road. In that brilliantly lighted zone I would be comparatively safe from any concerted attack—if I could get there. I began to walk away across the park toward Whitehall Street.

To my surprise he made neither objection nor comment. He paced quietly beside me. Soon we were out of the Battery and not far ahead were the lights of the Bowling Green station. My resentment and anger diminished, a certain amusement took their place.

Obviously, it was absurd to suppose that in New York City any one could be forced to go anywhere against his will, once he was in the usual close touch with its people and its police. To be snatched away from a subway station was almost unthinkable, to be kidnaped from the subway once one got in it absolutely unthinkable. Why then, was my companion so placidly allowing each step to take me closer to this unassailable position?

It would have been so easy to have overpowered me just a few moments before. Or why had I not been approached at the club? There were a dozen possible ways in which I could have been lured away from there.

There seemed only one answer. There was some paramount need for secrecy. A struggle in the park *might* have brought the police.

Overtures at the club *might* have left evidence behind had I disappeared. How utterly outside the mark all this reasoning was I was soon to learn.

As we drew closer to the Bowling Green entrance of the underground I saw a po-

liceman standing there. I admit without shame that his scenic effect warmed my heart.

"Listen," I said to my companion. "There's a bluecoat. Slip my gun back into my pocket. Leave me here and go your way. If you do that, I say nothing. If you don't, I'm going to order that policeman to lock you up. They'll have the Sullivan Law on you if nothing else. Go away quietly and, if you want to, get in touch with me at the Discoverers' Club. I'll forget all this and talk to you. But don't try any more of the rough stuff or I'll be getting sore."

He smiled at me, as at some child, his face and eyes again all kindness. But he did not go. Instead, he linked his arm firmly in mine and led me straight to the officer. And as we came within earshot he said to me, quite loudly:

"Now come, Henry. You've had your little run. I'm sure you don't want to give this busy officer any trouble. Come, Henry! Be good!"

THE policeman stepped forward, looking us over. I did not know whether to laugh or grow angry again. Before I could speak, the man in the Inverness had handed the bluecoat a card. He read it, touched his hat respectfully and then he asked:

"And what's the trouble, doctor?"

"Sorry to bother you, officer," my astonishing companion answered. "But I'll ask you to help me a bit. My young friend here is one of my patients. War case—aviator. He hurt his head in a crash in France and just now he thinks he is James Kirkham, an explorer. Actually, his name is Henry Walton."

The bluecoat looked at me, doubtfully. I smiled, in my certain security.

"Go on!" I said. "What else do I think?"

"He's quite harmless"—the "doctor" patted my shoulder—"but now and then he manages to slip away from us. Yes, harmless, but very ingenious. He evaded us this evening. I sent my men out to trace him. I found him myself down there at the Battery.

"At such times, officer, he believes he is in danger of being kidnaped. That's what he wants to tell you—that I am kidnaping him. Will you kindly listen to him, officer, and assure him that such a thing is impossible in New York. Or, if possible, that kidnapers do not conduct their captives up to a New York policeman as I have."

I could only admire the deftness of the story, the half humorous and yet patient, wholly professional manner in which he told it. Safe now as I thought myself, I could afford to laugh, and I did.

"Quite right, officer," I said. "Only it happens that my name really *is* James Kirkham. I never even heard of this Henry Walton he is talking about. I never saw this man here until tonight. And I have every reason in the world to know that he is trying to force me to go somewhere that I have no intention whatever of going."

"You see!" My companion nodded meaningly to the policeman who, far from answering my smiles, looked at me with an irritating sympathy.

"I wouldn't worry," he assured me. "As the good doctor says, kidnapers don't hunt up the police. Ye couldn't be kidnaped in New York—at least not this way. Now go right along wit' the doctor, an' don't ye worry no more."

It was time to terminate the absurd matter. I thrust my hand into my pocket, brought out my wallet, and dipped into it for my card. I picked out one, and with it a letter or two and handed them to the bluecoat.

"Perhaps these identifications will give you another slant," I said.

He took them, read them carefully, and handed them back to me pityingly.

"Sure, lad." His tone was soothing. "Ye're in no danger. I'm tellin' ye. Would ye want a taxi, doctor?"

I stared at him in amazement, and then down to the card and envelopes he had returned to me. I read them once and again, unbelievingly.

FOR the card bore the name of "Henry Walton," and each of the envelopes was addressed to that same gentleman "in care of Dr. Michael Corsardine" at an address that I recognized as a clinic up in the Seventies of the highest priced New York specialists. Nor was the wallet I held in my hand the one with which I had started this eventful stroll.

I opened my coat and glanced down into the inner pocket for the tailor's label that bore my name. There was no label there.

Very abruptly my sense of security fled. I began to realize that it might be possible to force me to go where I did not want to, after all. Even from a New York subway station.

"Officer," I said, and there was no laughter now in my voice, "you are making a great mistake. I met this man a few minutes ago in Battery Park. I give you my word, he is an utter stranger to me. He insisted that I follow him to some place whose location he refused to tell me, to meet some one whose name he would not reveal.

"When I refused he struggled with me, ostensibly searching for weapons. During that struggle it is now plain that he substituted this wallet containing the cards and envelopes bearing the name of Henry Walton in the place of my own. I demand that you search him for my wallet, and then, whether you find it or not, I demand that you take us both to headquarters."

The bluecoat looked at me doubtfully. My earnestness and apparent sanity had shaken him. Neither my appearance nor my manner was that of even a slightly unbalanced person. But on the other hand the benign face, the kindly eyes, the unmistakable refinement and professionalism of the man of the Battery bench were as far apart as the poles from the puzzled officer's conception of a kidnaper.

"I'm perfectly willing to be examined at headquarters—and even searched there," said the man in the Inverness. "Only I must warn you that all the excitement will certainly react very dangerously on my patient. However—call a taxi—"

"No taxi," I said firmly. "We go in the patrol wagon, with police around us."

"Wait a minute." The bluecoat's face brightened. "Here comes the sergeant. He'll decide what to do." The sergeant walked up.

"What's the trouble, Mooney?" he asked, looking us over. Succinctly, Mooney explained the situation. The sergeant studied us again, more closely. I grinned at him cheerfully.

"All I want," I told him, "is to be taken to headquarters. In a patrol wagon. No taxi. Doctor—what was it? Oh, yes, Consardine. Patrol wagon with plenty of police, and Dr. Consardine sitting in it with me—that's all I want."

"It's all right, sergeant," said Dr. Consardine patiently. "I'm quite ready to go. But as I warned Officer Mooney, it means delay and excitement, and you must accept the responsibility for the effect upon my patient, whose care is, after all, my first concern. I have said he is harmless, but tonight I took from him—this."

He handed the sergeant the small automatic.

"Under his left arm you will find its holster," said Consardine. "Frankly, I think it best to get him back to my sanatorium as quickly as possible."

THE sergeant stepped close to me, and, throwing back my coat, felt under my left arm. I knew by his face as he touched the holster that Consardine had scored.

"I have a license to carry a gun," I said tartly.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"In the wallet that man took from me when he lifted the gun," I answered. "If you search him you'll find it."

"Oh, poor lad! Poor lad!" murmured Consardine. And so sincere seemed his distress that I was half inclined to feel sorry myself for myself. He spoke again to the sergeant.

"I think perhaps the matter can be settled without running the risk of the journey to headquarters. As Officer Mooney has told you, my patient's present delusion is

that he is a certain James Kirkham, and living at the Discoverers' Club. It may be that the real Mr. Kirkham is there at this moment. I therefore suggest that you call up the Discoverers' Club and ask for him. If Mr. Kirkham is there, it will end the matter. If not, we will go to headquarters."

The sergeant looked at me, and I looked at Consardine amazed.

"If you can talk to James Kirkham at the Discoverers' Club," I said at last, "then I'm Henry Walton!"

We walked over to a telephone booth. Again Consardine forestalled me by giving the sergeant the number of the Discoverers' Club.

"Ask for Robert," I interposed. "He's the desk man."

I had talked to Robert a few minutes before I had gone out. He would still be on duty.

"Is that Robert? At the desk?" he asked as the call came through. "Is Mr. James Kirkham there? This is Police Sergeant Downey."

There was a pause. He glanced at me.

"They're paging Kirkham," he muttered then to the phone—"What's that? *You* are James Kirkham! A moment, please—put that clerk back. Hello—you, Robert? That party I'm talking to Kirkham? Kirkham, the explorer? You're certain? All right—all right! Don't get excited about it. I'll admit you know him. Put him back—hello, Mr. Kirkham? No, it's all right. Just a case of—er—bugs! Man thinks he's you—"

I snatched the receiver from his hand, lifted it to my ear, and heard a voice saying:

"Not the first time, poor devil—"

The voice was my very own!

CHAPTER III

THE GREATER WILL

THE receiver was taken from me, gently enough. Now the sergeant was listening again. Mooney had me by one arm, the man in the Inverness by the other. I heard the sergeant say:

"Yes—Walton, Henry Walton, yes, that's the name. Sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Kirkham. Good-by."

He snapped up the phone and regarded me compassionately.

"Too bad!" he said. "It's a shame. Do you want an ambulance, doctor?"

"No, thanks," answered Consardine. "It's a peculiar case. The kidnaping delusion is a strong one. He'll be quieter with people around him. We'll go up on the subway. Even though his normal self is not in control, it will whisper to him subconsciously that kidnaping is impossible in the midst of a subway crowd. Now, Henry," he said and patted my hand, "admit that it is. You are beginning to realize it already, aren't you—"

I broke out of my daze. The man who had passed me under the Arch! The man who had so strangely resembled me! Fool that I was not to have thought of that before!

"Wait, officer," I cried desperately. "That was an impostor at the club; some person made up to look like me. I saw hi—"

"There, there, lad!" He put a hand on my shoulder reassuringly. "You gave your word. You're not going to welch on it, I'm sure. You're all right, I'm telling you. Go with the doctor, now."

For the first time I had the sense of futility. This net spreading around me had been woven with infernal ingenuity. Apparently no contingency had been overlooked. I felt the shadow of a grim oppression. If those so interested in me, or in my—withdrawal, wished it, how easy would it be to obliterate me.

If this double of mine could dupe the clerk who had known me for years, and mix in with my friends at the club without detection, if he could do this what could he not do in my name and in my guise? A touch of ice went through my blood. Was that the plot? Was I to be removed so that this double of mine could take my place in my world for a time to perpetuate some villainy that would blacken forever my memory? The situa-

tion was no longer humorous. It was heavy with evil possibilities.

But the next step in my involuntary journey was to be the subway. As Consardine had said, no sane person would believe a man could be kidnaped there. Surely there, if anywhere, I could escape, find someone in the crowd who would listen to me, create, if necessary, such a scene that it would be impossible for my captor to hold me, outwit him somehow.

At any rate, there was nothing to do but go with him. Further appeal to these two policemen was useless.

"Let's go—doctor," I said quietly. We started down the subway steps, his arm in mine.

WE PASSED through the gates. A train was waiting. I went into the last car, Consardine at my heels. It was empty. I marched on. In the second car was only a nondescript passenger or two. But as I neared the third car I saw at the far end half a dozen marines with a second lieutenant. My pulse quickened. Here was the very opportunity I had been seeking. I made straight for them.

As I entered the car I was vaguely aware of a couple sitting in a corner close to the door. Intent upon reaching the leathernecks, I paid no attention to them.

Before I had gone five steps I heard a faint scream, then a cry of—

"Harry! Oh, Dr. Consardine! You've found him!"

Involuntarily I halted and turned. A girl was running toward me. She threw her arms around my neck and cried again:

"Harry! Harry, dear! Oh, thank God he found you!"

Two of the loveliest brown eyes I had ever beheld looked up at me. They were deep and tender and pitying, and tears trembled on the long black lashes. Even in my consternation I took note of the delicate skin untouched by rouge, the curly, silken, fine, bobbed hair under the smart little hat—hair touched with warm, bronze glints, the nose a bit uptilted and the exquisite mouth and pointed chin. Under other circumstances, exactly the girl I would have given much to meet; under the present circumstances, it was, well—disconcerting.

"There! There, Miss Walton!" Dr. Consardine's voice was benignly soothing. "Your brother is all right now!"

"Now, Eve, don't fuss any more. The doctor found him just as I told you he would."

It was a third voice, that of the other occupant of the corner seat. He was a man of about my own age, exceedingly well dressed, the face rather thin and tanned, a touch of dissipation about his eyes and mouth—rich, an idler, and not much given to denying his appetites, so ran my rapid analysis.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" he asked me, and added, somewhat gruffly: "Devil of a chase you've given us, this time."

"Now, Walter," the girl rebuked him, "what matter, so he is safe!"

I disengaged the girl's arms and looked at the three of them. Outwardly they were exactly what they purported to be—an earnest, experienced, expensive specialist anxious about a recalcitrant patient with a defective mentality; a sweet, worried sister almost overcome with glad relief that her mind-sick, runaway brother had been found; a trusted friend, perhaps a fiancé, a bit put out, but still sixteen carat faithful and devoted, and so glad that his sweetheart's worry was over, that he was ready to hand me a wallop if I began to misbehave again.

So convincing were they that for one insane moment I doubted my own identity. Was I, after all, Jim Kirkham? Maybe I'd only read about him! My mind rocked with the possibility that I might be this Henry Walton whose wits had been scrambled by some accident in France.

It was with distinct effort that I banished the idea. This couple had, of course, been planted in the station, waiting for me to appear. But in the name of all the far-seeing devils, how could it have been foretold that I would appear at that very station at that very time?

And suddenly one of Consardine's curious phrases returned to me:

"A mind greater than all to plan for all of them; a will greater than all their wills—"

Cobwebs seemed to be dropping around me, cobwebs whose multitudinous strands were held by one master hand, and pulling me, pulling me—irresistibly. Where—and to what?

I TURNED and faced the marines. They were staring at us with absorbed interest. The lieutenant was on his feet, and now he came toward us.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" he asked Consardine, but his eyes were on the girl and filled with admiration. And at that moment I knew that I could expect no help from him or his men. Nevertheless, I answered.

"You can," I said. "My name is James Kirkham. I live at the Discoverers' Club. I don't expect you to believe me, but these people are kidnaping me—"

"Oh, Harry, Harry!" murmured the girl and touched her eyes with a foolish little square of lace.

"All that I ask you to do," I went on, "is to call up the Discoverers' Club when you leave this car. Ask for Lars Thorwaldsen, tell him what you have seen and say I told you that the man at the club who calls himself James Kirkham is an impostor. Will you do that?"

"Will you come with me a moment, lieutenant?" asked Consardine. He spoke to the man who had called the girl Eve: "Watch, Walter—look after Harry—"

He touched the lieutenant's arm and they walked to the front of the car.

"Sit down, Harry, old man," urged Walter.

"Please, dear," said the girl. A hand of each of them on my arms, they pressed me into a seat.

I made no resistance. A certain grim wonder had come to me. I watched Consardine and the lieutenant carry on a whispered conversation to which the latter's leathernecks lent eager ears. I know the story Consardine was telling, for I saw the officer's face soften, and he and his men glanced at me pityingly; at the girl compassionately. The lieutenant asked some questions, Consardine nodded acquiescence and the pair walked back.

"Old man," the lieutenant spoke to me soothingly, "of course, I'll do what you ask. We get off at the bridge and I'll go to the first telephone. Discoverers' Club, you said?"

It would have been wonderful if I had not known that he thought he was humoring a lunatic.

I nodded wearily.

"'Tell it to the marines,'" I quoted. "The man who said that knew what he was talking about. Invincible but dumb. Of course you'll *not* do it. But if a spark of intelligence should miraculously light up your mind tonight or even tomorrow, please phone as I asked."

"Oh, Harry! Please be quiet!" implored the girl. She turned her eyes, eloquent with gratitude to the lieutenant. "I'm sure the lieutenant will do exactly as he has promised."

"Indeed I will," he assured me—and half winked at her.

I laughed outright, I couldn't help it. No heart of any marine I had ever met, officer or otherwise, could have withstood that look of Eve's—so appealing, so grateful, so wistfully—appreciative.

"All right, lieutenant," I said. "I don't blame you a bit. I bet myself I couldn't be kidnaped under a New York cop's eye at a subway entrance. But I lost. Then I bet myself I couldn't be kidnaped in a subway train. And again I lost. Nevertheless, if you should get wondering whether I'm crazy or not, take a chance, lieutenant, and call up the club."

"Oh, brother," breathed Eve, and wept once more.

I sank back into my seat, waiting another opportunity. The girl kept her hand on mine, her eyes intermittently on the leatherneck lieutenant. Consardine had seated himself at my right. Walter sat at Eve's side.

At Brooklyn Bridge the marines got out, with many backward looks at us. I saluted the lieutenant sardonically; the girl sent him a beautifully grateful smile. If anything else had been needed to make him forget my appeal it was that.

QUITE a crowd piled on the car at the bridge. I watched them hopefully as they stampeded into the seats. The hopefulness faded steadily as I studied their faces. Sadly I realized that old Commodore Vanderbilt had been all wrong when he had said: "The public be damned." What he ought to have said was: "The public be dumb."

There was a delegation of a half dozen on their way home to the Bronx, a belated stenographer who at once began operations with a lipstick, an Italian woman with four restless children, a dignified old gentleman who viewed their movements with suspicion, a rather pleasant appearing man of early middle age with a woman who might have been a schoolteacher, a laborer, three possible clerks, and a scattering dozen of assorted morons. The typical subway train congregation.

There was no use in making an appeal to these people. My three guardians were too far ahead of them in resourcefulness. They could make it abortive before I was half finished. But I might drop that suggestion of calling up the club. Someone, I argued, might have his curiosity sufficiently developed to risk a phone call. I fixed my gaze on the dignified old gentleman—he seemed the type who possibly would not be able to rest until he had found out what it was all about.

And just as I was opening my mouth to speak to him, the girl patted my hand and leaned across me to the man in the Inverness.

"Doctor," her voice was very clear and of a carrying quality that made it audible throughout the car. "Doctor, Harry seems so much better. Shall I give him—you know what?"

"An excellent idea, Miss Walton," he answered. "Give it to him."

The girl reached under her long sport coat and brought out a small bundle.

"Here, Harry," she handed it to me. "Here is your little playmate—who's been so lonely without you."

Automatically I took the bundle and tore it open.

Into my hands dropped out a dirty, hideous old rag-doll!

As I looked at it, stupefied, there came to me complete perception of the truly devilish cunning of those who had me in their trap. At the girl's clear voice, all the car had centered their attention upon us. The very farciality of that doll had a touch of terror in it.

I saw the dignified old gentleman staring at me unbelievingly over his spectacles, saw Consardine catch his eye and tap his forehead significantly—and so did every one else see him.

I realized that I was on my feet, clutching the doll as though I feared it was to be taken from me.

"Hell!" I swore, and lifted it to dash it to the floor.

And suddenly I knew that any further resistance, any further struggle, was useless.

The game was rigged against me all the way through the deck. For the moment I might as well throw down my hand. I was going, as Consardine had told me, where the "greater intellect and will" pleased, whether it pleased me or not. Also I was going when it pleased.

And that was now.

Well, they had played with me long enough. I would throw my hand down, but as I sat back I would have a little diversion myself.

I dropped into my seat, sticking the doll in my upper pocket where its head protruded grotesquely. The dignified old gentleman was making commiserating clucking noises and shaking his head understandingly at Consardine. One of the Italian children pointed to the doll and whined,

"Gimme."

I took the girl's hand in both of mine.

"Eve, darling," I said, as distinctly as she had spoken. "You know I ran away because I don't like Walter there."

I put my arm around her waist and with mordant delight felt her shrink from me.

"Walter," I leaned over her. "No man like you just out of prison for what was, God knows, a justly deserved sentence, is worthy of my Eve. No matter how crazy I may be, surely you know that is true."

The old gentleman stopped his annoying clucking and looked startled. The rest of the car turned its attention, like him, to Walter. I had the satisfaction of seeing a slow flush creep up his cheeks.

"Dr. Consardine," I turned to him, "as a medical man, you are familiar with the stigmata, I mean the marks, of the born criminal. Look at Walter. The eyes small and too close together, the mouth's hardness deplorably softened by certain appetites, the undeveloped lobes of the ears. If I ought not to be running loose—how much less ought he to be, doctor?"

Every eye in the car was taking in each point as I called attention to it. And each happened to be a little true. The flush on Walter's face deepened to a brick red. Consardine looked at me, imperturbably.

"No," I went on, "not at all the man for you, Eve."

I gripped the girl closer. I drew her tightly to me. I was beginning to enjoy myself—and she was marvelously pretty.

"Eve!" I exclaimed. "All this time I've been away from you—and you haven't even kissed me!"

I lifted her chin and—well, I kissed her. Kissed her properly and in no brotherly manner. I heard Walter cursing under his breath. How Consardine was taking it I could not tell. Indeed, I did not care—Eve's mouth was very sweet.

I kissed her again and again—and the girl's face which at the first of my kisses had gone all rosy red, turned white. She did not resist, but between kisses I heard her whisper:

"You'll pay for this! Oh, but you'll pay!"

I laughed and released her. I did not care now. For an idea had come to me that this girl who had helped so well in my capture was the only girl whose kisses would hereafter mean anything to me.

And that I was going to go with Dr. Consardine wherever he wanted to take me—as long as she went with me.

"Harry," his voice broke my thought, "come along. Here is our station."

The train was slowing up for the Fourteenth Street stop. Consardine arose. His eyes signaled the girl. Her own eyes downcast, she took my hand. Her hand was like ice. I got up, still laughing. Consardine at my other side, Walter guarding the rear, I walked out upon the platform and up the steps to the street.

Once I looked behind me into Walter's face, and my heart warmed at the murder in it.

It had been touché for me with two of them at any rate—and at their own game.

A chauffeur in livery stood at the top of the steps. He gave me a quick, curious glance and saluted Consardine.

"This way—Kirkham!" said the latter curtly.

So I was Kirkham again! And what did that mean?

A powerful car stood at the curb. Consardine gestured. Eve's hand firmly clasped in mine, I entered, drawing her after me. Walter had gone ahead of us. Consardine followed. The chauffeur closed the door. I saw another liveried figure on the driver's seat. The car started.

Consardine touched a lever and down came the curtains, closeting us in semi-darkness.

And as he did so, the girl, Eve, wrenched her hand from mine, struck me a stinging blow across the mouth and, huddling down in her corner, began silently to weep.

CHAPTER IV

SATAN RULES THE WORLD

THE car sped smoothly over to Fifth Avenue and turned north. Consardine touched another lever and a curtain dropped between me and the driving seat.

There was a hidden bulb that shed a dim glow. By it I saw that the girl had recovered her poise. She sat regarding the tips of her shapely, narrow shoes. Walter drew out a cigarette case. I followed suit.

"You do not mind, Eve?" I asked solicitously.

She neither looked at me nor answered. Consardine was apparently lost in thought. Walter stared icily over my head. I lighted my cigarette and concentrated upon our course. My watch registered a quarter to ten.

The tightly shaded windows gave no glimpse of our surroundings. By the traffic stops I knew we were still on the avenue. Then the car began a series of turns and twists as though it were being driven along side streets. Once it seemed to make a complete circle. I lost all sense of direction, which, I reflected, was undoubtedly what was intended.

At ten fifteen the car began to go at greatly increased speed and I judged we were out of heavy traffic. Soon a cooler, fresher air came through the ventilators. We might be either in Westchester or Long Island. I could not tell

It was precisely eleven twenty when the car came to a stop. After a short pause it went on again. I heard from behind us the clang of heavy metal gates. For perhaps ten minutes more we rolled on swiftly and then halted again. Consardine awoke from his reverie and snapped up the curtains. The chauffeur opened the door. Eve dropped out, and after her Walter.

"Well, here we are, Mr. Kirkham," said Consardine affably. He might have been a pleased host bringing home a thrice-welcome guest instead of a man he had abducted by wile and falsehood.

I jumped out. Under the moon, grown storm-promising and watery as a drunkard's eye, I saw an immense building that was like some château transplanted from the Loire. Lights gleamed brilliantly here and there in wings and turrets. Through its doors were passing the girl and Walter. I glanced around me. There were no lights visible anywhere except those of the Château. I had the impression of remoteness and of wide tree-filled spaces hemming the place in and guarding its isolation.

Consardine took my arm and we passed over the threshold. On each side stood two tall footmen and as I went by them I perceived that they were Arabs, extraordinarily powerful. But when I had got within the great hall I stopped short with an involuntary exclamation of admiration.

It was as though the choicest treasures of medieval France had been skimmed of their best and concentrated here. The long galleries, a third of the way up to the high vaulted ceiling, were exquisite Gothic; arrasses and tapestries whose equals few museums could show hung from them, and the shields and arms were those of conquering kings.

Consardine gave me no time to study them. He touched my arm and I saw beside me an impeccable English valet.

"Thomas will look after you now," said Consardine. "See you later, Kirkham."

"This way, sir, if you please," said the valet, and led me into a miniature chapel at the side of the hall. He pressed against its fretted back. It slid away and we entered a small elevator. When it stopped another panel slipped aside. I stepped out into a bedroom furnished, in its own fashion, with the same astonishing richness as the great hall. Behind heavy curtains was a bathroom.

Upon the bed lay dress trousers, shirt, cravat, and so on. In a few minutes I was washed, freshly shaved, and in evening clothes. They fitted me perfectly. As the valet opened a closet door a coat hanging there drew my sharp attention. I peered in.

Hanging within that closet was the exact duplicate of every garment that made up my wardrobe at the club. Yes, there they were, and as I looked into the pockets for the tailor's labels I saw written on them my own name.

I had an idea that the valet, watching me covertly, was waiting for some expression of surprise. If so he was disappointed. My capacity for surprise was numb.

"And now where do I go?" I asked.

For answer he slid the panel aside and stood waiting for me to enter the lift. When it stopped I expected, of course, to step out into the great hall. Instead of that the opening panel revealed a small anteroom, oak-paneled, bare, and with a door of darker oak set in its side. Here was another tall Arab, evidently awaiting me, for the valet bowed me out of the elevator and reëntering, disappeared.

The Arab salaamed. Opening the door, he salaamed again. I walked over its threshold. A clock began to chime midnight.

"Welcome, James Kirkham! You are punctual to the minute," said some one.

THE voice was strangely resonant and musical, with a curious organ quality. The speaker sat at the head of a long table where places were laid for three. That much I saw before I looked into his eyes, and then for a time could see nothing else.

For those eyes were of the deepest sapphire blue and they were the *alivest* eyes I had ever beheld. They were large, slightly oblique, and they sparkled as though the very spring of life was bubbling up behind them. Gemlike they were in color, and gemlike were they in their hardness. They were lashless, and as unwinking as a bird's—or a snake's.

It was with distinct effort that I tore my gaze from them and took note of the face in which they were set. The head above them was inordinately large, high and broad and totally bald. It was an astonishing hemisphere whose capacity must have been double that of the average.

The ears were long and narrow and distinctly pointed at the tips. The nose was heavy and beaked, the chin round but massive. The lips were full, and as classically cut and immobile as that of some antique Greek statue. The whole, huge, round face was of marble pallor, and it was unwrinkled, unlined, and expressionless. The only thing alive about it were the eyes, and alive indeed they were—uncannily, terrifyingly so.

His body, what I could see of it, was unusually large, the enormous barrel of the chest indicating tremendous vitality.

Even at first one sensed the abnormal and the radiation of inhuman power.

"Be seated, James Kirkham," the sonorous voice rolled out again. A butler emerged from the shadows at his back and drew out for me the chair at his left side.

I bowed to this amazing host of mine and seated myself silently.

"You must be hungry after your ride," he said. "It was good of you, James Kirkham, to humor this whim of mine."

I looked at him sharply, but could detect no sign of mockery.

"I am indebted to you, sir," I answered as urbanely, "for an unusually entertaining journey. And as for humoring what you are pleased to call your whim, how, sir, could I have done otherwise when you sent messengers so—ah—eloquent?"

"Ah, yes," he nodded. "Dr. Consardine is indeed a singularly persuasive person. He will join us presently. But drink—eat."

The butler poured champagne. I lifted my glass and paused, staring at it with delight. It was a goblet of rock crystal, exquisitely cut, extremely ancient, I judged—a jewel and priceless.

"Yes," said my host, as though I had spoken. "Truly one of a rare set. They were the drinking glasses of the Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid When I drink from them I seem to see him surrounded by his beloved cup-companions amid the glories of his court in old Bagdad. All the gorgeous panorama of the Arabian Nights spreads out before me. They were preserved for me," he went on, thoughtfully, "by the late Sultan Abdul Hamid. At least they were his until I felt the desire to possess them."

"You must have exercised great persuasion, sir, to have made the sultan part from them," I murmured.

"As you have remarked, James Kirkham, my messengers are—eloquent."

I took a sip of the wine, and could not for the life of me hide my pleasure.

"Yes," intoned my strange host, "a rare

vintage. It was intended for the exclusive use of King Alfonso of Spain. But again my messengers were eloquent. When I drink it my admiration for its excellencies is shadowed only by my sympathy for Alfonso in his deprivation."

I drank that wine worshipfully. I attacked with relish a delicious cold bird. My eye was caught by the lines of a golden compote set with precious stones. So exquisite was it that I half arose to examine it more closely.

"Benvenuto Cellini made it," observed my host. "It is one of his masterpieces. Italy kept it for me through the centuries."

"But Italy would never voluntarily have let a thing like that go!" I exclaimed.

"No, quite involuntarily, I assure you," he answered blandly.

I BEGAN to glance about the dimly-lighted room and realized that here, like the great hall, was another amazing treasure chamber. If half of what my eye took in was genuine, the contents of that room alone were worth millions. But they could not be—not even an American billionaire could have gathered such things.

"But they are genuine," again he read my thoughts. "I am a connoisseur indeed—the greatest in the world. Not alone of paintings, but of gems and wines and other masterpieces of man's genius. I am a connoisseur of men and women. A collector of what, loosely, are called souls. That is why, James Kirkham, you are here!"

The butler filled the goblets and placed another bottle in the iced pail beside me; he put liqueurs and cigars upon the table, and then, as though at some signal, he withdrew. He disappeared, I noted with interest, through still another wall panel that masked one of the hidden lifts. I saw that he was a Chinese.

"Manchu," observed my host. "Of princely rank. Yet he thinks to be my servant the greater honor."

I nodded casually, as though the matter were commonplace, and butlers who were Manchu princes, wine lifted from King Alfonso, goblets of an Arabian Nights' Caliph, and Cellini compotes, were everyday affairs. I realized that the game which had begun in Battery Park a few hours before had reached its second stage, and I was determined to maintain my best poker face.

"You please me, James Kirkham," the voice was totally devoid of expression, the lips scarcely moved as it rolled forth. "You are thinking: I am a prisoner, my place in the outer world is being filled by a double whom even my closest friends do not suspect; this man speaking is a monster, ruthless and consciousless, a passionless intellect which could—and would—blow me out, if he desired, as carelessly as he would blow out a candle flame! In all that, James Kirkham, you are right."

He paused. I found it better not to look into those jewel-bright blue eyes. I lighted a cigarette and nodded, fixing my attention on the glowing tip.

"Yes, you are right," he went on. "Yet you ask no questions and make no appeals. Your voice and hands are steady, your eyes untroubled. But back of all your brain is keenly alert, poised on tip-toe to seize some advantage.

"You are feeling out for danger with the invisible antennæ of your nerves, like any jungle man. Every sense is alive to catch some break in the net you feel around you. There is a touch of terror upon you. Yet outwardly you show no slightest sign of all this—only *I* could detect it. You please me greatly, James Kirkham. Yours is the true gambler's soul!"

He paused again, studying me over the rim of his goblet. I forced myself to meet his gaze and smile.

"You are now thirty-five," he continued. "I have watched you for ten years. I was first attracted to you by your work in the French Espionage Service during the second year of the war."

My fingers stiffened involuntarily about my glass. None, I had thought, had known of that work except the chief and myself.

"It happened that you ran counter to no plans of mine," the toneless voice rolled on. "So you—lived. You next came to my

notice when you undertook to recover the Spiradoff emeralds from the Bolsheviki in Moscow. You ingeniously left them with the imitations and escaped with the originals. I did not care for them, I have much finer ones. So I allowed you to return them to those who had commissioned you.

"But the audacity of your plan and the cool courage with which you carried it out entertained me greatly. I like to be entertained, James Kirkham. Your indifferent acceptance of the wholly inadequate reward showed that it had been the adventure which had been the primal appeal. It had been the game and not the gain. You were, as I thought, a true gambler."

AND now, despite myself, I could not keep astonishment from my face. The Spiradoff affair had been carried out in absolute secrecy. I had insisted upon none except the owner knowing how the jewels had been recovered. They had been resold for their value as gems, and not with their histories attached. Not even the Bolsheviks had as yet discovered the substitution, I believed, and would not until they tried finally to sell them. Yet this man knew!

"It was then I decided I would—collect—you," he said. "But the time was not fully ripe. I would let you run awhile. You went to China for Rockbilt, on the strength of a filmy legend. And you found the tomb wherein, true enough, the jade plaques of that legend lay on the moldering breast of old Prince Su-kantse.

"You took them and were captured by the bandit Kin-Wang. You found the joint in that cunning thief's armor. You saw, and took the one chance to escape with your loot. Gambler he was, and you knew it. And there in his tent you played him for the plaques with two years' slavery to him as your forfeit if you lost.

"The idea of having you as a willing slave amused him. Besides, he recognized of what value your brain and courage would be to him. So he made the bargain. You detected the cards he had cunningly nicked before the game had gone far. I approve the dexterity and skill with which you promptly nicked others in the identical fashion. Kin-Wang was confused. Luck was with you. You won."

I half arose, staring at him, baffled and fascinated.

"I do not wish to mystify you further." He waved me back into my seat. "Kin-Wang is sometimes useful to me. I have many men in many lands who do my bidding, James Kirkham. Had you lost, Kin-Wang would have sent me the plaques, and he would have locked after you more carefully than his own head. Because he knew that at any time I might demand you!"

I leaned back with a sigh, the feeling that some inexorable trap had closed upon me, oppressive.

"Afterward"—his eyes never left me—"afterward I tested you again. Twice did my messengers try to take the plaques from you. Purposely, in neither of those efforts had I planned for sure success. Else you would have lost them. I left in each instance a loophole that would enable you to escape had you the wit to see it. You had the wit—and again I was vastly entertained, and pleased.

"And now"—he leaned forward a trifle "we come to tonight. You had acquired a comfortable sum out of the jades. But there seemed to be a waning interest in the game you know so well. You cast your eyes upon another—the fool's gamble, the stock market. It did not fit in with my plans to let you win at that.

"I knew what you had bought. I manipulated. I stripped you, dollar by dollar, leisurely. You are thinking that the method I took was more adapted to the wrecking of some great financier than the possessor of a few thousands. Not so. If your thousands had been millions the end would have been the same. That was the lesson I wished to drive home when the time came. Have you learned the lesson?"

I repressed with difficulty a gust of anger. "I hear you," I answered curtly.

"Heed!" he whispered.

"So, too," he went on, "it was tonight. I could have had you caught up bodily

and carried here, beaten or drugged, bound and gagged. Such methods are those of the thug, the unimaginative savage in our midst. You could have had no respect for the mind behind such crude tactics. Nor would I have been entertained.

"No, the constant surveillance which at last forced you out into the open, your double now enjoying himself at your club —a splendid actor, by the way, who studied you for weeks—in fact all your experiences were devised to demonstrate to you the extraordinary character of the organization to which you now have been called.

"And I say again that your conduct has pleased me. You could have fought Consardine. Had you done so you would have shown yourself as devoid of imagination as any thug. You would have come here just the same, but I would have been disappointed. And I was greatly diverted by your attitude toward Walter and Eve—a girl whom I have destined for a great work and whom I am now training for it.

"You have wondered how they came to be in that particular subway station. There were other couples at South Ferry, the elevated station, and at all approaches to the Battery within five minutes after you had seated yourself there. I tell you that you had not one chance of escape. Nothing that you could have done that had not been anticipated and prepared for. Not all the police in New York could have held you back from me tonight.

"Because, James Kirkham, *I* had willed your coming!"

I had listened to this astonishing mixture of subtle flattery, threat, and colossal boasting with ever increasing amazement. I stood back from the table.

"Who are you?" I asked directly. "And what do you want of me?"

The weird blue eyes blazed.

"Since everything upon this earth toward which I direct my will does as that will dictates," he answered slowly, "you may call me—Satan! And what I offer you is a chance to rule this world with me—at a price, of course!"

CHAPTER V

THE SEVEN FOOTSTEPS OF BUDDHA

THE two sentences tingled in my brain as though charged with electricity. Absurd as they might have sounded under any other circumstances, *here* they were as far removed from absurdity as anything I have ever known.

Those lashless, intensely alive blue eyes in the immobile face were satanic. I had long sensed the diabolic touch in every experience I had undergone that night. In the stillness of the huge body, in the strangeness of the organ pipe voice that welled, expressionless, from the almost still lips, was something diabolic too—as though the body were but an automaton in which dwelt some infernal spirit, some alien being that made itself manifest through eyes and voice only.

That my host was the exact opposite of the long, lank, dark *Mephisto* of opera, play, and story made him only the more terrifying. And it has long been my experience that fat men are capable of far greater deviltries than thin men.

No, this man who bade me call him Satan had nothing of the absurd about him. I acknowledged to myself that he was dreadful.

A bell rang, a mellow note. A light pulsed on a wall, a panel slid aside, and Consardine stepped into the room. Vaguely I noted that the panel was a different one than that through which the Manchu butler had gone. At the same time I recalled, aimlessly it seemed, that I had seen no stairway leading up from the great hall. And on the heels of that was recollection that I had noticed neither windows nor doors in the bedroom to which I had been conducted by the valet. The thoughts came and went without my mind then taking in their significance.

I arose, returning Consardine's bow. He seated himself without salutation or ceremony at Satan's right.

"I have been telling James Kirkham how entertaining I have found him," said my host.

"And I," smiled Consardine. "But I am afraid my companions did not. Cobham was quite upset. That was really cruel of you, Kirkham. Vanity is one of Cobham's besetting sins."

So Walter's name was Cobham. What was Eve's, I wondered?

"Your stratagem of the rag doll was demoralizing," I said. "I thought I was rather restrained in my observations upon Mr. Cobham. There was so much more opportunity, you know. And, after all, so much provocation."

"The rag doll was a diverting idea," observed Satan. "And effective."

"Diabolically so." I spoke to Consardine. "But I find that was to have been expected. Just before you entered I discovered that I had been dining with Satan."

"Ah, yes," said Consardine coolly. "And you are no doubt expecting me to produce a lancet and open a vein in your wrist while Satan puts in front of you a document written in brimstone and orders you to sign away your soul in your blood!"

"I am expecting no such childish thing," I replied with some show of indignation.

Satan chuckled; his face did not move, but his eyes danced.

"Obsolete methods," he said. "I gave them up after my experiences with the late Dr. Faustus."

"Perhaps," Consardine addressed me blandly, "you think I may be the late Dr. Faustus. No, no; or if so, Kirkham"—he looked at me slyly—"Eve is not Marguerite."

"Let us say, not *your* Marguerite," amended Satan.

I felt the blood rush up into my face. And again Satan chuckled. They were playing with me, these two. Yet under that play the sinister note persisted, not to be mistaken. I felt uncomfortably like a mouse between a pair of cats. I had a sudden vision of the girl as just another helpless mouse.

"No"—it was Satan's sonorous voice—"no, I have become more modern. I still buy souls, it is true. Or take them. But I am not so rigorous in my terms as of old. I now also lease souls for certain periods. I pay well for such leases, James Kirkham."

"Is it not time that you ceased treating me like a child?" I asked coldly. "I admit all that you have said of me. I admit I am gambler to the core. I believe all that you have said of yourself. I admit that you are Satan. Very well. What then?"

THERE was a slight pause. Consardine lighted a cigar, poured himself some brandy and pushed aside a candle that stood between us, so, I thought that he could have a clearer view of my face. Satan for the first time turned his eyes away from me, looking over my head. I had come to the third stage of this mysterious game.

"Did you ever hear the legend of the seven shining footsteps of Buddha?" he asked me.

I shook my head.

"It was that which made me change my ancient methods of snaring souls," he said gravely. "Since it caused the beginning of a new infernal epoch, the legend is important. But it is important to you for other reasons as well. So listen.

"When the Lord Buddha, Gautama, the Enlightened One," he intoned, "was about to be born, he was seen gleaming like a jewel of living light in his mother's womb. So filled with light was he that he made of her body a lantern, himself the holy flame."

For the first time there was an expression in the voice, a touch of sardonic unctuousness.

"And when the time came for him to be delivered, he stepped forth from his mother's side, which miraculously closed behind him.

"Seven footsteps the infant Buddha took before he halted for the worship of the devis, genii, rishis and all the heavenly hierarchy that had gathered round. Seven shining footsteps they were, seven footsteps that gleamed like stars upon the soft greensward.

"And lo! Even as Buddha was being

worshiped, those shining footsteps of his stirred and moved and marched away, beginning the opening of the paths which later the holy one would traverse. Seven interesting little John the Baptists going before him— Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Satan from unchanged face and motionless lips.

"West went one, and east went one," he continued; "one north, and one south; opening up the paths of deliverance to the whole four quarters of the globe.

"But what of the other three? Ah—alas! Mara, the King of Illusion, had watched with apprehension the advent of Buddha, because the light of Buddha's words would be a light in which only the truth had shadow, and by it would be rendered useless the snares by which mankind, or the most of it, was held in thrall by Mara. If Buddha conquered, Mara would be destroyed.

"The King of Illusion did not take kindly to the idea, since his supreme enjoyment was in wielding power and being entertained. In that," commented Satan, apparently quite seriously, "Mara was much like me. But in intelligence much inferior, because he did not realize that truth, aptly manipulated, creates far better illusions than do lies. However—

"Before those laggard three could get very far away Mara had captured them. And then, by wile and artifice and sorcery, Mara seduced them. He taught them naughtiness, schooled them in delicious deceptions, and he sent them forth to wander!

"What happened? Well, naturally, men and women followed the three. The paths they picked out were so much pleasanter, so much more delectable, so much softer and more fragrant and beautiful than the stony, hard, austere, cold trails broken by the incorruptible four. Who could blame people for following them?

"And besides, superficially, all seven footprints were alike. The difference, of course, was in the ending. Those souls who followed the three deceitful prints were inevitably led back into the very heart of error, the inner lair of illusion, and were lost there; while those who followed the four were freed.

"And more and more followed the naughty prints while Mara waxed joyful. Until it seemed that there would be none left to take the paths of enlightenment. But now Buddha grew angry.

"He sent forth a command, and back to him from the four quarters of the world came hurrying the shining holy quartet. They tracked down the erring three and made them prisoners.

"NOW arose a problem. Since the erring three were of Buddha, they could not be destroyed. They had their rights, inalienable. But so deep had been their defilement by Mara that they could not be cleansed of their wickedness.

"So they were imprisoned for as long as the world shall last. Somewhere near the great temple of Borobudur, in Java, there is a smaller, hidden temple. In it is a throne. To reach that throne, one must climb seven steps. On each of these steps gleams one of Buddha's seven baby footprints. Each looks precisely like the other —but oh, how different they are! Four are the holy ones, guarding the wicked three. The temple is secret, the way to it beset with deadly perils. He who lives through them and enters that temple may climb to the throne.

"But—as he climbs he must set his foot on five of those shining prints!

"Now, after he had done this, hear what must befall. If of those five steps he has taken he has set his feet upon the three naughty prints, behold, when he reaches the throne, all of earthly desire, all that the King of Illusion can give him, is his for the wishing. To the enslavement and possible destruction of his soul, naturally. But if, of the five, three have been the holy prints, then is he freed of all earthly desire, free of all illusion, free of the wheel, a bearer of the light, a vessel of wisdom, his soul one with the pure one, eternally.

"Saint or sinner—if he steps on the three unholy footprints, all worldly illusions are his, willy-nilly! And sinner or saint—if he

treads on three of the holy footprints, he is freed of an illusion, a blessed soul forever in Nirvana!"

"Poor devil!" murmured Consardine.

"Such is the legend." Satan turned his gaze upon me again. "Now I never tried to collect those interesting footprints. They could have served no purpose of mine. I have no desire to turn sinners into saints, for one thing. But they gave me the most entertaining idea I have had for—shall I say centuries?

"Life, James Kirkham, is one long gamble between the two inexorable gambles of birth and death. All men and all women are gamblers, although most are very poor ones. All men and all women have at least one desire during their lives for which they would willingly stake their souls, and often even their lives. But life is such a crude game, haphazardly directed—if directed at all—and with such confusing, conflicting, contradictory and tawdry rules.

"Very well. I would improve the game for a chosen few, gamble with them for their great desire, and for my own entertainment would use as my model these seven footsteps of Buddha.

"And now, James Kirkham, listen intently, for this directly concerns you. I constructed two thrones upon a dais, up to which lead not seven but twenty-one steps. On each third step there shines out a footprint—seven of them in all.

"One of the thrones is lower than the other. Upon that I sit. On the other rests a crown and a scepter.

"Now, then. Three of these footsteps are—unfortunate. Four are fortunate in the aggregate. He who would gamble with me must climb to that throne on which are crown and scepter. In climbing he must place a foot on four, not five, of these seven prints.

"Should those four upon which he steps prove to be the fortunate ones, that man may have every desire satisfied as long as he lives. I am his servant—and his servant is all that vast organization which I have created and which serves me. His my billions, to do with as he pleases. His my masterpieces. His anything that he covets—power, women, rule, anything. What he hates I punish or remove. His the crown and scepter upon that throne higher than mine. It is power over earth! He may have—everything!"

I GLANCED at Consardine. He was nervously bending and unbending a silver knife in his strong fingers, his eyes glittering.

"But if he treads on the others?"

"Ah, that is my end of the gamble! If he treads upon the first of my three—he must do me one service. Whatever I bid him. If he treads on two—he must do my bidding for a year. They are my—minor leases.

"But if he treads on all three"—I felt the blaze of the blue eyes scorch me, heard a muffled groan from Consardine—"if he treads on all my three, then he is mine, body and soul. To kill at once if it is my mood—and in what slow ways I please. To live—if I please, as long as I please, and then to die—again as I please. Mine, body and soul!"

The rolling voice trumpeted, grew dreadful. Satanic enough was he now, with those weird eyes blazing at me as though behind them were flames from that very pit whose master's name he had taken.

"There are a few rules to remember." The voice abruptly regained its calm. "One need not take the whole four steps. You may stop, if you desire, at one. Or two. Or three. You need not take the next step.

"If you take one step, and it is mine, and go no farther, then you do my service, are well paid for it, and after it is done may ascend the steps again.

"So if you go farther and touch the second of my steps. After your year, if you are alive, you again have your chance. And are well paid during that year."

I considered. Power over all the world! Every desire granted. An Aladdin's lamp to rub! Not for a moment did I doubt that this—whatever he was—could do what he promised.

"I will explain the mechanism," he said. "Obviously the relative positions of the seven steps cannot remain the same at each essay. Their combination would be too easy to learn. That combination I leave to chance. Not even I know it. Through that I get the cream of my entertainment.

"I sit upon my throne. I touch a lever that spins a hidden wheel over which roll seven balls, three marked for my steps, four marked for the fortunate ones. As those balls settle into place, they form an electrical contact with the seven footprints. As the balls lie, so lie the prints.

"Where I can see—and others if they are present, but not to be seen by the climber of the steps—is an indicator. As the aspirant sets his foot on the prints this indicates, James Kirkham, whether he has picked one of my three or one of his four.

"And there is one final rule. When you climb you may not look back at that indicator. You must take the next step in ignorance of whether that from which you have come was good for you, or evil. If you do weaken and look behind, you must descend and begin your climb anew."

"But it seems to me that you have the better end of the game," I observed. "Suppose one steps upon a fortunate step and stops—what does he get?"

"Nothing," he answered, "but the chance to take the next. You forget, James Kirkham, that what he stands to win is immeasurably greater than what I win if he loses. Winning, he wins me and all I stand for. Losing, I win only one man—or one woman. Besides, for my limited leases I pay high. And give protection."

I NODDED. As a matter of fact, I was profoundly stirred. Everything that I had experienced had been carefully calculated to set my imagination on fire. I thrilled at the thought of what I might not be able to do with—well, admit he was Satan—and his power at my beck and call. He watched me imperturbably; Consardine understandingly, and with a shadow of pity in his eyes.

"Look here," I said abruptly, "please clear up a few more things. Suppose I refuse to play this game of yours—what happens to me?"

"You will be set back in Battery Park tomorrow," he answered. "Your double will be withdrawn from your club. You will find he has done no harm to your reputation. You may go on your way. But—"

"I thought, sir, there was a but," I murmured.

"But I will be disappointed," he went on quietly. "I do not like to be disappointed. I am afraid your affairs would not prosper. It might even be that I would find you such a constant reproach, such a living reminder of a flaw in my judgment, that—"

"I understand," I interrupted. "The living reminder would strangely cease some day to be a reminder—living."

He did not speak; but surely I read the answer in his eyes.

"And what is to prevent me from taking your challenge," I asked again, "going partly through with it, enough to get away from here, and then—ah—"

"Betray me?" Again the chuckle came through the motionless lips. "Your efforts would come to nothing. And as for you—better for you, James Kirkham, had you remained unborn. I, Satan, tell you so!"

The blue eyes scorched, about him in his chair seemed to grow a shadow, enveloping him. From him emanated something diabolic, something that gripped my throat and checked the very pulse of my heart.

"I, Satan, tell you so!" he repeated.

There was a little pause in which I strove to regain my badly shaken poise.

Again the bell sounded.

"It is time," said Consardine.

But I noticed that he had paled, knew my own face was white.

"It happens"—the organlike voice was calm again—"it happens that you have an opportunity to see what becomes of those who try to thwart me. I will ask you to excuse certain precautions which it will be necessary to take. You will not be harmed. Only it is essential that you remain silent

and motionless, and that none read your face while you see what you are going to see."

Consardine arose; I followed him. The man who called himself Satan lifted himself from his chair. Huge I had guessed him to be, but I was unprepared for the giant that he was. I am all of six feet, and he towered over me a full twelve inches.

Involuntarily I looked at his feet.

"Ah," he said suavely—"you are looking for my cloven hoof! Come, you are about to see it."

He touched the wall. A panel slipped away, revealing a wide corridor, not long, and windowless and doorless. He leading, Consardine behind me, Satan walked a few yards and pressed against the wainscoting. It slid back soundlessly. He stepped through.

I walked after him and halted, staring blankly into one of the most singular rooms, chambers—no, temple is the only word that its size and character deserve to describe it. I stood staring, I repeat, into one of the most singular temples that probably man's eyes had ever looked upon.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Our Daily Miracle

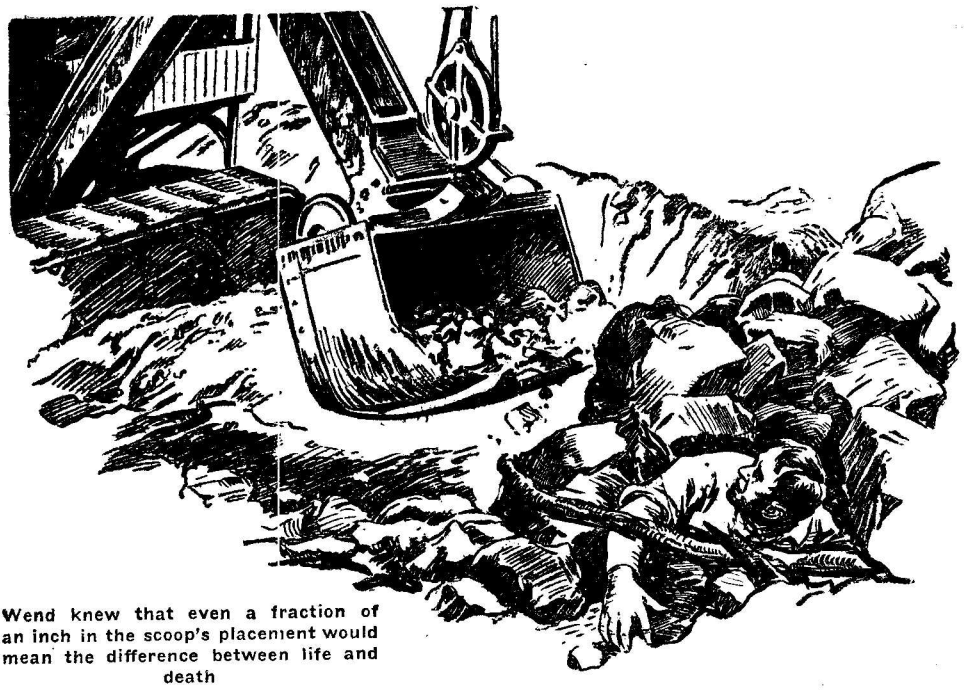
OURS is an uneasy time, for man finds it difficult to place trust in his neighbor, when that neighbor probably wears a uniform and carries a gun. So, to those who have lost faith in your fellow man, we suggest that you put your faith in miracles. They can still happen.

Down in Texas not long ago three men were working on an oil-refinery tank. A sudden explosion threw their ladder from the tank, and they were marooned there—with flames stretching toward them from the burning oil. Now mark this, you of little faith! A second tank exploded, and while the trapped men watched dazedly, their ladder returned on the wings of the blast. It settled firmly against the tank, and they climbed down to safety. . . .

The second miracle happened in New York City. A car crossing a viaduct above railroad tracks crashed through the railing and fell just as a train was passing. The automobile struck the top of the moving train with all four wheels—bounced—and landed back on the viaduct again. The two passengers were practically uninjured.

Miracle is a large word, but what else would you call the affairs of the boomerang ladder and the bounding automobile?

—*Peter Kelly*



Wend knew that even a fraction of an inch in the scoop's placement would mean the difference between life and death

Shovel Skinner

Dutch was small; he had blind spots and a gnawing pain in his stomach. But before he died he had to conquer that great iron beast

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH
Author of "Tanks Can't Fly"

THAT promise was due to ride Wend Brady like the Old Man of the Sea: "Dutch, I'll teach you to run a shovel or kill you tryin'."

It was the sort of promise a man makes on impulse. But however he made his promises, Wend Brady always kept them. He was the best dragline or shovel skinner in the construction game but that wasn't what men thought of when they spoke of the big rawboned American. They said that when Wend Brady promised anything it was as good as done.

It happened on the Kramper Dam construction in the late fall. Wend was minus an oiler for old Sadie, the big four-yard Huckarus shovel that he had been operating for Art Sander's company for the last three years.

"What's the matter, Brady?" Sanders inquired that evening. "Smaltz comes in lookin' like he's been through the Farr. Called you a murderin' Communist. Wanted his time."

"You give it to him?"

"Sure. But where do I get another oiler?"

Brady dusted sand from his plug of tobacco and sank strong teeth into the corner. "You send me anybody, Chief," he said, stowing the chew. "Only when I want oil on the boom-point sheave I don't

want my oiler up there makin' a speech. Him tellin' me the American government's goin' to be takin' orders from some lousy dictator, come next Spring! I want an oiler not an orator."

So he got little Dutch, because Dutch was the first man around next morning looking for work who claimed any experience as a shovel oiler.

Little Dutch wasn't young and he wasn't old. Time seemed to have stopped for him after he'd passed twenty-five. He had a round, chubby face and faded blue eyes that were steady as rock. His shoulders were almost as wide as he was tall but he wasn't very tall; he had to tilt his head way back talking with big Wend Brady.

"Who'd you work for last?" Brady wanted to know.

"Pat Strode. Dragline," Dutch said promptly. "He run me off the job."

"How come?"

"Clevis pulled on the hoist line. He said I didn't secure it right."

Brady frowned. Little things can cause big accidents around a shovel. "Well, did you?" he demanded.

Doubt came into the round face, but the eyes held steady. "I thought I did," Dutch said. "I . . ."

"Okay," Brady interrupted. He knew Pat Strode of old, knew that he was short in temper. "We got two-three weeks here in the pit, then we take old Sadie down on that coffer dam fill. And there's plenty yardage up here to move."

BY THE end of that first week Brady thought little Dutch would do all right. By the second week he was ready to swear that Dutch was the best oiler he'd ever had. Time pressed him. He had told Sanders he'd have the gravel pit stripped and the trap-cut finished in three weeks, and what he said he'd do he did. Only to do it he had to work at top speed. It is at such times that a good oiler shows his worth.

As for little Dutch, his approval of Wend Brady was almost instant.

And well it might be, for Brady could operate a shovel. He handled it with a steady, constant drive that was beautiful to watch. That huge dipper might be his own hand, the sticks his own forearm, so unerringly did it rack into the gravel bank, raise, swing and spill its four cubic yards into a waiting truck. And, pulling her out of the bank, he started the swing with such even use of power that the governor might as well been off the Diesel. There was no stalling, no hesitation in the steady back and forth work of the boom.

At spare moments little Dutch stood a little distance from the shovel, admiring Brady's work. He would watch the sticks racked out to within an inch of the "greenhorn block" on a long reach and shake his head and look to see if the truck skinners got the beauty of all this.

In fact, that second week, little Dutch had a fight over that very thing. He wasn't a heavy drinker Somehow even one straight whisky would tie his stomach into knots of agony. But he liked a beer now and then.

It happened in Pete's Long Bar.

He was wedged in between two huskies, his right foot dutifully on the brass rail, which was no brass rail but a length of galvanized iron pipe. "The Chief," he addressed his glass aloud, "he don't need no greenhorn blocks on his sticks. The Chief . . ."

A whisky-roughened voice interrupted him. Dutch recognized one of the truck drivers. "Who you callin' Chief?" the man inquired belligerently. "Art Sanders' chief o' this camp, runt. You talkin' about that dumb shovel skinner of yours?"

Dutch set his glass carefully on the bar. "Dumb! You call Wend Brady dumb!"

"Yeah. So what?" The truckman chuckled. "All them shovel skinners is batty. They get that way ridin' them levers. Hey . . !"

Dutch was a man of action, not words. His right fist swung into the truck driver's short ribs, his left to the face and his short body lunged forward as a battering ram into the man's stomach.

The room of men formed itself in a

familiar pattern, like iron filings around a magnetic field. It wasn't the first fight that had occurred in the Long Bar. Pete, the proprietor, reached under the bar for his sawed-off, leaded billiard cue.

But the fight was over. Dutch stood up, panting, blood oozing from his torn right ear. The truck driver remained sprawled out limp on the barroom floor.

"So Brady ain't Chief, huh?" little Dutch roared. "All right, he ain't Chief, then. He's Chiefer." Dutch raised his voice in absurd challenge. "Brady, he's Chiefer. You fellers hear that?"

They heard and no one there cared to accept the challenge. Dutch wasn't big but they had seen the murderous efficiency of his compact body.

WORD travels fast in a construction camp. At noon hour the next day Wend Brady called little Dutch into the privacy of the shovel house.

He glared down into the chubby, uplifted face. "You thick-headed little monkey," he growled, "I oughta bang you against that drum head. My name's Brady, you hear? An' I'm just a dumb shovel runner. Get that? An' shovel runners're batty or they wouldn't be shovel runners. You hear that?"

There was misery in Dutch's face. "Uh-huh. I get it, Chief."

"You what!"

"I get it, Mr. Brady. I won't do it no more."

Brady's hands dropped despairingly.

Mister Brady was almost as bad as Chief, but for some reason little Dutch had that unbounded respect for a good shovel hand and there was no taking it out of him. Brady got his lunch box from its hook and sat down to consume his three big sandwiches, pie and coffee. Little Dutch crouched on the white service can.

There were two of these cans. The red one contained gasoline for the auxiliary electric light plant, the white one water.

They talked . . . about shovels; about dragline rigs, clamshells, dragshovels, digging angles, cat mountings . . . about things that make up the life of a good shovel man. Dutch's knowledge of these things astonished Brady. He began to wonder.

"You ever run a shovel, Dutch?"

"Me!" Dutch laughed bitterly. "A runt like me run a shovel? You make jokes, Mr. Brady."

"How old are you, Dutch?"

"Forty-one."

"That's not old," Brady told him. "D'you want to run a shovel, Dutch?"

Dutch's face stiffened suddenly. His eyes shifted. "Kind of," he said, tight voiced. "Uh-huh, I always wanted to." Then his eyes met Brady's. He raised his arm. "I'd give that arm, Mr. Brady, to run a shovel." It was a simple statement of fact.

"Well, why not?" Brady asked. He stopped suddenly. "Say, you're not eatin' anything."

Dutch shook his head. "It gives me misery in my stomick, these lunches."

Brady watched little Dutch after that There are ways of telling whether an oiler would make a good shovel man. Dutch had all the earmarks. Brady didn't have to tell him about the shovel placing. He was out with a crowbar and had the larger boulders cleared away, boulders that had rolled too near the cats for Brady to handle with the dipper unless he wasted time in backing away from them.

And in cold weather a cat tread can splinter itself over a rock no larger than a man's head. He handled the outside cat clutch bar like an old timer and he kept the house as clean as a ship's bridge. Not a bearing or gear ever escaped his oil can and grease gun. He was a good oiler.

And if ever a man wanted to run a shovel it was little Dutch.

They were through with the gravel pit in eighteen days.

"And you got that new oiler to thank for a lot of that time saved," Wend Brady told Sanders that night. "He knows his business."

Art Sanders pulled clouds of smoke from his old pipe. He kicked one of the office chairs around for Brady. "I was going to

speak about him," he said. "I'll be needing a good man to boss that excavation work, Brady. In fact, I'll be needing you. How about this Dutch? Can you break him in on that shovel within the next six months?"

Brady wanted that superintendent job. But he didn't want to make any promises he couldn't keep. "I can try," he said.

Sanders nodded slowly. "Well, that's as good as another man's promise. Go to it."

THE next morning they were to move down to the coffer dam fill. In the sub-zero weather tempered metal was glassy brittle. A padlock pin splintered. They could wait a half day for the shops to make up new pins. But waiting time with that big Huckarus cost money. Brady sent the broken parts down by the pit truck and chained the dipper up for the move.

They started ponderously down the river embankment to the coffer dam fill. It was a long, steep pitch; it was the kind of a move that puts gray hairs in a shovel skinner's head, that brings him awake at night with body moist, dreaming that something had slipped on the down grade.

And this time something did slip.

Brady, riding high in the house cab, felt the thump of a loose rock between the cat treads. It must have struck the clutch bar a deflecting blow. Suddenly the big shovel was free, running wild. Something like a hundred tons of metal started a plunge down the hillside.

Instinctively Brady jammed the brakes.

The great manmade behemoth gathered speed. With the clutches disengaged the brakes were useless.

He heard little Dutch shout a warning from the side. The cat chains were slapping viciously beneath the floor of the house. Behind him the great Diesel grumbled sleepily. There was power, power almost unlimited . . . but no way of using it.

Brady knew a cold fear, the fear that any shovel man has of wrecking his equipment.

Speed had picked up now so that Dutch had to run to keep his position at the side. Brady kicked his hoist cable loose. He might drop the dipper, ease it gradually into the dirt ahead for a brake.

It would take careful handling. If it dug in too suddenly the great weight of the house machinery would shove sticks, boom and all clear back.

The drum went slack, but there was no payout. He had secured for the move. The dipper, chained in place, was useless. That was the last hope. Poor old Sadie, who had the power within her to move mountains, was helpless.

She was plunging to her destruction, like some wild, wounded animal.

Mentally Wend Brady pawed the control levers. There was only one thing he could do. He could swing it, house, boom and all at right angles to the cat travel. This might overbalance and roll it. And this might or might not be better than letting her pile up at twenty or thirty miles an hour into the coffer dam.

It was a gamble not worth taking. At any rate, when she struck he would be in the middle of things. They'd be using a torch to cut him free.

On the left side he had a brief glimpse of Dutch, his short legs churning. He was a little distance ahead of the runaway shovel, but losing ground.

Suddenly he threw himself between the cat treads.

Involuntarily Brady shouted a warning. The next instant he was thrown violently forward. The cats locked, with a grinding crash of metal.

He jammed the brakes and old Sadie came to a rocking halt.

Brady cut his injection pressure and shoved the throttle down. White-faced he climbed slowly down from the house. He hadn't realized until this moment how much he had become attached to his homely little oiler.

It was almost a physical shock to him when little Dutch climbed from under the cat mounting, uninjured.

"She almost runned away, that old snooter," he said, patting the cat tread.

Brady held himself for a moment before trusting his voice. "Uh-huh," he said then. "Much obliged, Dutch."

"Oh, that ain't nothin', Mr. Brady."

"Listen here," Brady commanded. "You call me Wend or Brady; one or the other. Stop that *mister* stuff. You're goin' to be a shovel man yourself. Dutch, I'll teach you to run a shovel, or kill you tryin'."

THERE it was, the promise. And Wend Brady kept his promises. Everybody knew that. Little Dutch looked at him as though Brady had, personally, opened the gates of Heaven.

"I'm goin' to run a shovel!" Dutch said. He repeated it, in a slow, wondering voice: "I'm goin' to run a shovel."

That was in the late fall.

The next day old Sadie was grumbling in her new placement, gnawing at the side hill that flanked the coffer dam. Dutch was in the house, clearing the light plant for night work. He started the small engine for a test, just as Brady tied things up for the noon hour.

Brady climbed out of the cab seat, stretching his arms and legs. A spark from the light generator brushes caught fire to the wiping rag in Dutch's hand. Brady watched unconcernedly as Dutch threw it to the metal deck and tried to stamp out the fire. Then, to his astonishment, he saw the little man walk deliberately over to the red gasoline can and dump half its contents onto the small blaze.

Instantly the house was full of the roar of fire. Dutch stood there with the red can in his hands, looking stupidly at the blaze.

Brady leaped across the flame, snatched the can from him and threw it outside.

He grabbed the big fire extinguisher from the wall, up-ended it and started its jet foaming about the base of the fire. It was all over in a minute or so.

"Why did you throw gasoline on it, Dutch?"

Dutch looked about, like a man awakened from sleep. "I threw water on it," he said.

"Out of the red can!"

"No, Wend, I had the white can."

Brady searched the steady eyes. Dutch really thought he had picked up the white water-can. It was hard to believe, but Brady knew it was so.

He was thoughtful that afternoon. He remembered that Pat Strode had fired Dutch for a piece of carelessness. But it wasn't carelessness about that gasoline can. It was . . . Brady didn't know what it was.

Nor, a week later, could he account for the freeze-up of the compressor-engine radiator. Dutch said that he had drained it the night before. He was sure he had.

At least he was quite sure. . . .

Weeks passed and the situation, to Brady's mind, became worse. Small things happened, as when Brady found grease on the swing frictions. The little oiler had denied doing this . . . denied it indignantly. He knew every plate, bolt or bearing of the frictions by their first name.

Grease on frictions? Of course not! And then that puzzling doubt had crept into his eyes.

Occasionally now Brady allowed Dutch to sit on the stool on easy digging, but never without him standing behind, ready to catch any mistakes.

That was all right at first, but a man never learns to run a shovel with some other person directing every move he makes. But Wend Brady wanted to be sure. Those other things kept coming back into his mind.

Dutch was clever with the can and his lever work was good. Brady's uneasiness started to leave him. After all, everybody makes mistakes now and then.

EARLY spring came and the river ice started piling up back of the coffer dam, threatening to cave the outer piling. Temporarily old Sadie lost her shovel rig and got a hundred foot dragline boom in its place. She waddled out to the end of the coffer-dam fill and Brady started tossing the big bucket out into the ice jam, as a fisherman casts his fly.

Dragline work is different from shovel. The bucket is not always under control. Before starting his swing the operator must know just where he wants to place the bucket. After that it is the speed of the swing and the payout of hoist and drag cables, that determine where the bucket will land.

Brady pounded the ice into smaller chunks under the crashing impact of his six-ton bucket, then draglined it out.

Dutch belonged on the right hand side of old Sadie if he got any distance from her treads. There was safety. On the left side was sudden death.

Brady sat in the cab, automatically working the levers and pedals.

And he planned his attack on the side hill, flanking the coffer. That would be their next task and Art Sanders left things like that to him. This was a small job they were on. And Sanders Construction company was a small outfit. By rights they should have a dragline at the top of the slope to knock down the overhang, against the danger of rolling boulders.

But Brady had a plan to get along without that dragline. He'd have them boilerplate the windows and let old Sadie take a few bangs. She could stand it.

He boomed down to get distance, and tossed the bucket. He brought it around and started in on the hoist and dragline cables. The rock-polished teeth rose from the water, like great metal claws.

He speeded up the swing, slacked on drag cable to get set for distance. Something caused him to drop his eyes to the left, down the path of that hurtling engine of destruction.

There stood Dutch, exactly where the bucket would land; where it would land in the next split-second!

Brady worked so fast that he never was able to remember the exact sequence of his movements. He got it stopped, catching it with the hoist, full speed, and a quick jerk in on the drag.

Those mighty teeth, that could split a half-yard boulder, shaved over Dutch's head by not more than an inch.

In that fraction of a minute two of the bucket teeth seemed bound to fork Dutch's neck, pop his head off like a shoe button.

In his imagination Brady actually saw the head part from the squat little body. He froze in sheer horror and the hoist cable came taut against the dragline. The whip of that cable against the boom jerked Brady to reality.

He eased a few feet of slack to each cable and braked the drums and sat there for a few moments until the tightness left his nerves.

Then he locked the controls and moved slowly, deliberately to the house door.

Wend Brady had every intention of making mincemeat out of his oiler. But Dutch's appearance stopped him. He was sick, vomiting. His face was yellow.

"What's the matter, Dutch?"

"I got misery. To the stomick."

"You've got something else, Dutch. It's . . ." Brady paused, uncertain. "It's psychological . . . it's . . . you go blank, Dutch. You've got blind spots. Like some of those automobile drivers run into another man and swear they never saw him. Things like that. You go see the camp doctor. Right now, Dutch!"

The little man started to protest. But from Brady, it was a command.

IN THE small, white enameled office the camp doctor was inclined to laugh at the whole thing. "So you've got blind spots, eh? You tell that shovel skinner I'll have him arrested for practicing medicine without a license."

"I got blind spots," Dutch repeated stubbornly. "Brady says so."

"Say, wait a minute!" The doctor swung him to face the window. "Oh-oh! Strip off to the waist."

Dutch obeyed.

"What d'you eat?" the doctor questioned, feeling of Dutch's stomach.

"Don't eat much of anything. I get misery of . . ."

"You're going to the hospital, son. For a long time."

Dutch shook his head. "Huh-uh, doctor.

Wend Brady's goin' to make a shovel man of me." He started slipping into his shirt.

"Who d'you think this Brady is! Goddlemighty?"

Little Dutch hesitated. Then: "No, he ain't that, doctor. Can't you do somethin' for my blind spots?"

The doctor was accustomed to handling men who faced reality. "Anybody in your family ever have cancer?"

Dutch's hands stopped suddenly on the buttons of his shirt. His face went white.

"My mother," he said, voice hardly audible. He started feverishly buttoning his shirt.

He knew what cancer meant. Days of agony greater than human nerves can stand. Drugs in increasing doses, until the arms are freckled with hypo scars.

And in the end even those not capable of blocking the torture. Suddenly Dutch was in a frantic hurry, a man whose hours are limited; a man who has something that must be accomplished.

Brady watched him in the days that followed, watched him and was deeply troubled. Dutch had gotten himself a pair of cheap dark glasses. He had reported truthfully the doctor's attitude toward his "blind spots."

That other thing, that was his own secret, to carry with him day and night in cringing horror.

They had moved old Sadie back to the slope and re-rigged her as a shovel. Strips of heavy boiler plate covered the windows now, with observation slits between. Great sheets of it extended as shields from each end of the house. Brady made a strict ruling.

None of the other men were to come within a half mile of the slope toe. And Dutch was not to get beyond the protection of that boiler plate.

Art Sanders was putting pressure on Wend Brady. As near as pressure could be applied to a man of that character. He must turn Dutch loose with the big Huckarus or start breaking a regular shovel man in on her. The excavation work must start within a week.

Brady took his accustomed chew of tobacco before replying to this. "Maybe I should have spoke to you before about that, Chief," he said. "I'm stayin' with the shovel. You get another boss for that excavation. Tim Ryan's a good man."

Sanders shook his head. He leveled his pipestem on the big man who stood before him. "You're going to boss that job."

Brady's jaw set. "I'll stay with the shovel, Chief. It's takin' longer to break Dutch in than I thought it would."

Sanders rocked back in his chair. "Are you crazy?" he demanded. "You're giving up the opportunity of your life, just to teach that little runt how to handle a shovel. Now, day after tomorrow, I'm going to have a regular shovel man here to go on with you for a few shifts."

Brady shook his head, jaw muscles tight. "Not 'less you fire me, Chief."

"Get outa here!" Art Sanders roared. "Get outta my sight, you stubborn mule. If you weren't the best construction stiff in the country I'd fire you. And I'd personally kick you off the works."

BRADY left. Sanders relaxed in his chair. A slow grin spread his lips. "As though I could," he chuckled. Then he grew serious. "Damn! Too good a man to be shovin' levers. What in hell's wrong with him?"

Every day now little Dutch was getting time on the shovel. But Wend Brady was always there, ready to stop any false move. Both of them knew that this wasn't shovel running. Brady foresaw months of this, even years, if Dutch made any more mistakes. But he had promised he would teach Dutch to run a shovel.

And Wend Brady kept his promises.

Old Sadie rooted her big dipper into the earth and gravel, tossing it over the embankment, making her own roadway as she shuffled ahead a few feet at a time, like an old woman in house slippers.

The spring thaw was setting in, loosening rocks at the slope crest. The smaller rocks bounded harmlessly off from the steel-sheathed house. Brady was careful

about the larger rocks, some of them as big as a dinner table.

He undermined them, alert to hoist the sticks clear as they rolled by.

He nudged the dipper teeth under a dead fall timber and raised it, nicely balanced, to toss over the embankment. It slipped and one end caught on the shield plate.

He swung slightly, lowered it over a three-foot rock to balance for another pickup after he'd moved back a few feet.

Dutch started scrambling out to handle the clutch bar. Brady stopped him. He lived constantly with the fear that Dutch would have another accident to bring back the old doubts.

"I'll handle it," he said. "You ride the stool."

Afterward Brady figured out what happened. A heavy rock struck one end of the timber, balanced like a teeter-totter. The other end of the timber lifted and caught him and threw him twenty feet up the slope. And his impact started a small slide.

But at the time everything happened at once. He found himself, half-stunned, under the scanty protection of a small boulder. And a flat slab of rock lay over his thigh, imprisoning him.

BRADY lay there, not moving. The confusion left his brain. His eyes traveled up the slope and he knew that sometime soon, perhaps in the next few seconds, that slope would break and come down like the wash of a wave.

He would be under it. If he wasn't battered to death that would be his misfortune, for he would die a more agonizing death from suffocation.

In the quiet he could hear the steady *thump, thump* of old Sadie's Diesel.

Well, that was the way things went with a construction stiff. And after all, he reflected, in his time he'd moved a lot of earth. He had done things; built things that would serve mankind for centuries.

At a time like this, helpless to save himself, a brave man thinks of many things besides the approach of death. Brady thought about the superintendent job. He would have liked that. He would have washed out to bedrock on the upper slope with hydraulics . . . put old Sadie in to dig a carry-off channel above river level.

Perhaps he had broken an unvoiced promise to Art Sanders in this. Art had depended on him to do the job.

But there was Dutch and the promise he'd made him. Human affairs were so complicated! The laws of nature were simple. But you had to understand them. You had to look out for things like this.

It was his own fault. And old Sadie's Diesel would thump out his funeral march.

As though in answer to his thought that deep-throated engine came to life. His position kept him from seeing the huge shovel. But he could hear the grumble of its swing.

The dipper came into view above him, lowering. Gently it deposited a great rock within two feet of his head. It disappeared, returned. Another rock lay beside the first.

Slowly, steadily the rock wall built up around him.

At first none of this was connected in his mind with little Dutch. For some reason it seemed that the machine was doing this of its own volition.

It seemed as though the old shovel, that had known his touch for so many years, was trying to give him a decent burial.

The wall of rock grew about him, slowly, skillfully. He realized, after a time that even if the slide did come now he would have a chance; there would be a space for life-giving air.

Slowly then the dipper hovered over him, like the trunk of some gigantic elephant. It lowered until he could feel a little of its weight on his body.

Suddenly the sticks racked out. The boulder moved. Rocks came bounding down the slope, struck the wall about him and rebounded.

Brady wanted to shout: "You fool, don't move that rock!" But he knew the rumble of machinery would drown his voice.

He saw then why Dutch was moving the boulder. With it there he wouldn't be able to get the dipper teeth under the rock slab that pinned him down.

Again the rock-scarred hand of steel edged down onto his body. Brady gritted his teeth. The tiniest misuse of controls would smash him like a fly.

Again the Diesel thumped its increase of power and the dipper teeth splintered hard granite. The boulder moved two feet. A huge rock from above struck the wall and bounded clear over.

He heard the impact of it against the iron sides of the shovel. But there was purchase room under the slab now.

Brady held himself tight. He heard his own voice: "Dutch, if you can do it you're a better shovel hand than I am."

THE dipper lowered. Slowly the bright metal of its teeth edged under the slab. Slowly, jammed against the boulder, the slab moved into the dipper's mouth. Tiny jerks of its rack gears carried the message of Dutch's hands on the levers.

Good hands, Brady thought. Steady hands. The hands of a born shovel man. Even with death so near Brady exulted. He'd said he would teach Dutch how to run a shovel!

The weight lifted from his thigh. Brady knew that he was a free man; knew that if he could reach the shovel house under the constant bombardment of small rocks he would cheat death this time.

The dipper lifted and swung out of sight. Brady got slowly to his knees, crouching. Now he had a fifty-fifty chance. No better.

The instant he left the shelter of that built-up wall he would be a target for those deadly missiles.

But the dipper returned, lowered and paused. It was there and it was waiting. Suddenly Brady understood. With a shout he flung himself into its protective mow. A pause.

Then, like a released catapult, the dipper shot upward, carrying its human burden to safety.

Little Dutch met Brady under the protection of the shield. He had cut the injection pressure. The Diesel was grumbling to itself and blowing smoke rings into the cool air, like a complacent old man with his pipe.

"Hurt any?" Dutch asked, with that comical grin on his chubby face.

"Nope," Brady told him, holding his voice to a casual tone. "Nothin' that won't heal up in a coupla days. Much obliged, Dutch."

"Oh, that ain't nothin'," little Dutch said. He was holding both hands to his middle.

Brady saw that his teeth were clenched, his face yellow and dripping with sweat. "Hey, Dutch, you're sick!"

"I got . . . I got some misery to my stomick. I . . ." He stumbled forward, retching.

"Dutch! Get back of that shield!"

It was too late. Brady, powerless to avert it, saw the rock bounding through the air, saw it strike.

He pulled the limp body back under the shield.

Dutch was on the ground, on his side, doubled a little from tightening, stiffening muscles. But it seemed that he wasn't aware of his condition, didn't know that he was already dying. The rock had struck his head near the back, crushing it like old, brittle paper.

His lips moved. "I runned ol' Sadie, huh, Chiefer? I runned that ol' snooter, huh?"

"And how!" Wend Brady assured him. "The finest bit of shovel runnin' I ever saw, Dutch." The big man crouched over him, suffering with his helplessness to aid. "Does it hurt, Dutch?"

Dutch shook his head. Only the tough fiber of that small, vital body held him to life. "It's good, Chiefer. You ask that doctor. An' it's like you said, Chiefer. You learned me to run a shovel. I . . . the ol' snooter . . . I . . ." The face relaxed, the lips spread in a smile.

Little Dutch was a shovel skinner.

He told the old man: "It is better to sit on one's rug with wisdom than to stretch one's legs to the world's end"

Allah's Infidel

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

Author of "Rainbow's End"

Since the Queen of Sheba was a girl, cunning and peril have lived by the Red Sea; and so a man must be especially beloved of the gods to walk its shores safely with a priceless green pearl in his hand

A DOZEN bronzed Somalis squatted on the slippery deck of the little pearling boat which rolled lazily in the sun-beaten waters of Djumelay Bay. Lucky Knudsen watched their sharp faces lengthen, and heard them mutter, "Another day, and Allah has forgotten us."

With every other crew around the Dahalak Islands bringing in pearls, it seemed a mistake for him to be called "Lucky." But Knudsen grinned, and kicked a big oyster that had slid away from the heap on the deck.

"Open this one," he ordered, voice big and hearty.

Saoud, the mate of the Suhail, looked up and dubiously eyed the red-haired Dane who had browbeaten and cajoled them into carrying on, despite short rations and no success. Knudsen flung back his square head, and folded his arms across his broad chest.

"Open it. Now, instead of waiting!"

"In the name of Allah!" Saoud muttered, and plied his heavy knife.

This was the usual *sadaf* oyster, two pounds or more. There was also a pear-shaped pearl, unusual in size as well as

shape. Its peculiar greenish luster made it a freak that would follow no rule of appraisal.

Knudsen did not try to explain why he had picked on that one stray *sadaf*. Because of such things which had happened in the past the Red Sea fishers called him lucky.

"El hamdulilahi!" It had happened, and that was enough for the men. "Allah loves him, and he sees what eyes cannot see."

The mate held the pearl between thumb and forefinger. It was magnificent in the slanting light. Knudsen spent a moment wondering what color eyes, what tint of skin, what hair the woman must have who could wear a solitaire which had stolen a ghost-green from the sea, a shadow from the Nile, a touch of jade's coolness in its changing shades.

Then he frowned. This was too much luck! Selling such a pearl was a problem. Only Petro Simonini had the money, and Petro was no oyster. Knudsen spat, and tried to think of some other buyer in Massawa.

"Wellah," the mate said, "this is the Father of the Green!"

"Now that you've named it," said Knudsen, "get back to work!"

He pocketed the solitaire and forgot all but the tough problem of selling it. Saoud and his men plied their knives, and as they worked, they sang, *"Benat' al Bérbera . . . Benat al Bérbera . . . Reh chamâlo . . . Reh chamâlo . . .Reh halbâr . . . Reh halbâr . . ."*

Something about a northwind, and a girl in Berbera; monotonous, and it made no sense, and thus it fitted the Red Sea where Knudsen had lost two fortunes, and was seeking a third.

Gun-runner, buyer of leopard skins, and now owner of a pearling boat; owner, and *nakhoda* also, with only his canvas pants to distinguish him from the Somali crew. His skin was tanned as dark as theirs, and a kerchief protected his head from the sun.

The next day brought other pearls. The *Suhail* headed north to Massawa, where buyers from all the world try to get as cheaply as possible the treasure which brown men steal from the jealous water.

The crew needed food and tobacco and rest; a chance to let their coral-slashed feet recover, and to extract the poisonous spines of sea urchins. They were young, for no pearl diver grows old. He either retires, or his overstrained lungs and heart finish him.

Massawa is a crazy tangle of Arab's whitewashed houses wedged in ledges of volcanic rock. The town is on an island, connected by a causeway with the mainland; hotter than Djibouti, further south, because there is little wind.

THERE is an ancient tradition which governs pearl selling, and nothing changes on the Red Sea. The *nakhoda* takes the booty to the traders; and two witnesses go with him, one to protect the fishers against his trickery, one to protect the owner in case of disputes with the crew, for all have a share in the proceeds.

Habeeb, a hook-nosed Arab, represented the crew. He had a heavy-bladed knife and an ancient revolver. Ali, similarly armed, was to testify that Knudsen, owner as well as skipper, had not short-changed the crew.

It was not that his men questioned Knudsen's honesty; his luck proved that Allah loved him. It was rather that every detail of pearl trading had been settled some years before the Queen of Sheba carried Red Sea treasures to King Solomon.

In the odorous town, now crowded with Italian soldiers and civilians waiting to go inland to Ethiopia, Knudsen found Petro Simonini, who claimed to be French. Actually, he was a Levantine whose white duck suit was faultless as his waxed moustache and carefully manicured nails.

Simonini wore perfume and a dozen diamond rings, but that did not fool Knudsen, any more than the round, boyish face.

"Ah . . . Mr. Knudsen! What a pleasure, that you look for me. Something exceptional you have found?"

The rumor of the green pearl had undoubtedly beaten him to the mainland, but Knudsen shrugged. "It's exceptional I found anything," he carelessly retorted. "Who's our *dallal?*"

"Mike Matar," the Levantine said, gesturing toward the whitewashed house next to the noisy and odorous bazaar. "Very experienced."

"No doubt," Knudsen admitted.

Between one *dallal* and another, there was not much choice. And after all, the man who acted as umpire and arbitrator in the haggling between buyer and seller was paid a percentage of the money that finally changed hands. The higher the price, the more rake-off for Matar. The only catch was, he might be bribed to favor the buyer.

Matar received his visitors in a barren room with a cleanly swept dirt floor. A servant brought in a bubble pipe with brass fittings, and small cups of steaming Keshir brewed from coffee leaves, ginger, and saffron. Simonini, in no way handicapped by his linen pants and snug coat, squatted on his rug and hoped that his dear friend Mike was well; that his father was well, that business was good, and that his days would be long.

They had already met that day, only a few hours previous, but that made no difference.

A servant brought out scales and a table not over a foot high. Knudsen took the several parcels of pearls from his belt; they were wrapped in scraps of red calico. All but one of these he opened.

Matar's face, which was the shape and color of seven pounds of liver, did not change, but his eyes sharpened. Simonini's smile was a fixture. He delicately stroked his moustaches. Both men meant, "Is this all you're showing us?"

Knudsen weighed the larger pearls, one by one. Baroques and seeds are sold in parcels. Simonini politely challenged a few specimens, finding imaginary flaws and lack of "orient". But before the haggling began, the big Dane exposed the green solitaire, then put it away.

"First," he said, "let's get these routine bits disposed of."

Simonini reproachfully eyed him. "How much?"

"Ten thousand *rupees,*" said Knudsen.

"A hundred is too much!"

Mike Matar stroked his third chin and said nothing.

A Levantine is a person of mixed race, originating between Stamboul and Cairo, who can buy from an Armenian and sell to a Scot, cheating both parties. Knudsen knew that, and was resigned to letting go for four thousand *rupees*. He was saving his stubbornness for the Father of the Green. The real fight would come then.

Simonini was saying, "Two thousand *rupees,* Monsieur Knood-song. They are junk, but I will take them. For American tourists, you know."

Lucky Knudsen rumbled, "Eight thousand. Do you think I find these in the sand?"

The *dallal* nodded. The two witnesses grinned and stroked their dirty beards, and made sucking sounds at the pipe stem they passed back and forth. This might go on for the rest of the day.

Simonini picked up his earthenware mug of *keshir*. Fortified, he made a womanish gesture of weakness, and sighed, "Three."

"Seventy-five, you thieving hound!" Knudsen added a few words too dirty for any language but Arabic.

"Four, and you are robbing me," the Levantine wailed.

Knudsen almost blinked. He had the fellow on the run. "Seven, and I hope the dogs eat your insides."

Simonini cast an appealing glance at the *dallal*. Mike Matar let a smile flow slowly over his liver-colored face. He purred, "Put out your hands, *effendim.*"

"By heaven, I won't!" Knudsen snarled.

Simonini groaned.

But both obeyed. They hitched their rugs closer to the *dallal's* right and to his left. Matar took a turban cloth and spread it over his knees, hiding them and the extened hands of buyer and seller. Under cover of the veil, he took Simonini's fingers

in one hand, and Knudsen's in the other.

THIS was done today as it had been done when Balkis, Queen of Sheba, was a girl, just over on the other coast of the narrow Red Sea. Nothing changes here except a man's luck, and that changes often —and sometimes, for the worse.

Matar had seven of Knudsen's big stump-fingers; he had seven of Simonini's; that meant, without any exchange of words, "seven thousand *rupees*."

"Son of a diseased camel!" Knudsen growled.

"Son of a loose mother!" Simonini wailed.

They turned deadly looks at Matar. The Syrian's chin sank to the breast of his greasy robe; he neither saw nor heard. He was pondering, sizing up buyer and seller and the gems. There was a readjustment of hands and fingers. Now Matar had six of Knudsen's and six of Simonini's.

Again, he gauged the protests, nodded.

He deliberately put the cloth aside. Then he commanded, "Join hands." The two obeyed. This done, he went on, "You, Khwaja Simonini, say 'I buy.' You, Khwaja Knudsen, say, 'I sell.' "

Each repeated the proper words, and Matar cut in, "For six thousand *rupees*, cash in hand."

Having put their hands under the veil, they had now to abide by the *dallal's* decision. That was the custom.

Six thousand *rupees* amounted to about two thousand American dollars; but from this would be deducted the expenses of all those fruitless cruises, food for the crew, and gear. Of the amount that remained, Knudsen, as owner of the *Suhail*, took a fifth; as *nakhoda*, he took a third; and the crew divided the remainder.

This left Knudsen out of debt; selling the Father of the Green would be the stake he had been seeking.

Simonini, almost at the door, suddenly remembered something, "Oh, of course. That funny green baroque. It's pretty—" He winked. "And I promised a girl in Cairo I'd bring her a pearl."

Cheapness for the cheap, he implied. Matar grinned appreciatively.

Knudsen yawned. "Two hundred thousand *rupees*."

Simonini giggled, pretending to relish a jest. "You're not serious, of course. But let me see it again."

Knudsen handed him the gem. Simonini frowned a little. "Hmmm . . . better than I thought. An odd trifle. I might give it to my wife, instead. She likes green." Then, engagingly frank, "I did beat you down on the deal we just finished, so I'll not wrangle about this. Two thousand *rupees*. Because you are my friend."

Knudsen recovered the green pearl. "I can always beg for a living."

"I guess you'll sell elsewhere."

"To Eichenbaum, Delacroix, or Potts," Knudsen said, nodding.

"Don't be a fool! They're not crazy, and they're bought up, this trip."

He was right. Later, when they had felt out the market, sized up the demand, and found out whether the Paris brokers had any prospects for such an unusual pearl, they would trade.

In the meanwhile, Knudsen would have to wait, and perhaps spend weeks guarding a precious piece of loot. But he said to Simonini, "All three together can swing it. And they will, Brother Petro!"

The Levantine took that smiling. And in the next few days, Knudsen learned that there was such a thing as being too lucky. Potts, the horse-faced Englishman who lived on whisky and the luster of pearls, said to him, "By Jove, old chap, it's not the amount. But this is a collector's specimen. Why don't you try old Shaykh Ahmad, back in Dahalak?"

"He's tough meat! Like any Arab. And I'm in a hurry. I can't be sailing around, when this town's full of buyers."

Eichenbaum was next in line. "Ach," said the old German, "it iss beautiful. The Raja of Pandar would love it, for his collection."

"Hell," Knudsen exploded, "I can't spend a lot of dough and six months time going to India!"

"The women," said Friedrich Eichenbaum, regretfully shaking his head as he lovingly eyed the gem, "cannot have an announcer to say, here iss something costlier than you have. It must be obvious, you understand. Me, how I would like it for keeping myself. Now let us have some beer. I buy it, yes?"

KNUDSEN was not surprised, the following night, when a Turk came to the *Suhail* and said, "Simonini Effendi sends me to ask you to call on an important matter."

Saoud and the crew, surly from the postponed drunk, brightened. "Allah be praised," they cried, childishly happy. "A customer at last."

Little time was lost in finding witnesses. And presently, Lucky Knudsen was stalking down the water front, where boats rolled lazily in the warm water. The odor of sheep dung blended with the tang of crude incense-gum and spices and leather. Simonini wanted the Father of the Green, and he also wanted to get out of Massawa's little hell and have a look at Paris.

Knudsen, though armed, was wary. Too many people knew of the treasure he carried. His safety lay in the difficulty a thief would have in disposing of it. Despite the sharp practices of the pearling trade, outright robbery was not countenanced. And the Italians had brought strict order—for the Red Sea coast, that is.

"In here," Habeeb whispered, gesturing toward the dark archway of one of the houses that loomed up white as dice set in a row by some giant gamester. "He has moved since you saw him."

"Yes, by Allah," Ali affirmed, "the dog lives in a better place."

A black servant answered Habeeb's knock at the iron-bound door. From somewhere beyond the small courtyard came the sound of a woman's laughter, and the plucked strings of an *oudh*.

Then something like Simonini's voice, gurgling and drunk. Knudsen frowned. The man could hardly be in any condition to bargain. Impatient, he strode forward, following the white-robed Negro, who paused at an inner door.

Ali and Habeeb hung back, respectfully, Knudsen assumed. But in another second a net dropped from overhead, its leaden weights pulling the meshes about his ankles. The knotted cords entangled his arms when he cursed and tried to free himself. And behind him, the street door slammed.

Barefooted men emerged from dark corners, bearing him to the ground. Taken by surprise, Knudsen could make no use of his strength and bulk. A rug flung over his head choked his wrathful roar. Staves whacked down on his shoulders, knocking him breathless. He rose to his knees, shook himself, lurched clear, but his assailants followed him, and pulled him down again.

Red lights danced before his eyes, and camel-scented dust from the stifling rug choked him. A loop about his throat further cut off his breath. With head and feet and hands weighted down, he could not use weapons or stop the deft fingers that reached through the net and probed his belt.

A man muttered, laughed softly, but did not bother to strike a light. Knudsen's assailants knew precisely what they sought; sense of touch sufficed. Then the ropes were pulled tighter, and the captive lifted off the ground. When the patter of bare feet ceased, the big Dane was suspended from an archway, wriggling and cursing into the rug.

The music and laughter in the house had ceased. It took Knudsen several hours to disentangle himself. He finally succeeded by sheer strength and fury, bursting some rotted meshes.

IT WAS not until he was back at the *Suhail* that Knudsen realized how thoroughly he had been settled. Saoud and the crew clamored for their cut of two hundred thousand *rupees*.

"Paid?" Knudsen growled. "Look at me! Do I look as if I got paid?"

"We beg pardon of Allah," the tall Somali said, sour and surly, "but Ali and

Habeeb came running to tell us of the sale."

The crew muttered, fingered heavy knives. For a moment, watching their tense brown bodies, greased and rippling in the moonlight, Knudsen felt very close to death.

"Have I ever robbed you?"

"Have you ever had such a pearl before?" the mate retorted.

A diver, crouching by a bulkhead, suddenly flashed to his feet, knife advanced. "O thou father of thieves! Allah curse thy religion!"

Knudsen's revolver stopped that rush; just one shot, drilling the fellow's shoulder, made him drop his knife. Knudsen, recoiling, covered the group. They were too close packed to risk a hostile move, and they knew it. He said, "This is mutiny, and I will have the Italian *askaris* take you all to the guardhouse."

Il Duce's soldiers were not popular with the Somalis. Saoud straightened, and quietly said, "Master, we have served you well, and you have cheated us. If you had kept a hundred thousand *rupees* and bribed the witnesses, we would not complain, since that has always been the way with a *nakhoda* and his crew. But this is too much."

"Get off this boat!"

"Allah curse us if ever we step on a boat of yours," Saoud muttered. "May he do more unto us if any other fisher does."

They took their pots and gear and went ashore.

With such a story circulating, Knudsen could not anywhere on the Red Sea get a crew. He had to recover the Father of the Green.

He took passage, the following day, on a *boutre* bound for the Dahalak Islands. All the way south to the fishing water, he felt staring eyes, and heard mutterings. And back again at Djumelay Bay, he found that the story had beaten him to the harbor. Knudsen had one hope left—the pearl collector, Shaykh Ahmad. Though no one ever equaled him in wily trading, he was honest.

He lost no time. Despite the fury of the sun, he strode along the dusty trail that led to the heart of the barren island. The air danced over the baking sand and rock. Coral reefs in the water, desert on the island, both guarded Shaykh Ahmad and his pearls. A retired trader, the old Arab had become something just short of a saint. When he died, there would be pilgrimages to his tomb.

The sun was low when he saw the green clump of palms of the only oasis on the island. An armed Negro accosted Knudsen a quarter of a mile from the edge of the palms; he had emerged from a lookout post on the shaded side of a rock. He said nothing, but the rifle with which he covered Knudsen was a hint.

Somewhat further to the left, a blob of white indicated another guardian. But for these blacks scattered about the rock dotted expanse, anyone could approach the oasis.

A young Arab courteously greeted Knudsen as he approached the stone-coped spring. He gestured toward the two-story house, white and cubical like all its kind. "Be pleased to enter, *sahib*. My father is at home."

KNUDSEN followed him to the *shaykh's* house. The reception room was sand-strewn and barren. Pipes and a brass coffee service gleamed in niches in the masonry wall. A white-bearded man sat on a stone dais which was covered with cushions and a rug. He inclined his head, acknowledging his visitor's salute.

Shaykh Ahmad's turban was white, and as plain as his robe. The carpet on the floor was good, but worn. The only outstanding articles in the room were books. The one lying beside the sharp-faced old man was perhaps a thousand years old, illuminated in red and blue and gilt which time could not dim.

This heartened Knudsen. He complimented the *shaykh* on the exquisite Kufic script. Then he said, "It is better to sit on one's rug with wisdom than to stretch one's legs to the world's end."

Shaykh Ahmad smiled, appreciatively. "Your legs are long."

"They have taken me nowhere." Knudsen already knew from the shrewd, kindly eyes that the *shaykh* had heard the story. "And Satan has blackened my face."

"It is not yet black before me," the *shaykh* said.

Finally Knudsen got to the point. "It is said that you are the father of pearls."

"Have you any to offer me?"

"Only a present." He took from his belt a matched pair he had bought with the proceeds of Simonini's purchase. "To keep my hands from being empty when I ask your advice."

The old man praised them, each according to its points, and then clapped his hands. Two armed Negroes came into the room.

Shaykh Ahmad beckoned and said, "Come this way and I will show you how pearls are kept safe against age and spoiling."

Knudsen followed him into an inner room, which was below the ground level. The old man opened a massive lock. The guards drew back the iron doors. Knudsen blinked and recoiled a pace.

The light that came through a grating in the ceiling reached slantingly into the closet. On the shelves were rows of glass jars with glass covers. Each vessel was filled with pearls, likes peas in a can. One lot was full pink; another, pale rosy-white; and so on, through all the shades, and every parcel matched as to size and shape.

"The sea has been yielding them since Suleiman the Wise made Satan serve him," Shaykh Ahmad said, smiling. "And they do not spoil, or go dead. The liquid that covers them is rainwater. That is the secret."

"But I see none that are green."

"That is your fault," Shaykh Ahmad said, smiling strangely. "You were in such haste to sell that you ended by losing. And now you want me to tell you of collectors who wanted a green pearl, perhaps to match some they already had."

"Yes. I have to be right the first time I try to recover my loss. There will not be a second chance. And I am sure that the Father of the Green has not left Massawa."

Shaykh Ahmad stroked his beard. "Wisdom is with Allah. But you could easily be right. Deserts and reefs guard the best. The infidel buyers get the rest."

He deliberately spoke the jingling Arabic that scholars use in clinching a point. Knudsen felt that his trip had not been wasted; but he was not prepared for what took place.

It happened at the head of the stairs. Instead of leading the way back to the reception room, Ahmad said, "It is not well for you to leave now. Haste is of Satan."

The old man gestured to another archway, and himself backed toward the reception room. The Negroes blocked Knudsen's way. Without asking, he knew that he was a prisoner; nor was there any use in protesting. Even if he broke from the house, he could not elude the guards that surrounded the oasis.

The old man bowed, and the Negroes gestured; respectfully, but with certain intent. And they remained at the door of the sand-paved room into which Knudsen had to go. There was a rug, a jug of water, and a pipe. On the wall was a gilt medallion of exquisite design.

After an hour of squatting and staring, Knudsen sighed and shook his head. He could not see any reason for captivity. He could hardly convince himself that the old saint had arranged for the theft of the pearl, and was not keeping him a prisoner for some grim and fatal future reference.

The sharks and the reefs guarded secrets as well as pearls. Knudsen wiped the sweat from his forehead and contemplated the impossibility of wedging his broad frame between the closely spaced bars of the single high window that pierced walls two feet thick. Not even after dark could he slip out.

THE sun's rays, now level, picked out the gilt medallion. In sheer weariness and perplexity, Knudsen began to concen-

trate on the interlaced strokes. Bit by bit, he recognized them as Arabic characters.

A proverb: *Haste is of Satan; contemplation is of God.*

He grimaced, and muttered, "I'm not hurrying anywhere!"

The text mocked Knudsen for three long days and three restless nights. The Negroes brought food and *keshir* and tobacco. They never said a word to him or to each other. He began to suspect that their tongues were missing, so that they could not babble any secrets. This did not reassure him.

"Haste is of Satan . . ." At times he wanted to draw his revolver and blow the mocking motto from the wall.

He had been too hasty in trying to sell the pearl; too hasty in trying to get information as to the thief. But now he had time to think it out; think about his mutinous crew, Simonini, the perjured witnesses, the lying *dallal*. And finally, Shaykh Ahmad's cryptic jingling words: We keep the best, the infidels get the rest.

He remembered the collector who died, leaving five million dollars worth of matched pearls; an Indian maharaja had bought the lot. It all came back to Simonini. But who was the unknown who had egged the Levantine into trickery?

Fighting the sea was one thing. Battling with inaction was something else. Here, he had not a chance, except of making a fool of himself. Slugging or shooting a guard would get him just to the fringe of the oasis, no further.

At last Shaykh Ahmad came in, and greeted him as though there had not been any solitary confinement. Knudsen answered, voice level. The old man smiled and said, "You have my permission to leave. And you will forgive me for discourtesy. I am old, and I spend much time meditating."

"So do I!"

The *shaykh* ignored Knudsen's bitterness. "Then go to Massawa. Your men are waiting for you, and not with knives."

"Oh, they're not?"

"By Allah, they will be glad to see you. They will help you." The old man's long fingers hid a twitching, short-lived smile. "And it is written, *He who steals a minaret should hide it in a well.*"

The Father of the Green was as conspicuous as a minaret. But Knudsen was puzzled by the old man's cryptic saying. "Maybe you're right, but where's the well?"

Shaykh Ahmad's great courtesy kept him from laughing. He gravely answered, "Let the thief lead you to the well. And I will buy when you wish to sell."

That ended it. Once he reached the bay, Knudsen boarded a northbound *dhow*. It was night when he landed in Massawa.

The *Suhail* was among the boats that wallowed lazily in the harbor. Men squatted about a fire on deck—brown men, with fuzzy heads and oiled bodies. Knudsen leaped aboard. He recognized Saoud and the crew, and they knew him before he spoke.

The mate knelt. "*Sahib,* we are fools and witless fellows, doubting you. If you forgive us, we will serve you."

Knudsen, bewildered, answered: "Allah forgives you."

Lucky again, he thought; but later, as he ate *dourra* bread and fish, the truth came out: "Verily, *sahib,* no *nakhoda* would let us sail with him. Soon we would starve, being outlawed for mutiny against you. The pious Shaykh Ahmad spoke, and Allah's face was hidden."

Knudsen now saw the reason behind the old man's strange conduct. He made a grand gesture. "We will find more pearls. But first, we will find the Father of the Green."

They believed him, and did not ask how. He listened to their chatter, and heard what they had learned as they vainly tried to enter the service of another skipper; and Knudsen began to see how Simonini might lead him to the well where the minaret was hidden. Shaykh Ahmad's riddles were not as cryptic as they had seemed.

KNUDSEN heard how Habeeb and Ali, the witnesses, had bought beer and red calico and extra wives. Simonini,

still in town, was buying pearls. Bigger purchases than he had ever made on any trip. These things meant little to thick-witted Somalis, but Knudsen saw how his disappearance had let the tricksters move easily.

Later that night, one of the crew took a note to Simonini. It was in flourishing Arabic, done by a bazaar letter writer; it said, *Come at once to buy privately, for the hidden shall be revealed and that which hath been concealed shall come forth.*

There was no signature. None was needed. If Simonini had sold the Father of the Green to a pearl hoarder, he must have seen the collector's treasures, and vainly tried to buy a choice specimen.

Knudsen and his crew lurked in dark corners, and behind heaps of rotting offal. Somewhere, a hasheesh smoker coughed a dry, racking cough, and a trader from the mainland yelled for more maize beer.

A man in European clothes presently came from Simonini's house. A Somali wearing a pistol and cutlass followed him. Whichever way they went, one of the crew was posted, and waiting.

The Somalis were stalking in pairs. Minutes later, one met Knudsen and whispered, "*Sahib,* he goes to the mainland."

"Get a dugout from the *Suhail.*"

This was done, and they put out from the island, heading straight for the forboding shore along which Simonini would soon be walking. Against the blackness of the volcanic crags Knudsen saw the dim white masses of houses that were almost fortresses—the strongholds of money lenders, smuggler captains, native pearl traders and fleet owners.

One of these was Simonini's destination; that much was certain. So Knudsen, having gained on the Levantine, waited to intercept him, while others trailed on his heels.

Saoud whispered, "He goes to Marouf's house." This was an easy guess, since the buildings were isolated, perched on shelves of rock. And that opinion fitted the facts; Marouf was a trader and collector.

Simonini was not far from the house when two shadows rose from behind boulders. And men closed in from the rear while Saoud grapp'ed with the Levantine's guard. Neither knife nor pistol came into play.

"Take what you want," Simonini said, with scarcely a quaver in his voice. "If you are *harami,* my pockets are yours."

"There's nothing in your pocket I'm interested in, except—" Knudsen probed for a moment, and found a sheet of paper. A single match identified it. "Except this. Bait, Simonini. You sold the Father of the Green. A number of people might have bought it. And this note made you think that your customer had relented. I figured that you'd try to swap for commercial pearls, and fail to get the choice of the fellow's collection. No one ever does, you know. So here we are!"

"I'm under Italian protection. I have a passport."

"Sure you have. You come out here alone because you didn't know I'd returned. And you didn't want too much publicity."

Simonini realized that he was on trial in a court where ordinary evidence was not needed. "What are you going to do?"

"You've named the buyer just by coming here. Now you're going to get in and try to dicker with him. I'm putting on your guard's clothes and going with you."

"I'll warn him, and his guards will finish you!"

"I'll risk that."

KNUDSEN made the change. The remainder of his crew had come up the zig-zag ascent. In a moment, they had their orders; and each had his heavy knife, and a heart filled with wrath.

"Don't forget your story," Knudsen warned. "You've come back for another chance at something that you saw in the same jar with the green pearls."

"What?" This shook Simonini. "How—"

"I know," was the grim answer." Even if I don't leave the house, my Somalis will cut you open to see if you've swallowed the Father of the Green. They're childish and stubborn, eh?"

"Before God—" Simonini was trembling. "I can't get it back. I sold it, yes. But he won't return it."

"My Somalis won't return anything they cut off your frame."

"I'll pay you for it!"

"I'll never have you cornered again," Knudsen countered. "And you've not got enough cash in your pocket. If it's my funeral, it's surely yours, Brother Petro."

It was not far to Marouf's stronghold. Rock and thorns made the approach difficult. There was no challenge until Simonini reached for the brazen knocker, which was shaped like the sacred hand of Fathma, to bring good luck to the house. When an African voice answered from within, the Levantine said, "Tell Marouf that Simonini wishes to see him. On urgent business, and Allah pardon the hour."

Bolts clanked metallically, and chains rattled. The porter relayed the call. Inside, men muttered. There was no laughter. Knudsen stood straight, and somewhat to one side of the Levantine. Thus, a moment later, the flare of a *dammar* torch just missed his face, and revealed only his brown body, lean and corded, and gleaming with palm oil.

"Only two men," the porter shouted. "An infidel and his servant!"

In the courtyard, someone repeated the call. "Only two, by Allah!" And the message was echoed from somewhere in the house itself. In a moment, the answer came to the front; first muffled, then clearer: "In the name of Allah! Let both come in."

Much simpler than getting out. But Knudsen was pushing his luck until it cracked or won. He could not hear the *chunk* of the bolt sliding home behind him. But the hinge creaked a farewell.

At the door of the reception room, Knudsen halted and squatted in the shadow of the jamb, as befitted his assumed rank. Simonini went into the smoky light of the *majlis*, where Marouf waited, thin lips compressed, and brows rising to arches under his big turban.

There was the usual grave ritual of greeting. From the corner of his eye, the big Dane could see that the thin-faced Arab was puzzled by this unusual call. But Simonini was his slick self, cool and suave.

Minutes dragged interminably. Vague sounds in the court worried the outer silence. Bare feet padded and robes rustled in the shadowy hall behind Knudsen. The moment of discovery would be no better for being delayed.

They were talking about pearls now. Simonini was describing a lot, kept, like Ahmad's, in rain water. Marouf was stroking his henna-red beard, and making jingling plays on Arabic. Finally he clapped his hands, and guards appeared. He said to Simonini, "Let us not talk of buying. But since you love pearls, you may look again. At the finest I have, next to the green ones."

HE ROSE, and beckoned to the Levantine. Knudsen was on his feet in a flash. A long leap carried him half way across the *majlis*. Marouf turned. Simonini whirled. Neither spoke, for Knudsen's gun was leveled, and his third bound brought him within arm's reach of the two.

"Haste is of Satan," he said, smiling mirthlessly. "I have come for a reckoning, Marouf. There is a pear-shaped green pearl which belongs to me. A thief sold it to you. Give it to me, and I leave in peace."

"Leave?" Marouf's voice was level. "Are your wits with Allah?"

"I found the Father of the Green, and my men require it of me," Knudsen explained. "Wherever I go, you go with me."

Marouf looked into the Dane's cold blue eyes, and knew that his guards could never get near enough to help. He said, "This man robbed you, *nakhoda?*"

"Yes, by your beard! And fear made him sell you into my hands. No man trusts me since I am unjustly accused, and it does not matter how I leave. I am the forgotten of Allah unless I have the Father of the Green."

Marouf burned Simonini with a glance, then looked at Knudsen and shrugged. "You would surely kill us both, madman. For a pearl."

"For that one which is mine, no matter what it cost you."

Marouf spoke to the servant who had not dared moved lest the invader's pistol cut down the master of the house. "Get it, Nuh."

Knudsen could not quite believe this; not even when Marouf added, at the servant's departure, "I buy. I do not steal. You are a madman, and it is well known that Allah loves you. So what this has cost me, I will require it of Simonini."

He could do just that, and the Levantine knew it.

Then Saoud cut in from the hallway, "That is well done, Marouf. So we do not have to slay your men!"

The mate of the *Suhail* had come in with the rest of the crew, taking the house guards by surprise; but counting on this was more than Knudsen had hoped for. Marouf exclaimed, "There is no might and no majesty save in Allah! How does this thing happen?"

When Knudsen saw a servant coming in with the Father of the Green, he explained, "I stuffed rags into the socket of the lock when it was opened for me and Simonini. So it was easy to surprise your men."

Marouf surrendered the pearl. "Take it and go."

The Levantine had not found his voice when Knudsen said, "Maybe you can square this with a refund, Brother Petro. Though that is no business of mine. No one in town knows where you went tonight. And if you live through this, try remembering what an old friend told me: *'He who steals a minaret should hide it in a well!'* "

Some days later, the *Suhail* was back in the fishing waters of the Dahalak Island; and Knudsen was in Shaykh Ahmad's house in the oasis. The old man was saying, "Verily, neither I nor my men could have opened the way. I drive a hard bargain, but it would have been better if you had seen me first."

"I had too much luck," Knudsen admitted. "So the Father of the Green is yours, for two hundred thousand *rupees.*"

"You are robbing me!" Shaykh Ahmad groaned. "Allah bear witness—"

"That you are a poor man, living in the desert."

So they sent for a *dallal* and two witnesses, as custom demanded. For nothing has changed on the Red Sea since the Queen of Sheba was a girl.

What—No Screeno?

MOVING picture technicians recently have been experimenting with a new kind of screen that produces a third-dimensional effect. So gratified are the Hollywood tycoons that they predict great things for this invention. We are to have movies in third dimension in no time at all.

What the new screen does is to absorb rather than to reflect the light thrown upon it by the camera. Consequently the actors stand out in three dimensions, and watching them must be a good deal like peering into one of those old stereopticons which we used to delight in. But the Hollywood people will work out all sorts of fancy tricks, of course; and it's interesting to reflect on what they may accomplish. For instance, will they be able to project Hedy Lamarr so far out from the screen that she will seem to be standing right in front of the spectator—or possibly sitting in his lap? It would be a pleasant illusion.

—*Charles Dorman*

The Man from Madrid

By WALTER RIPPERGER

FOUR American pirates of finance—Zimmerman, Meechling, McLaughlin and Gabriel—know that in the lawlessness of war, lawless men prosper. In Madrid, pretending to be working for Franco, they managed by violence and torture to secure a fabulous Loyalist treasure, which they had shipped to America.

A year later the two men who had been entrusted with it—the American Don Graham and José, a little Spanish cobbler—cross the Atlantic to recover the bullion and to mete out vengeance for what they had suffered at the hands of the unholy four.

Coldly, Don Graham tells each of them that he intends to kill them, one by one, until they return the money. Gabriel and Meechling are terrified. McLaughlin is inclined to bluster. Only Zimmerman is cool enough to evolve a plan. He tells Graham that the treasure has been used to buy arms for Franco's final push on Madrid, and offers to let Graham inspect the shipment. Graham soon discovers that he has been tricked, and that most of the munitions are valueless.

MEECHLING and Gabriel try to force Zimmerman to return what remains of the gold, which is locked in a safety vault to which only Zimmerman and Meechling have keys. Zimmerman refuses; Meechling, frightened, gives his key to his wife, Hilda, who has become interested in Don Graham.

Zimmerman realizes he will have to act quickly before Gabriel and Meechling crack. His secretary, Vera Higgins, who is blindly in love with him, reports that his brokers are calling for further margin—and he realizes his only resource is in his share of the treasure.

Don Graham, hoping to frighten Gabriel, warns Gabriel's niece, Diana Lee, of what he intends to do; and she, realizing he is no cold-blooded killer, tries to make him promise not to carry out his threat. This he refuses to do, although José, his partner, is afraid his resolve is weakening.

The next morning Meechling's body is discovered, and circumstantial evidence points to Don Graham. But Sergeant-detective C. O. Ponder does not believe Graham guilty; and this in addition to the efforts of the great criminal lawyer, Garber, effects Graham's release. Graham, puzzled, learns that Garber had intervened at the insistence of Brother

This story began in the Argosy for June 10

Nibbs, who runs a mission on the Bowery.

As he is leaving the courtroom, Graham is accosted by a shabbily dressed man. "Brother Nibbs wants to see you," the man says. "You better come quick. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

CLEFT FOR ME

DON GRAHAM made no move to accompany Hands. "I've got to go back to Headquarters," Graham said. "They've got my stuff down there and I've got to see what happened to a friend of mine who was arrested, too."

"Never mind about your stuff and your friend," Hands said. "Mr. Nibbs will take care of all that. Better come and see Mr. Nibbs."

Still Graham hesitated. Perhaps this restless-eyed individual was right. Perhaps everything considered, it might be just as well to see this Mr. Nibbs. It was quite obvious that Mr. Nibbs not only had influence, but was quick to use it. Just why he had exerted it on his behalf, Graham hadn't the faintest notion, but here was a chance to find out.

Hands led him to a shabby old sedan parked a few yards away. At the wheel sat a short man with a flat face and mud-brown hair—Pudgy Myers. He didn't turn his head to look at Graham or at Hands—just waited until the door slammed then started the car uptown.

At the Rock of Ages Mission, Hands said: "Better stick around, Pudgy. Mr. Nibbs might want to see you. Tell the rest o' the boys."

Pudgy nodded and Hands led Graham inside.

The hall was deserted, gloomy and musty. Mr. Nibbs was in his little office at his desk. He motioned Hands outside. When the latter had gone, he turned to Don.

"Have a seat, Brother Graham."

The Manx cat came and rubbed its body against Graham's trouser leg. "Lucifer likes you," Mr. Nibbs said, as though that was to Don's credit. "Garber just telephoned. I'm glad everything turned out so well, although Garber admitted that it wasn't due so much to his efforts as to the testimony of a Sergeant Ponder."

Graham nodded. He kept his eyes on Mr. Nibbs. There was something unreal, incredible about the one-eyed man with his one-eyed cat. "Garber told me a little about you," Nibbs said, "but if I am to help you, I must have the complete story from you."

"You can't help me," Graham said shortly. "Maybe that sounds ungracious, but this is a job that only I can do."

Mr. Nibbs twisted his lips into the ugly line he considered a smile, and softening his strident voice, said:

"You'd be surprised. I think you at least owe it to me to tell me the story. After that I'll tell you what I can do. Then if you still don't wish my help there will have been no harm done. You can go your way and I'll go mine."

Graham shrugged. "All right," he said, "I'll tell you."

FOR the second time that day he related his story. When he had finished, Mr. Nibbs made a queer, hissing sound through his teeth. His good eye gleamed. "Five million dollars," he said, "is a great deal of money. So much good could be done with it—and so much evil."

"If I get it back," Graham said, "it's going to the Loyalists. If Franco wins—and that seems inevitable—it's going to help the refugees."

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Nibbs, "but you won't get it back. It's plain to me you don't know how. I'm not questioning your courage, Brother Graham, nor your determination. It's just that you haven't the equipment, you haven't the men."

"I've got one man—"

"Yes, I know. The little Spaniard—José—you said his name was. What can you do, you two, against this Zimmerman you described, and the others? And you haven't any money. He has plenty. And there's something else you lack—something else—"

"What?"

"The proper attitude. No, that's not it. That doesn't define it quite accurately," Mr. Nibbs went on thoughtfully. "I have a love for words. Do you like words, Brother Graham? I mean words that are exact in their meaning? Take the word 'ferocity' . . ." He stooped down and stroked Lucifer, then he straightened up and fixed Don Graham with his one eye. "Brother Nibbs has everything that is suited to this situation. He has the men, the money, and the proper attitude . . . ferocity." His voice was filled with such malign intensity that Don Graham could only stare at him speechless.

There in the semi-darkness of Mr. Nibbs' little office, Don Graham had a sudden sense of evil. The stuffy air seemed filled with it—evil that spurted from Mr. Nibbs' one good eye, evil of such strength, such magnitude that it seemed to spread, even to cross over into Mr. Nibbs' glass eye, making that rigid optic seem alive.

Graham was breathing hard. He wanted to get up and leave, and yet something held him there. An idea at the back of his mind was gradually forming. The evil that was concentrated in the person of Mr. Nibbs, properly directed, might achieve the thing that he, Don Graham, wanted—to get back that treasure. There was something inhuman about that evil. It wasn't the expression of an emotion, it was a force.

For moments neither of the two said anything. Then Graham, his eyes hot, intent, said:

"Why do you want to do this for me? Why do you want to help me?"

"That is my mission in life," said Nibbs, "to help those in need, and by helping you, I will be able to help others."

"I don't understand"

"I naturally would expect a share," said Mr. Nibbs, "not for myself, of course, but for the mission—a small share of what we recover—say twenty per cent. To do it for so little, I am sure you will agree is charity."

"In other words, you expect to get a million dollars," Graham said, his voice harsh.

"Not for myself, but for the mission," Mr. Nibbs reiterated, "and believe me, without me you'll get nothing. With me, you'll get four million, and more than that—you'll get your revenge."

"How do you propose to go about it?"

Mr. Nibbs turned his head sideways so that the left side, the Mr. Hyde's side of his face was toward Don. He bent forward a little and said:

"By striking terror into their hearts."

Mr. Nibbs rose. He went to the door, opened it and called:

"Hands, come, and bring the others." His voice sounded weird and hollow in the emptiness of the meeting hall outside.

A MINUTE went by, then five men trooped in. Two of them Graham recognized. One was the man who had accosted him in front of the courthouse, the other the man who had driven the car. Behind these came three more—Jones, walking with his arms swinging loosely, seeming taller than ever with his eyes more frozen, his square chin more aggressive, Runner Smith appearing nondescript, nothing like the cold-blooded killer he was, and last of all came Bugs Bindler. A dirty handkerchief was gripped in Bugs Bindler's hand. There were little dark red spots on the handkerchief.

They came in silently, not looking at Graham, not looking at anything, and grouped themselves about the room against the walls. Hands sat on top of the safe. Pudgy Myers stepped onto the seat of a chair and perched himself high up on its back. Runner Smith did the same with a second chair. Jones spat on the glowing stove making a sizzling noise and leaned indifferently against the wall. He was so tall that he was on a level with the other two on the backs of their chairs. Bugs Bindler looked around. There weren't any other chairs. Little Bugs Bindler tried to climb up onto the safe next to Hands and couldn't quite make it. He started coughing and held the handkerchief to his

mouth. Hands reached down, took hold of the little man's wrist and helped him up.

Then there was silence.

Mr. Nibbs swung around in his chair facing them.

"Some of my men," he said to Graham, "just a few of them—my lieutenants. There are others, quite a lot of others who fight in the front line trenches, so to speak."

Graham stirred restlessly. Why the devil didn't Nibbs put on the light? To be sure it was just about noon broad daylight, but the two windows at the back of Mr. Nibbs' office were so covered with dirt and grime that the sunlight struggled in vain to come through, and he felt uncomfortable with these strange men now looking down at him without saying a word, without moving.

"This is Brother Graham. We are confronted by a problem—Brother Graham and I. There are three men. They must be brought to reason. At least one of them must be brought to reason—the leader. How are we going to go about it?"

Slowly Mr. Nibbs' narrow head swiveled on his scraggly throat, taking in each of his five lieutenants in turn. None of them spoke. They sat there rigid, remote.

A chill feeling went up and down Graham's spine. These men were like dead bats clinging to the rafters . . . not knowing they were dead.

After a long time, Hands said:

"What's in it for us?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Nibbs firmly, "but a great deal for the Mission."

"The Mission—that's what I mean."

"Something must happen," Mr. Nibbs declared, ignoring the question, "something must happen to one of the three men, so that the other two will realize that we mean business. What do you suggest?"

Still the five men sat there silent but watchful. Finally Runner Smith spoke.

"Let one of 'em have a belly full of slugs, that's what I say—a little tattooing with a tommy gun."

Mr. Nibbs shook his head. "Crude," he murmured, "crude."

Pudgy said: "All right. Plant his feet in a tub of concrete and dump him in the river. That'll learn the other two."

Mr. Nibbs glanced at Jones, who stretched his long arms and flexed his fingers. Then he made a pinching gesture with his thumb and forefinger, against his throat.

"I'd squeeze him just like that," he volunteered, "just like that I'd squeeze him."

Graham, staring at the man, felt sick inside. The cold gruesomeness of it all was more than he could stand. He wanted to get away from this place, so as to put miles between himself and the fetid atmosphere in this room that threatened to choke him. He started to rise and found Mr. Nibbs' eye on him.

Mr. Nibbs had reached down and scooped up Lucifer. He was holding the Manx cat in his lap, stroking its back.

"No, no," Mr. Nibbs said, "something more subtle, something more fearsome. Our new friend, Brother Graham, wouldn't want anything of the sort you suggest. He's a fighter, a soldier, but he doesn't like that sort of butchery." Mr. Nibbs' good eye being away from Graham, he permitted himself a wink. "He doesn't know you very well. He doesn't realize that you are just joking."

Hands essayed a grin. Runner Smith and Pudgy bared their teeth, both trying to smile. If anything, it made them look more horrible, more relentlessly cruel. Bugs Bindler up on the safe beside Hands, coughed.

"I wish—I wish one of 'em had what I have," he said. He put his handkerchief to his mouth while a spasm racked his emaciated body. "If I could give it to him—"

Mr. Nibbs held out his hand to Graham.

"We must give this more thought," he said, "but you can count on us, Brother Graham. We never fail. Come back tomorrow and we'll tell you our plans."

Don Graham, pretending not to see the outstretched hand, got up. "Thanks," he said.

"Before you go," Mr. Nibbs said, "give me the addresses of the three men—Zimmerman, McLaughlin and Gabriel."

Graham stared for a long time moodily at Mr. Nibbs. For some reason he didn't want to give Nibbs the addresses, and yet why not? In the first place, Nibbs could find the addresses in the telephone book, and in the second place, if he did anything —anything that would frighten Zimmerman and the others—so much the better. He took the pad and pencil that Mr. Nibbs was holding out to him and wrote down the addresses. Then he turned and limped out.

When he had gone, Mr. Nibbs' men climbed down from their perches and gathered around Mr. Nibbs. Greed leapt high in their dead, watchful eyes—even Hands' generally restless eyes had that dead watchful quality now. Almost of one accord, they said:

"How much—how much is in it?"

Mr. Nibbs waited a few seconds before answering, then:

"Millions! Millions!"

Jones flexed his long arms, curled and uncurled his fingers.

"What'll we do?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Nothing," said Mr. Nibbs, "not right away. I think it's a matter that will require my personal attention . . . and some thought."

OUT in the street, Graham turned up the collar of his trenchcoat. The day was raw, but even so he took deep breaths, filling and refilling his lungs with the fresh air as though to rid himself of the foul atmosphere of Mr. Nibbs' office. Then he heard his name called.

Parked along the curb there was a small green police car. A young uniformed policeman was at the wheel and beside him sat Sergeant Ponder, beckoning. Graham went over.

To the policeman, C O. Ponder said:

"You take the subway while I drive Mr. Graham down to headquarters for his stuff."

The young policeman climbed out. Sergeant Ponder worked his way under the wheel and made room for Don Graham.

"I owe you an apology," Sergeant Ponder said in his gloomy way, as he put the car into gear. "That was a dirty trick I played you."

Don Graham said, "I don't understand."

C. O. Ponder said nothing until he came to a red light. He plucked a pin from the lapel of his coat and impaled what remained of his cigar butt on that. That enabled him to get another half dozen puffs before having to throw it away. He reached into his pocket and brought out a brand new wallet.

"It's a present for you," he said, "not exactly a present—a sort of an exchange. I want to keep your old wallet and give you this one."

Don Graham, nonplussed, looked at the wallet the sergeant had thrust in his hand.

The light changed. Sergeant Ponder threw his butt regretfully out into the street, carefully replaced the pin, and set the car in motion.

"I knew all along you didn't kill this Meechling," he said. "I was just using you. First I thought if I locked you up you'd crack and tell me what's back of this, but it didn't take me long to find out you're not the kind that cracks. Then I thought at the hearing I'd have the D. A. put this Zimmerman and McLaughlin and the two women on the stand if I couldn't get anything out of you. I had it figured out all wrong. I thought you didn't have a lawyer, that you were sort of alone, but when Garber showed up I knew it was no use. Garber would punch my case full of holes in no time, so I spilled the beans myself and got you off. You must be pretty well fixed to be able to get Garber."

Don Graham shrugged. "Why do you want my old wallet?" he asked.

"Maybe it will come in handy," C. O. Ponder said noncommittedly. For the briefest instant he let his inexpressive round eyes rest on Don Graham. "You don't feel like opening up, do you?"

Don Graham shook his head. Perhaps some time he'd tell the sergeant his story,

but he'd already told it twice that morning and he was tired. The ordeal he had been through had taken more out of him than he realized and he wanted time to think things out. Now that he no longer stood accused of killing Meechling, he wanted to try and figure out who had done it—and why. In a vague way he wondered if he could take advantage of the fact that Gabriel had seemed so sure that he, Don Graham, had done it. Even little José had thought he had done it. And that reminded him.

"What about my friend?" he said to the sergeant. "The little Spaniard you arrested too?"

"We're letting him go," C. O. Ponder said. "No use holding him now."

Another light and C. O. Ponder brought the car to a stop. He fished out a fresh cigar, lit it with one of his kitchen matches, and without glancing at Don Graham, said:

"What were you doing up in that Mission? Do you live there?"

"Live there?" Don Graham said. "I'd rather live in a sewer."

"Tch-tch," C. O. Ponder said, "what a way to talk about a Mission."

CHAPTER XIII

THE WHISPERING WOMAN

AROUND six o'clock that evening, Mr. Nibbs had Pudgy Myers drive him up to the house in which Gabriel lived. Mr. Nibbs didn't get out of the car. He just told Pudgy to stop across the street while he surveyed 362a through the window. Two workmen were busy putting up iron bars in front of the first floor window; there were bars already on those in the basemen.

"Mr. Gabriel seems to be taking precautions," Mr. Nibbs said, addressing the back of Pudgy's head. "Those bars are stout and it is reasonable to suppose that the door has been reinforced. If they're that afraid of this Don Graham," he went on stridently, "I wonder how they'd feel if they knew about me."

Pudgy Myers grunted.

"Turn around," said Mr. Nibbs. "We're going downtown across the Brooklyn Bridge, where McLaughlin lives. Perhaps McLaughlin lives in a house too—a house less guarded than this one."

Pudgy nodded, swung the car around and started downtown.

Pat McLaughlin lived a short distance across from the bridge, on Orange Street. As the car drew up and Mr. Nibbs verified the number, something like satisfaction lit up Mr. Nibbs' one eye.

Pat McLaughlin's was a very old little house, a frame house, two stories high, that looked as though it might collapse in a fairish gust of wind. McLaughlin had inherited it from his grandfather. In those days this section had been a more pretentious residential area but now a huge garage flanked the little house on one side and a none too attractive tenement on the other. McLaughlin didn't care whether he was comfortable or not. Some day of course he'd move to more pretentious quarters, that is, as soon as he'd sold the house if ever anyone wanted it.

Pudgy Myers swung around so that he could see Mr. Nibbs in the back seat.

"If that's it," he said, "I can get into it with a jackknife."

Mr. Nibbs nodded. He had, in the meantime, noted the sign that said "For Sale."

"Before you use your jackknife," said Mr. Nibbs, "I think I'll just go inside and first have a little chat with Mr. McLaughlin, if he's in."

He climbed out of the car with surprising agility, mounted the half dozen steps and rang the bell. He had a long wait and was about to ring again when the door opened.

A little woman of around fifty stood there. She wore a black dress and a white apron. Her face was heavily lined and her gray eyes were filled with distrust—a distrust which mounted as she studied Mr. Nibbs' countenance.

"I'd like to see the owner," Mr. Nibbs said, striving to make his voice ingratiating. "I see this house is for sale."

For a time the woman made no move to allow him to enter, then she drew aside. Mr. Nibbs stepped past her went through the door she indicated, and found himself in a small parlor. The furniture was old, of a bad period. The windows were curtained with dark red draperies. There was a fireplace but no fire. All this Mr. Nibbs saw only after she had turned a switch and lit a converted gas chandelier.

"You can sit down," she said in an unfriendly way. "Nobody ever comes to look at the house, except when it's suppertime."

SHE disappeared and a little later McLaughlin came in. "My name is Smithers," Mr. Nibbs said, coming directly to the point. "I was passing by and saw that this house was for sale. I might be interested—that is, if the price isn't too high."

McLaughlin sized up his visitor. He didn't look very prosperous, still one never could tell.

"I'm asking fifteen thousand," McLaughlin said. "It's not the house, it's the property that makes it worth that."

"A little high, a little high," Mr. Nibbs said carefully, "still I don't suppose it costs much to run a house like this."

"I only have one servant," McLaughlin said, "—a housekeeper, the woman who let you in. She can take care of it easily."

"Would you take half in cash and a mortgage for the rest?"

McLaughlin began to show more interest. It looked as though here was a possible buyer. "Would you like to go through the house?"

"If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all," said McLaughlin. "This, as you see, is the living room. Now back here," he pushed a set of sliding doors apart, "here's the dining room. There's a little yard in back."

From there on, he led Mr. Nibbs through the rest of the house. It wasn't much of a house—three small bedrooms upstairs, a couple of servant bedrooms in the basement, and a kitchen of course.

Still Mr. Nibbs took it all in with the greatest interest. When they were all through, Mr. Nibbs said:

"I'll talk to my wife about it. We live in an apartment now out in Flatbush, but we'd like to move to a little house. I think this would suit her—suit her nicely. What about the neighbors? Are they congenial people, Mr.—?"

"McLaughlin," McLaughlin said. "I don't know about the neighbors. Never speak to them. My friends live in New York. I guess the neighbors are all right."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Mr. Nibbs said, nodding agreeably. "You'll hear from me in a day or so, Mr. McLaughlin."

McLaughlin watched him go with a distinct sense that the house was as good as sold—a sense that grew more definite as he watched Mr. Nibbs climb into the sedan and being driven off. An unpleasant-looking party with a glass eye. but still McLaughlin felt that he had judged him correctly—a miserly old codger who had a car and a chauffeur of sorts, just the kind of a chap who'd buy a house like this.

HOURS before, Hilda Meechling had gone to Zimmerman's office. Zimmerman was out. She went in and waited in his room.

Hilda had been thinking. When poor Eddie had given her that key, the key to the vault, he had said that if anything were to happen to him, she was to take the key right to Zimmerman. Then he had said, "I'm more afraid of—". He never had had a chance to finish that sentence, but Hilda could surmise what he had intended to say—"I'm more afraid of Zimmerman than Don Graham." Why?

Hilda turned away from the window and sat down. She lit a cigarette. In the event of anything happening to Eddie, Eddie had told her not to try to get into the vault. A curious piece of advice to give her. It would never have occurred to her to try and get into the vault, but if she had—

A sudden break came in Hilda's thoughts. Her mind went off sharply at a tangent. What if there was something

wrong with the vault! What if it was empty! That must be it. When Eddie had told her his version of that treasure they had gotten in Madrid, he had told her about its being stored in the vault. He had told her that only he and Zimmerman had keys to the vault.

Suppose the treasure, or at least part of it, was gone and Eddie knew it. Probably that's why he had been afraid of Zimmerman. He feared that Zimmerman some day would do away with him so that he couldn't betray him. She remembered now the time she and Eddie had first discussed the arrival of Don Graham, and how Eddie had told her that Zimmerman would have to do what Eddie said. That had made her laugh at the time, but she understood it a little better now.

In a way Eddie had a hold over Zimmerman. Probably not so much of a hold, because if the treasure or any part of it was gone, Eddie must have received a small share himself. Maybe Eddie had helped filch some of the treasure. On the other hand, it was more likely that Zimmerman had just paid him off.

And now Eddie was dead.

Had the thing he feared actually happened? Was it Zimmerman who had murdered him? Had Zimmerman seen a way to kill two birds with one stone, to rid himself of Eddie and Don Graham at one and the same time? Hilda wondered. She didn't put it beyond Zimmerman. Zimmerman was capable of anything. She had always known that. It was a characteristic in him which, in a mild way, fascinated her. At the same time Zimmerman's coarseness repelled her.

The look in Hilda's eyes softened. Poor Eddie! What a terrible position he must have been in! No wonder he worried, with the threat of Zimmerman hanging always over him, and no wonder he had told her to take that key straight to Zimmerman if anything ever happened to him, and keep away from the vault.

Eddie had certainly loved her. He hadn't wanted anything to happen to her, had tried to caution her so that she wouldn't get into the same position that he himself had been in. If, like Eddie, Zimmerman discovered that she knew about the vault, Zimmerman would have to remove her too. That's what Eddie had been afraid of. Poor Eddie! She wished she had been kinder to him. She had tried, she honestly had tried . . .

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN came in. He greeted her in his booming way. He dropped heavily into the chair at his desk, swiveled it around so that he could face her, and asked.

"Anything I can do for you in connection with the funeral?"

"No thank you," Hilda said, her voice cool and detached, "I can manage."

Zimmerman felt there was something in the air, and waited.

"I'm a sort of a partner here now, I suppose," Hilda said slowly, "now that Eddie's dead. One of these days I'd like to come down and check things over with you—just how I stand. I mean what my interest in the firm amounts to."

"Sure, sure," Zimmerman agreed heartily. He stopped short "You don't mind my saying, do you," he declared, "that you're the best-looking widow I've ever seen?"

"I do mind your saying it," Hilda said, "at this time."

"Why?" Zimmerman wanted to know. "You don't look very broken up over Eddie's death. You haven't gone all to pieces. He's not buried yet and you're down here wanting to know what his share in the business was. And that reminds me. Yesterday the first thing you wanted to know when you discovered that Eddie was dead, was about the things they'd found in his pockets. You know, I didn't think you were like that. I think you and I will get along fine together. Some people might say you were grasping, but not me. Ho, ho, ho, Fritz Zimmerman is just like you. Eddie's dead so what's the use of fussing about that? The thing to find out is how much was he worth, how you stand, even to the extent of not letting the cops walk off with a couple of hundred dollars

or so that might have been in Eddie's pockets."

Hilda colored faintly, but her voice was as level as ever when she said:

"There was only one thing that I was interested in as to the things in Eddie's pockets. That was a key—a flat key to a vault."

Nothing changed in Zimmerman's enormous face. The china blue eyes retained their guileless expression. He locked his fingers across his fat stomach and said:

"I remember. What became of that key, by the way?"

"I've got it," Hilda said. "I had it when I asked the policeman for it."

"Then why did you ask him about it?"

"Just to let you know," she said, emphasizing each word in turn, "that I knew about that key."

"What did you know?" Zimmerman still sat there, a great mountain of flesh, unruffled.

"Nothing much then,' Hilda said, "I just had a feeling that you would like to have that key back. . . . Now I'm sure of it."

Now Zimmerman sucked in his breath heavily. He straightened up in his swivel chair, and without looking, groped for the chromeplated box that held his peanut brittle. His hand couldn't find it and he looked. The box was gone. He scowled and punched the buzzer.

Vera came in. At the sight of Hilda, she stiffened.

"Where's that box that was on my table?" Zimmerman growled.

Vera, keeping her eyes on Hilda, not even glancing at the table, said:

"How should I know?" Her voice was strained.

Zimmerman banged the desk with his fist. He invariably lost his temper over petty annoyances and not big ones.

"Why wouldn't you know?" he thundered. "Anybody been in here while I was out?"

Vera's face colored deeply. She turned on Zimmerman. How dare he talk to her in that tone, especially in front of this woman, this Meechling woman who she felt convinced was trying to take Zimmerman away from her? How dare he humiliate her like that? An angry retort flew to her lips but she checked it. It would only make matters worse.

"Nobody," she said, "unless perhaps it was that sergeant. He came in a while ago and asked for you and when you were out they told him at the desk to see me. He wanted to go through the building in connection with—with what happened to Mr. Meechling. He didn't ask me if he could; he just said he would. Very likely he was in here too."

"What the devil would a detective want with a box of peanut brittle?" Zimmerman grumbled irritably.

Vera shrugged and went out of the room.

HILDA MEECHLING rose. She stood for seconds marvelously contained, a faint smile on her lips. She faced Zimmerman. "Could you give me Don Graham's address?"

Zimmerman glared at her. He hadn't quite recovered himself. Then he laughed. He took a slip of paper from his desk and scribbled the address on it and gave it to her.

"What are you trying to do, make him? You're wasting your time. That guy's got no use for women, and even if you get him, he won't be much use to you, not by the time I get through with him. He wiggled out of that jam he was in this morning on account of a dumb cop, but I'm not through yet. I'll do plenty to him."

Hilda, still smiling, opened her purse and dropped the slip Zimmerman had given her, inside, snapped it shut and looked at Zimmerman.

"You're not going to do anything to Don Graham," she said.

"Who's going to stop me?"

Hilda, her voice pleasant, said:

"If anything happens to him, I'll take a look at that vault . . . I should certainly want to look at the vault along with McLaughlin and Gabriel . . . because you see if anything happened to Don Graham,

time would hang heavy on my hands now that Eddie's gone . . . and I probably wouldn't think of anything to do except to check up that treasure . . . to see it's all there."

"Ho, ho, ho," Zimmerman laughed, but his laughter hadn't the same note that it generally held.

"Are you threatening me?" he asked, "or something?"

"No, just warning you," Hilda said, and walked out.

Fritz Zimmerman watched the door close behind her. Alone, some of the geniality went out of his eyes. He sat there motionless chewing his lower lip. Then he got up and started for the door that led into Vera's office. He was about to reach for the knob when the catch sprang of itself. Vera hadn't closed the door tightly.

He started in but stopped at the sound of a voice. If there were somebody with Vera, he didn't want to go in. He listened. Maybe it was only McLaughlin or perhaps it was that damn policeman again, Sergeant Ponder.

The voice he heard was a woman's voice. It sounded familiar and yet he didn't actually recognize it at first. And then he did! It was Vera's voice but it had a strange quality to it, a sort of sing-song monotonous quality, as though she were talking in her sleep, and what she said didn't seem to make much sense either.

Gently, Zimmerman pushed the door back a few inches so that he could peer inside. Vera was alone. She was standing with her back toward him, staring into a little mirror that hung over the wash-basin. Zimmerman could see her face, her dark eyes wide and glassy as though she were in a trance. He could make out plainly what she was saying. She was saying:

"It's gone, Mr. Graham. Most of it's gone. It wasn't my fault. I'll tell you how it happened if you promise not to harm me—I'll tell you . . ."

Vera stopped. Her whole body seemed to petrify. Then suddenly she buried her face in her hands and sobbed wildly.

Zimmerman closed the door noiselessly and stepped back to his desk. For a time he stood looking at the opposite wall with unseeing eyes.

"What's going on around here anyhow?" he muttered fiercely.

CHAPTER XIV

FANATICS WILL FIGHT

IN THEIR shabby little room Don Graham sat in the rocker, smoking. José was reading a Spanish newspaper—*La Voz*. "It is bad, comrade," José said. "There is not enough guns, not enough planes, there is not enough of anything, and there is not enough food." José's face was gray, woeful. "It is hard to fight when there is *nada . . . nada.*"

Don Graham nodded in a distrait way. He had a feeling of lassitude that he couldn't shake off. Very possibly it was only a letdown, the result of what had happened in court during the morning, but he didn't think that that was it.

Perhaps it was the interview he had had with Mr. Nibbs and those silent watchful vultures that Mr. Nibbs called his lieutenants. There had been something revolting about those men and the latent cruelty that slept inside them, ready to come to life at Mr. Nibbs' bidding.

Whatever happened, he wouldn't avail himself to Mr. Nibbs' proffered aid. He wouldn't sink to that level. Mr. Nibbs and his crew were birds of prey—unclean birds of prey. And Mr. Nibbs had offered his help for what there was in it for them. He wanted a mill on dollars. Don Graham was willing to pay that if he could get the treasure back, but he was asked to pay more than that; he was asked to sacrifice his self-respect, his sense of decency.

But that wasn't all that was troubling Don Graham. He couldn't attribute that overpowering weariness that held him in its grip to that alone. It was as José had said. His heart was no longer in the mission he had undertaken. And why wasn't it?

Perhaps Mr. Nibbs had been right. He

hadn't the equipment, he hadn't the men or the money to combat Zimmerman, and perhaps there was that other thing that he didn't have—ferocity the degree of savagery necessary to accomplish what he had set out to do. And yet he had had it.

He had arrived with his soul filled with all the ferocity that even Mr. Nibbs could desire. He had come satisfied that there was nothing too ruthless, too cruel that he wouldn't undertake, to bring about the restoration of what Zimmerman and his gang had stolen.

But it wasn't there any more. The iron in him had softened, had lost its strength. He tried to tell himself that that wasn't so, that he was only temporarily thrown off his stride, that he'd be himself again tomorrow or the next day. And of course that girl, that niece of Gabriel's had nothing to do with it. He was nothing to her and she was nothing to him.

He was in a war, a bitter struggle, and there was no place in war for softness, for romance. There was no place for anything but fighting and blood and death.

As from a distance he heard José say: "It is bad, comrade. Madrid will fall—"

DON GRAHAM roused himself with an effort. He had detected a note of doubt in José's voice and that doubt was meant for him.

He had been mad to think that he could come back here, with no one to aid him but José, and recover all that gold. He had been insane to think that he could frighten a man like Zimmerman, secure here in New York, protected by the law, by his friends, his money. But what would happen to José if he deserted him? The little Spaniard was capable of any desperate act. He was capable of carrying on all by himself, but nothing could come of that. Somebody would be killed. That shoemaker's knife of José's would slit a throat, and then what? José would stand in the court where he, Don Graham, had been standing that morning, with a charge of murder, and no one would be able to get José off. What a tragic end!

"I've got to form a plan, José," Don Graham said. "You and I must form a plan. We must weigh our chances carefully. It may take days," said Don Graham, not knowing what else to say. He couldn't think of any way in which to play for time but that.

He started to say something else, but stopped. There was a knock on the door. José sprang to his feet, facing the door, his crippled hand inside his blouse on the shoemaker's knife.

"Zimmerman!" he whispered.

Don Graham said:

"Perhaps." He rose, reached for his cane, and stood there. "All right, open the door."

José crossed the room to the door. He threw the bolt back silently, then flung the door wide. Then he let out a soft, hissing sound, and spun around so that he could see Don Graham.

Don Graham's face went white. He stood a little unsteadily. It was not Zimmerman, nor any of the others, at the door. It was Diana!

She came in shutting the door quietly behind her. After a brief glance in José's direction, she fixed her eyes on Don Graham.

"The other night," she said, "you asked me to come and see you. Tonight I've come without being asked."

"Will you—will you sit down?" Don Graham indicated the rocker.

Diana shook her head.

"I can only stay a few minutes." She paused as though it were hard for her to say what she had come to say.

José, standing near the door, watched her with restless eyes.

"You can't blame me," she said, "if for a while I thought that you had killed Meechling. Remember, you told me you were going to do something like that. I know now you didn't. My uncle is still convinced that you did. It's been a terrible shock to him." Again she stopped.

Her unexpected appearance had thrown Don Graham off balance. Now he was himself again. That faint mirthless smile came to his lips.

"I find it hard," he said, "to work up any sympathy for your uncle."

"I know," she said. "That's one of the reasons why I came to see you. You're too big, too fine, Don Graham, to let your whole nature become warped, to let your mind be filled with hate and thoughts of vengeance. I can't bear to think of you being like that. It's unworthy of you. Besides, what can it mean to you? The Spanish are nothing to you. Fighting for either side is just one of those quixotic things that men do. What difference can it make to you which side wins?"

A soft, sibilant sound from José interrupted her.

Don Graham said nothing. In one sense she was right. It didn't matter to him which side won, but he had taken sides with the Loyalists and had made their cause, his. Surely that meant something. It wasn't just being quixotic. But then she couldn't be expected to see it. The gulf between her life and his was too wide, he told himself.

"I want you to give up this mad quest of yours," Diana said. She was holding her head a little defiantly now. "I'm—I'm fond of you, Don Graham. It seems scarcely credible. I've seen so little of you, but I am—I am fond of you."

Don Graham's somber eyes glowed dully. He felt the blood pounding in his veins. She was fond of him! Idiotically, in a strained voice, he said:

"You're fond of me? What does that mean?"

For an instant, Diana dropped her eyes; then she met his gaze squarely.

"More than you think perhaps. But I couldn't feel that way toward you, couldn't if . . . You must be what I *think* you are! You can't destroy my picture of you, the real you, incapable of brutality, of . . ." She finished the sentence with a shrug.

DON GRAHAM didn't notice José. The little Spaniard's eyes were darting back and forth between Diana and Don Graham. He could see what was happening. She was taking Don Graham, his ally, away from him, away from the Loyalists, and all would be lost. Something had to be done, and that quickly. With lithe, swift steps, José came and placed himself in front of Diana.

"The things thees Zimmerman did, *señorita,* and your uncle, Meester Gabriel, and the others, they are nothing, ha? Look," he said, holding out his hands with the curved fingers that would never be straight again. "Look," he said, pointing to Don Graham's maimed foot, "thees they do to us—they torture, they cripple, and that is nothing. All right, that is nothing, but they steal, not from Don Graham and José, but they steal from the Loyalists, from all the people, and that is nothing, ha?" His whispering voice grew steadily more passionate.

Don Graham said, "José!"

José paid no attention to him. He pushed back his hair.

"Look," he said, "thees they do to José . . ."

Diana turned away with a shudder. There was a look of disgust in her face. More to herself than to anyone, she said:

"Revolting."

For seconds Don Graham's eyes clouded. She shouldn't have said that. But perhaps she shouldn't be blamed either. It was not a nice sight for a girl of Diana's sensitive nature, he told himself. With all her loveliness, she was meant to be guarded, shielded from the unpleasantness of life, and not subjected to it.

Once more he said, but gently this time:

"José."

Slowly the little Spaniard dropped his hair and turned to look at him. Hopelessness filled José's eyes as he walked away.

"I'm sorry," Don Graham said. "José doesn't quite understand people like you. His heart is in Spain . . . and he's suffered a lot."

"Does my coming here," Diana Lee said, "saying the things I have said, mean anything to you?"

"Yes," Don Graham said, "it means a great deal to me."

"You'll—you'll do as I ask?"

It seemed as though he would never answer, but in the end he nodded once.

Diana held out her hand. He took it eagerly. There were things he wanted to say to her but they wouldn't come to him just then.

Perhaps she understood. Her eyes warmed. She smiled, and then was gone.

José went to a chair and for a long time he sat, bent forward, staring down at the floor.

Don Graham watched him. He had a sense of discomfort, a vague feeling of disloyalty. And yet what the devil did José expect? It was all right for José to feel the way he did. It was *his* country, not Don Graham's. And even so, he had done all that could be expected of any man. He had fought for the Loyalists, fought more savagely, more grimly than any Spaniard. José had said so himself. And he had allowed himself to be tortured, to be crippled, and he hadn't given in. And he had come over here with the firm intention of getting the treasure back, but it couldn't be done, it couldn't be done.

And he had a right to some happiness out of life, and it was here, within his reach. He knew it. He was just as sure of it as if that happiness were already his. Don Graham moistened his dry lips.

"José," he said.

José looked up, then rose. "Yes, comrade?"

"I can't help it," Don Graham said, his voice rasping.

FOR a time, José looked at him, his dark eyes stark, then: "When I was in *la carcel*—in prison, comrade, before you come and get me out, I think. There is much time to think. To myself I say, 'Thees trouble has come to Don Graham because of you, José. It was you who tell where the treasure was hidden. It's all your fault, José,' I say to myself. 'Why should Don Graham go on?' I ask myself. 'Why should he run the beeg risk when it was all your fault, Jose?' "

Don Graham scowled. 'You know that's not it," he said, "It's just—"

"I know—I know, comrade," José interupted him. "I could understand if that was it—if you stopped now because you feel that way, or maybe because thees thing we come and try to do, it is impossible perhaps. But you don't stop because of that. You stop . . . because of a woman."

Don Graham's mouth tightened. He knew that José was right. But hadn't he a right to quit for any reason that he wanted to?

"Even a *mujer*—a woman," José said, "I can understand, but not . . . not thees woman!"

Don Graham straightened up. Anger darkened his face.

"What are you talking about?"

José, his hands clenched until the nails dug deep into his palms, said:

"Thees woman, she is not for you, comrade. She is soft. She has no power. She is without strength. She thinks in a funny way. To her everything in life must be nice, must be soft. It is wrong, comrade. She isn't for you, I know it—*I know it.* There is no blood in her veins . . . only *agua.*"

With each word Don Graham's anger mounted and then his expression softened; he felt sad. Poor José, striving so desperately to keep him linked to himself, to their joint mission and to the Loyalists. He could even see José's point of view about Diana. She wasn't like the girls in Spain. It was easily understandable how José couldn't see anything in Diana.

Don Graham put a hand on José's shoulder. "I suppose in a way I've let you down, José. I didn't mean to. It's just—Oh, what the devil! I'm tired and worn out. I think I've taxed myself a little too much, what with the war and that other business, and the thing that happened yesterday, and—" A wry smile came to Don Graham's lips, "and the woman, if you want to. José—the woman who's not for me."

Don Graham tried to make his voice friendly, reasonable, and succeeded in a measure, and yet he couldn't shake off that tiny feeling of guilt.

"I'll give it some more thought, José. I'll do my darnedest to figure out a way."

José stepped away from him. It was as if he wanted to look at Don Graham from a distance in order to get a better perspective of him.

"*Si, si,* comrade," José said slowly. The look in his black fanatical eyes was more tense than Don Graham had ever seen it. "While you *think,* comrade . . . José will fight."

CHAPTER XV

GOODNIGHT, SWEETHEART

PAT McLAUGHLIN came down to breakfast the following morning at his usual hour. He went straight into the dining room, picked up his morning paper, punched the bell so that his housekeeper might know that he was ready, and started to read. He was so engrossed in the front page that he failed to notice that the footsteps of the person who came and stood by his chair were not the footsteps of his housekeeper. It was only when a deferential but strident voice said, "What will you have for breakfast, sir?" that McLaughlin looked up. There was a man in a butler's attire standing beside his chair.

For a moment Pat McLaughlin couldn't believe his eyes. The look of bewilderment on his face was almost comical.

"What the—?" he began, then, "What are you doing here? Say, aren't you—?"

"You rang, sir," Mr. Nibbs said with mock deference.

McLaughlin's temper, none too dependable at any time, now cracked. He pushed back his chair and got up.

'What are you doing here?" he roared. "You're the guy that was in here last night talking about buying this house. What kind of a gag is this? Where's my housekeeper?"

Mr. Nibbs, his one good eye gleaming maliciously, said: "You have an entire new staff of servants, sir," and even as he spoke, the swinging door that led to the pantry, opened, and three men came in.

Runner Smith was in the middle, with Jones on one side of him and Hands on the other.

"Your chauffeur, sir," Mr. Nibbs said, indicating Runner Smith. "Your footman," pointing to Jones, "and your valet." Mr. Nibbs made an elaborate gesture in Hands' direction. "You'll find Hands a most efficient valet. His hands are a little restless, I admit, but don't let it disturb you. When he shaves you he will use an electric razor."

Pat McLaughlin, rendered momentarily speechless, now found his voice.

"You tramps! What do you mean by forcing your way into my house? Get out of here, the whole bunch of you. I have a good mind to have you locked up." He glowered savagely at the four men.

The chauffeur, the footman and the valet were coming slowly into the room; they took a step or two, stopped, then two more steps. Gradually they spread out. There was something inexorable about their advance, something shattering about their silence, their frozen eyes. Before he realized it, McLaughlin found himself surrounded, his escape cut off in every direction.

But McLaughlin was no coward; far from it. He took a quick step, drew back a gnarled fist and lashed out viciously at Mr. Nibbs. Mr. Nibbs ducked; the blow missed him by a scant inch, and before McLaughlin could strike a second, he discovered that his new chauffeur and the footmen had him by the arm, and that Hands, the valet with the restless hands, was in back of him with those same hands tight about McLaughlin's throat. McLaughlin struggled savagely but he couldn't overcome three men, not when two of them were the size of Runner Smith and Jones, and not when a third was putting unbearable pressure on his windpipe. McLaughlin's face went black. He felt his eyes bulging as though they were about to pop out of their sockets. His knees buckled. The pressure on his throat ceased and they flung him into a chair.

Hands came around in front and leered at him. "A little massage, sir, is always good in the morning."

Smith and Jones said nothing; just stood there, one on each side, grimly silent.

Mr. Nibbs said: "I trust you've enjoyed your breakfast, sir. May I clear away the things?"

PAT McLAUGHLIN blinked. He refrained from pointing out that he hadn't had any breakfast. The whole thing didn't make sense. He couldn't understand it. Where did these men come from? What did they want? Of course, they had broken into the house during the night, but why? Things didn't happen like that in a big city—or did they? With a queer sinking sort of a sensation, he realized that stranger things had happened, but he still couldn't understand what they wanted, and he said as much to Mr. Nibbs.

"I don't get it," he said, trying to keep his voice firm, almost aggressive.

Jones, unsmiling, said to Runner Smith: "He don't get it."

Runner Smith, scarcely moving his lips, said: "He will."

Pat McLaughlin ignored them. He kept his attention fixed on Mr. Nibbs who he instinctively picked out as the leader.

"If it's money you want—" he began.

Mr. Nibbs made that horrible grimace which he considered a smile. "Thank you, sir," he said. "Just what the agency arranged for will do."

"The agency? What agency?"

"Shall I say—shall I say the Spanish agency?" Mr. Nibbs said. "A gentleman from Madrid sent us."

Once again McLaughlin lost his temper. He started to spring to his feet, but the heavy hands of Jones and Runner Smith pushed him back. So that was it! Don Graham had hired these thugs. That was the game. Well, he'd see. These four hoodlums couldn't scare him, not by a darned sight.

Pat McLaughlin let out a laugh, a great savage laugh; there wasn't any mirth in it. "What do you guys think you're going to do??" he bellowed. "Where do you think this is going to get you?"

"We are just going to take care of you," Mr. Nibbs said in his high-pitched voice. There was sort of a hellish pleasantry about his manner that gave McLaughlin pause. "There's a letter you wish to write," Mr. Nibbs went on, " a note to Mr. Zimmerman, telling him that you're going out of town for a few days, that you find the situation here a little difficult, and that you have closed the house."

McLaughlin set his jaw. "I'm not closing the house. And I'm not leaving."

"You're closing the house, sir," Mr. Nibbs declared placidly, "but you're not leaving. I am sure you will be pleased to know that we will stay here to look after your needs. You'll find the four of us a most efficient lot; myself as the butler, your chauffeur seems for the moment superfluous, but it's nice to have him around; your footman, and your valet—he uses an electric razor."

McLaughlin folded his arms and settled deeper in his chair. "All right," he said, "clown on if you want to. If you're crazy enough to think you can hold me a prisoner in my own house—"

"Will you write the note now, sir, or later?" An ominous note crept into Mr. Nibbs' voice.

"I'll do nothing," Pat McLaughlin said.

"Very good, sir," Mr. Nibbs said unctuously. He turned to Runner Smith and to Jones. "Hands and I have some things to do. It takes a little time to close up a house. While we're gone, please see that Mr. McLaughlin is properly taken care of."

Jones yawned. He flexed his long arms, drew up a chair next to McLaughlin and sat down. Runner Smith pulled up a chair on the other side. Mr. Nibbs and Hands left.

ALONE with only two of them, McLaughlin considered his chances. He was willing to take them both on, until he saw Runner Smith reach into his back pocket and bring out a length of wire cable, about the size of a policeman's club.

Runner Smith deposited it with ostentatious significance in his lap, then he took out a pack of cigarettes, passed one to

Jones and helped himself. He struck a light.

McLaughlin reached into his pocket for a package of his own cigarettes, but Jones snatched the package out of his hands.

"I'm sure they wouldn't be good for you, sir," Jones said, trying to mimic Mr. Nibbs' voice.

McLaughlin, his features distorted beyond recognition, sat there. Once he started to get up. Runner Smith, without any pretense at deference, said, "Sit down, you lug." At the same time his hand closed about the wire cable.

Upstairs McLaughlin could hear the sound of hammering. He could guess what it meant. The men who had elected themselves as his butler and his valet were nailing the shutters down.

Mr. Nibbs and Hands came back some time later and they set to work on the shutters in the dining room, and after that McLaughlin could hear them in the living room.

"Go outside and take the 'For Sale' sign down," Mr. Nibbs instructed Hands. "Mr. McLaughlin has decided not to sell the house for the time being." He was standing once more in front of McLaughlin. "Would you care to write that note to Mr. Zimmerman now, sir? Mr. Zimmerman might worry over your absence."

McLaughlin gritted his teeth. An obscene retort was on his lips but he choked it down. "Look here," he said, "whatever this guy, Graham, is paying you, I'll pay you twice as much. Can we make a deal?"

Mr. Nibbs repeated, "Would you care to write that note now, sir?" as though McLaughlin hadn't spoken.

McLaughlin looked at Runner Smith out of the corner of his eye. There weren't more than three or four feet between himself and Runner Smith. One quick move and he'd have that length of cable, and with that the odds would be more even.

"Well—" he said, then his hand shot out. His fingers closed over the cable in Runner Smith's lap. It was a quick move, almost successful, but not quite.

Before he could get to his feet, Mr. Nibbs had sprung in back of him and with a strength that was surprising in one of his frail physique, he had taken hold of McLaughlin's chair and pulled it over backwards so that McLaughlin's feet were kicking in the air. Runner Smith knelt on McLaughlin's wrist and tore the cable out of his hand. Jones bent over and calmly without rancor, rained blows into McLaughlin's face.

MR. NIBBS watched the performance for a time, then ordered his men to stop. They straightened up the chair with McLaughlin in it. McLaughlin fell off the seat. Jones and Runner Smith picked him up, and without effort, big as he was, carried him into the front room and dumped him on a couch. McLaughlin, his face a mass of bruises, lay there inert, his heart full of hate, trying to think.

He strained desperately to form some plan of escape, but in his pain the effort was useless.

Somewhere around noon time, or perhaps later, Mr. Nibbs came in with a large tray. "Your lunch, sir," Mr. Nibbs said.

McLaughlin, still on his back on the couch, opened a battered eye. There was a tiny glass of water and a crust of bread on the tray. McLaughlin turned away.

"He's not hungry," Jones said. "Maybe he needs some exercise."

"No," said Mr. Nibbs piously. "I abhor violence." He carried out the tray.

The afternoon passed like a nightmare to McLaughlin. It wasn't that they did anything to him. In fact they never even spoke to him. They just sat there talking among themselves, smoking. Part of the time Runner Smith and Jones played cards. They weren't all there all the time, but there were always at least two or three. The uncertainty of the thing, the feeling of being completely cut off from the outside world, absolutely helpless in the hands of this ruthless crew, was getting McLaughlin. He had a notion that pretty soon Don Graham and the Spaniard would show up. He remembered what he and Zimmerman had done to Don Graham and José back there in Spain and when he thought of

that McLaughlin, despite his inherent courage, felt his blood freeze. But neither Don Graham nor José made their appearance.

At six o'clock Mr. Nibbs came in again with his tray. As before it held only a small glass of water and a piece of bread.

"Your supper, sir," Mr. Nibbs said gravely.

McLaughlin, his nerves stretched to the breaking point, leapt up and knocked the tray out of Mr. Nibbs' hands. Instantly the others were upon him. Jones and Runner Smith had him by the wrists, twisting his arms in back of him. They pushed his arms up so that the excruciating pain forced McLaughlin onto his toes. McLaughlin sank his teeth into his lower lip and wouldn't let out a sound.

Mr. Nibbs said: "Mr McLaughlin is tired. He wishes to retire."

Holding McLaughlin the way they had him, they led him upstairs to his bedroom. Hands was there. Hands was grinning. They took off McLaughlin's clothes. He didn't struggle, made no effort to resist them. What was the use? Cold hate made his eyes flat, pale. They were three against one, not counting Mr. Nibbs, and he'd have to husband his strength if he were to do something to get himself out of this fix.

He remained motionless after they had undressed him; he stood, with his face set, staring at the wall.

Presently he heard Hands say: "Your pajamas are on the bed, sir."

There was something in the way his valet spoke that made McLaughlin's heart miss a beat. He turned his head slowly towards the bed. What he saw drained every vestige of color from his face.

His pajamas . . . a straitjacket!

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Coming soon: Jackie Cochran—Queen of the Air

Judy's whisper was made safe by the roaring cheers

By BAYNARD KENDRICK

Standing Orders

An unusual and moving story of Vienna, 1938—when the city of music heard only the war trumpets, and the streets became endless brown rivers of the soldier-puppets of the High Command

SOUND roared dully up from the streets of Vienna beating through the tightly closed windows of Judy's small room. Since early morning it had grown in intensity until its cadence was unbearable. She had closed the windows against it, preferring stuffiness to the mocking cheers, the blaring bands, and the roll of wheels.

She was twenty, and still remembered shots in the Ringstrasse below frightening her as a child. There were men lying still on the street when she climbed up to look, and her father pulled her away. That was years before—ten, twelve—it was hard to say exactly how many. Today there had been shots, too—cannon booming out salutes, killing no one, but shattering the heart of a city.

It was growing dark. Through the thin muslin curtains, Judy could see the flash of rockets stairing the sky—a welcome of fire to the invaders who were making Vienna their own. She drew the heavier drapes to hide the sight, stood for a moment in the darkness, then switched on a small pink lamp on the table. Under its shaded glow, the worn furniture looked newer, more comfortable.

"Loyal citizens of the blood, a nation is never a nation until those of common interests are combined. Only as one—"

Color flooded into Judy's face, touching the roots of her blond curly hair. The voice on the radio was commanding and cold. As temper seized her, she resisted a desire to dash the tiny set to the floor. Instead, she turned it off as she might touch something which would soil her slender fingers.

The mantel clock struck seven. Judy crossed the room and tried the phone again, listening for the tenth time to the long interminable rings which brought no answer from the other end.

"*Bitte!*" she said dully to the reporting operator. "I'll try later."

"Later—" She repeated the word when the phone was back on its stand. The smell of the frugal meal too long on the stove was already strong. Her father's slippers were mutely waiting. His great curved pipe was on the rack beside his easy chair. The fine paper of his manuscript rustled in her hand as she straightened its pages. One of the words was blurred. She touched it with the tip of a handkerchief and smiled. He'd chide her gently for that careless tear.

Somewhere on a sundial she had once read the words: *It's later than you think!*

She was due at the Café Strobel at nine to dance in the first show. More than ever, with Vienna in a holiday mood, she must be there on the hour. The streets were so crowded that progress was slow, and a taxi was out of the question.

Water trickled slowly into the tub. For an instant before she found bodily comfort in its lukewarm depths, she stood regarding her slim perfection in the glass. Her glance was more questioning than admiring. She was beautiful, that she knew. Herr Strobel never looked twice at a dancer without beauty. Never before had she thanked God that she was blond.

Her inexpensive evening gown of black was smoothed into place and she was busy fluffing her hair when she heard the scratching at the door. Soft and imperative, it lighted the fear which had smouldered in her all day. Holding the hairbrush motionless in her hand, she watched the door in the mirror.

Her father always entered without knocking. Even had he been delayed by the crowds, he would have phoned. There were nights when he worked late at the laboratory on Waringerstrasse, but he never forgot to call. She pictured him entering, opening the door behind her and stepping in, his somber face lighted with a smile, his shoulders slightly stooped from a tiring day.

"Bless you, dear!" His greeting never varied before he kissed her. After the kiss came the ceremony. The bag with two of her favorite chocolates from the Kohl-Markt shop was presented with a dignity befitting gifts to a queen.

JUDY placed the hairbrush on the table and tiptoed to the door. It was foolish to fear a summons so furtive. She wasn't afraid—not for herself, at any rate. She was filled with dread. That was it. Dread for a message which any courier might bring. Without asking, "Who's there?" she turned the knob and flung the door wide.

"*Herr Doktor!*" White-lipped, she drew back to rest against the edge of the table.

The little man stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He wore a long-tailed coat which made him appear unnaturally small. The V of his gray, black-braided vest disclosed a stove-pipe collar. Somehow, its high, cruel points had escaped wilting. They stuck viciously up, punishing the under part of his chin over the thick black tie.

"Your father, Judith—the *Herr Professor*—where is he?" Thin mobile fingers of a surgeon plucked at his small goatee. "I'm followed, child. Speak quickly! I must know."

"*Herr Doktor!*" Unbelievingly she held out both her hands. "He's at the laboratory. He's been there all day—with you!"

"*Gott in Himmel!*" He took two quick steps forward and seized her arm. "He hasn't been here since morning?"

"*Nein, Herr Doktor.*" Judy shook her head. "How could he be? He seldom

leaves the laboratory before five." She straightened up, watching his face, following his searching eyes. "He's hurt—tell me —I'll call the police. They must know—must help!"

"There are no police, child," he said slowly and placed one hand over the phone. "Look!"

He flicked off the lamp on the table, pulled back the drapes, and pushed the window high. Endlessly, gleaming fitfully under the street light, and casting nervous shadows from the flicker of Neon signs, serried ranks moved steadily below.

After a glance she drew back into the room. "I know, *Herr Doktor;* I'm no longer a child. But this is Austria. My father is an Austrian—a noted man, a scholar. His work of years lies there on the table almost completed. It will change all this, show the world the fruitlessness of conquest and war. Am I to believe, *Herr Doktor,* that Professor Max Lutzker is denied the protection of the Viennese police?"

The little doctor closed the window, pulled the drapes together, and waited until the table lamp was shining again. When he spoke, Judy saw the mistiness of his eyes and the tremor of his lips. "None of us can get protection from an institution which is dead. The police of Vienna cannot protect your father, child; they no longer exist. Out of your window you have just watched Austria's funeral. My laboratory, my work, and my career died today with my country. God give me strength, and I will soon follow!"

A door banged on the floor below. Judy's face was transfigured at the sound. "Quick, *Herr Doktor!*" she commanded. "You must go. There are stairs at the back to a door in the rear. And take this, please!" She grabbed a small portable typewriter from a taboret in the corner and thrust it into his hands. "Throw it away, *Herr Doktor.* Get rid of it—anything—it mustn't be seen. There may be a chance to save his work so this can never happen again!"

She ran into the tiny kitchen and pulled open a cupboard drawer. Nearly a ream of white paper lay before her, covered with her neat, methodical typing—a copy made day by day of her father's painstaking script which lay on the table in the other room.

Desperately, she removed it from the drawer and looked around. She could hear the clump of heavy boots on the floor below walking toward the stairs. Her light feet made no sound as she crossed the sitting room and bolted the door once more. When she returned to the kitchen she was carrying the case for her portable typewriter, carelessly overlooked in the shadows on the floor.

She thrust the typed manuscript inside, clicked the leather top shut, and turned to the kitchen window. An awning was down outside, and a guy rope fastened it to the window sill against the lift of the wind. She ran the guy rope through the handle of the typewriter case, tied it securely, and hoisted the awning high. By the time she was finished, someone was knocking on the sitting room door.

Judy took her time. She lighted a cigarette, put a record on the ancient victrola, and started it playing. At the sound of the music, the knocking increased. When it reached a stage of violence, she opened the door.

AT FIRST, she saw only her father. He was hatless, and the wisp of gray hair which was never in place, hung damply over his forehead. There were men with him—three of them, but they formed a background for Max Lutzker. The sameness of their dress blended them into an entity, and for many seconds they were unimportant as a firing squad escorting a single prisoner to his death. Rifle butts thudded lightly to the floor as two of the men took post guarding the door.

Her father addressed the third: *"Herr Oberleutnant,* this is the girl. Her name is Judith Freystadt." His speech came with difficulty and his lips moved but slightly. "We live here together—unmarried, yes, but happily. Is that such a crime?"

Watching her father's lips, Judy battled with a physical pain which threatened to turn to tears. His sensitive mouth was swollen, and marred with a tiny drop of blood. She breathed deeply and waited, for she knew the look in his eyes. He expected something from her—courage and understanding. He had looked at her in such a fashion when her mother died.

The officer seemed not to hear. He was a pudgy man with very white skin. Judy felt that a probing finger might leave a depression in his cheek, and fought a desire to try it. She had a similar impulse whenever she was near rising dough. He came closer to her, picked the small lamp from the table and let the light fall on her hair.

"Fräulein Freystadt, from your name you are Prussian, *nicht wahr?* Today, your people have come to free you forever—from this." He set the lamp down and swung his arm in a slow gesture designating the room. Judy backed until the edge of the mantel pressed into her shoulders, and forced herself to nod. The officer turned his expressionless face toward the victrola in the corner. The lilting waltz record rose in a passage of dreams and love. "Stop that!" he ordered one of the men by the door.

The man snapped into action, moving with a quick stiffness as though motivated by some force outside his own control. He set his rifle against the wall, marched to the offending victrola, and touched the control. The strains of the waltz died away, hideously losing key. He waited until the recording had stopped, then lifted the sound-arm and removed the disc, holding it with both hands. As he raised it to smash against the side of the cabinet, the pasty face of the *Oberleutnant* became circular with surprise.

"Nein!" he commanded throatily, and repeated, *"Nein!"*

"Herr Oberleutnant, you ordered the music—"

"Stopped," said the officer. "Not broken!" He straightened himself, tugging his close-fitting tunic down at the sides, and began to talk. Words came out of him with a kind of ordered fervor, in the way some ignorant statesman might read a speech which he failed to comprehend.

She listened quietly, holding herself as still as stone.

"We have standing orders from the High Command. The German people read what they want to read, hear what music they want to hear, worship as they wish to worship, and live united as they wish to live. We have come to Austria to save it, not to destroy it. Its books will be preserved, its science will be preserved, its people who are German in heritage will be preserved, and its music will be preserved."

"But never played!" said Max Lutzker. "You will preserve it. *Ja!* To prove to the outside world how fair you are. You erred in Germany when you destroyed those things the outside world had come to reverence. And now, *Herr Oberleutnant,* you have standing orders not to err again. The books of Austria, the music of Austria, and the soul of Austria will be preserved. I think, *Herr Oberleutnant,* that mummified would be a better word!"

The officer's face grew mottled as Judy's father spoke, but he made no move to interrupt. The *Herr Professor* was holding the rifle which the trooper by the victrola had leaned against the wall. He turned toward his daughter, and his dark kindly face was lighted with a madness which was almost divine.

"You have been kind to an old man who loves you, *gnädiges Fräulein,"* he said softly. "Thank God that the non-Aryan poison which runs in his veins has not polluted you. My memory will soon be forgotten. Your tenderness will live beyond the grave. *Auf Wiedersehen!"*

With the rifle held tautly before him, he backed into the adjoining room and closed the door. Far in the sky above Vienna, a rocket burst with a roar and showered down stars. It covered the report of the trooper's rifle, but not the sound of Professor Max Lutzker's body falling to the floor.

THE officer strode to the door, pushed it wide and looked into the other room. He closed the door again and returned to the table. Judy's shoulders were still against the edge of the mantel. She was startled that she could watch the man so impersonally, anticipate every move he made. He fitted into a pattern, moving about like a poor actor in a badly directed play, boring her with a series of obvious clichés.

With the point of his cane, he riffled the pages of her father's close-written script. He pushed the stick farther between them, flipped part of them over on the table, leaned closer and began to read.

For the first time, Judy noticed the trooper who was still standing guard by the door to the hall. He was in the shadow. The depth and blackness of his eyes made his face look white—not unhealthily white like the *Oberleutnant,* but pale. The numeral *7* glinted on each of his shoulder straps. He stood immobile, his rifle slanted out before him, but his hand was not steady. The rifle was swaying slowly from side to side.

The officer turned from the manuscript to Judy. "Did you love this man, *Fraülein.* —this Lutzker?"

Her lips moved. "He was kind to me, *Herr Oberleutnant.*"

"It is their method to enslave those of Aryan blood. With your beauty, *Fraülein,* others will be kind to you, too. Max Lutzker is well dead. He wrote treasonably of the world." He paused.

"I know nothing of his writing, *Herr Oberleutnant.* I am a dancer at the Strobel Cafe. Now I will be late, and if I lose my position, I starve."

The officer gathered up the manuscript and put it under his arm. "You are free to go to your dancing, Fraülein Freystadt, but you will be here at ten in the morning. There will be an investigation of this suicide. I shall leave a man on guard."

He beckoned to the trooper who had lost his gun, and with a click of heels, raised his arm stiffly in salute. As though her fingers were drawn up with string, Judy returned it. Running through her head was the phrase from the sundial she had remembered less than an hour before: *It's later than you think!*

The retreating footsteps on the stairs merged into the street sounds below. Judy listened to them without actually realizing that the officer and one of the soldiers had gone. A clink of metal arrested her attention as the dark-eyed youth left on guard brought his gun up sharply to his side.

"Heartbreak comes when there are no tears, Fräulein Lutzker," he said.

Judy freed herself from the friendly support of the mantel, picked her father's slippers from the floor and put them away. Her supple muscles, trained by years of dancing, sent sharp pains through her from the simple effort of bending over. Some great hunger, or some great illness, had entered her youthful body never to leave again.

"My name is Freystadt, *mein Herr.*" She kept her gaze away from the bedroom door, and fought to dispel the shadows which were closing about her mind. She had to think clearly; had to be clever. There was some excuse which would take her into the kitchen, but it seemed elusive and hard to find.

"You underrate the *Gestapo,* Fräulein Lutzker. You do not know how carefully they play their little game!"

SHE sensed that the soldier was speaking again, using her name a second time. A merciful numbness had seized her and held her comfortably in its grasp while she fumbled with objects on the table. His words broke annoyingly into the spell forcing her to recognize that he was a man and living, when her thoughts were with the dead.

"Must you talk?" she asked dazedly. "Isn't it enough that my only friend is gone?"

"They know he was your father, *Fräulein.* He was an obstacle to their plans. His life history—and yours—has been in their files for years. They accepted his desperate story that you were his mistress

and not his daughter because it suits their ends."

All at once her mind was alert and clear. "If that were true, *mein Herr,* I would not be free!"

"You will be followed, *Fräulein.*" The soldier's words were soft and sincere. "Your father's sixth book has fallen unpublished into their hands. Another might arouse the world because he saw clearly and wrote clearly. You are given seeming freedom, to make certain no such work exists. I can do no more than warn you."

"Danke schön!" Judy sat down and closed her slim fingers over the arms of the chair. "You are warning me—wearing their uniform and carrying their insignia on your arm. The *Gestapo* is clever, soldier. Tell them that Austria is not a nation of fools. You even know how many books Max Lutzker has written. Is that also part of their plan—to trick me into something which can hurt him even after he's gone?"

"Softly, *Fräulein!*" The soldier raised his hand. He opened the door and glanced briefly into the darkness of the hall. When the door was shut again, he said, "I know how many books Max Lutzker wrote, because I have read them all."

Judy searched for insincerity in his words and found none. Helplessness and futility drew her to him, forcing her to accept him as a friend She left the chair and studied his face, looking deeply into his fathomless eyes. Motionless he returned her gaze until she said at last, "Soldier, tell me your name."

"That is long dead, *Fraülein*—buried as your father tried to bury yours today. I have lived without it, because dead I am useless."

"What can the living do?"

"Much," he said shortly. "Alive and nameless, I am a weakness in a system which has forcibly taken me in. It prates of purging itself clean and in wild fanaticism overlooks the flaw. My race, absorbed and blended, was weak and ineffectual. Now its flowing blood, swept into the gutter by persecution, has united into a rushing stream."

"I think I know what you mean," said Judy softly. "I became part of that stream today!"

The soldier stood in the kitchen doorway and watched as Judy took down the bag from its place of concealment. When she showed him the typed manuscript inside, he shook his head.

"There might be a chance of smuggling that out of Germany," he told her gravely, "but not from here. Everything is searched at the border. Austria is ringed in."

"The weakness you speak of is weak indeed. It can't protect its own."

"It is cautious first," said the soldier. "Without caution, it cannot long survive. You have one chance. Take that manuscript with you tonight. Perhaps you can find a place to hide it in the cafe. Later, if you can get it into Germany, I have friends."

Judy took filmy things from a drawer and threw them in on top of the paper. The typewriter case was crowded when she closed it again.

"Where can I reach you?" she asked.

"You may never reach me, *Fraülein,*" he said slowly. "It's better that I get in touch with you." He paused listening. "You're in grave peril carrying that with you. Don't forget you'll be followed. Perhaps—"

"My gravest peril is that I fail to give my father's work to posterity," said Judy. She picked up the case and walked out into the hall.

Her light feet sounded on the stairs. Quickly, the soldier ran into the bedroom, stepped across Max Lutzker's crumpled body, and snatched up the rifle from the floor. He twisted the bolt of the Mauser, pulled it back, and closed it throwing a fresh cartridge into place.

The window stuck. By frantic tugging, he forced it loose and raised it high. When he leaned out, Judy's slim figure was just leaving the doorway below. The crowds on Ringstrasse were thinning out. The soldier watched her progress to the corner and her wait to get across. He also watched the jubilant rockets, still staining the sky.

As she stepped from the curb, a man left the doorway of the house next door. The soldier noted his quickened step and his anxious glance after the girl. He was a harmless-looking creature, neatly and inconspicuously dressed. A turning taxi halted him briefly at the corner, and at the same instant another rocket, trailing gold, hissed up into the air. It burst as the soldier aimed the Mauser and shot the man through the head.

He drew back into the bedroom, closed the window, and replaced the rifle on the floor. In the sitting room again, he resumed his guard of the door to the hall, standing rigidly with no sign of a tremor.

"Another atrocity," he said to himself grimly. "A member of the *Gestapo* shot in the streets of Vienna—an eye for a thousand eyes. A tooth for a thousand teeth."

"UND so," said the rotund Herr Strobel beaming, "we ask the graceful Fraülein Judy to dance again!" The patrons of the Café Strobel voiced their approval with a roar and a banging of steins on the tables.

Judy came up from her low professional curtsy wondering why they wanted to see her perform a second time. She was conscious of her hands and feet, and knew her turns were slow, lacking in heart and nerve which brought a number to life. Perhaps it was because the majority of the customers were men. They ringed her in with close-cropped heads, and stared with eyes beginning to show the redness of too much smoke and beer. Over their uniforms, their looks were for her and not for her dancing.

There were a few women, but none of the smart ones who regularly patronized the café. Those present wore too much rouge and their laughter was hard. In a single day, the Café Strobel had changed. Judy never wanted to see it again. She wanted to run—tear wildly through the streets until Vienna was gone and the open reaches of the countryside took her in. There would be quiet there at least, freedom from a city of music which had become a city of noise.

The band behind her crashed out an opening chord heavy with brass. She swung lightly to face it and started her dance a beat too late remembering again that the regular orchestra of the Café Strobel had been replaced for the evening.

Glittering horns shimmered under the electric lights and dazzled her eyes with hard, bright streaks. Everything about the band was hard—its touch and its tempo—and Judy was used to lightness. It was impossible to float skilfully about a dance floor when every bar of music was reminded of the clump of wooden shoes.

Her number ended in a dizzy whirl. She took two bows and ran from the floor just as the band broke out again. Everyone in the café arose and stood stiffly at attention. Shielded by the purple curtains which circled the bandstand, Judy watched the stir at the café's entrance. Some important personage was leaving.

She extended one foot under a fold of the curtain on the floor, moved it along, and breathed more easily. The portable typewriter case was still where she had hidden it half an hour before. It was safe only until the café closed. Cleaners went over the floor thoroughly every night after the patrons were gone.

Behind the curtains at the rear of the bandstand, a man in a musician's uniform was busily packing musical scores into a large oblong metal box. He looked up, saw Judy watching him, and said:

"Your dancing made an impression on the High Command, *Fraülein.* Congratulations!"

"*Danke schön.*" Judy bent over and looked in the box. "And who, *mein Herr,* is the High Command?"

The man's eyes widened. "Herr Oberst von Luden. He just left. Surely, *Fraülein—*"

"I'm sorry," said Judy. "I'm glad he was pleased. Is that why your band is playing here tonight?"

"Not my band, *Fraülein.* The band of the High Command's Guard." He pointed

to the stenciled lettering on the lid of the box. "Where Herr Oberst von Luden goes, his guard goes. Where his guard goes, his band goes! We leave for Berlin tomorrow."

JUDY forced herself to steadiness. "But you're packing the music of the orchestra which plays here. You're not going to destroy that, are you?"

"We have standing orders to destroy nothing, *Fraülein,*" said the man stiffly. Judy listened, as she had listened to the *Herr Oberleutnant,* weighing words which flowed without thought behind them.

"The German people hear the music they want to hear," the man went on. "For many years, without protest they have been forced to listen to this—" He picked a heavy score of a Viennese light opera from the box and held it in his hand. "We shall not destroy it, for the world lies when it says we are destructive. We are taking it with us. Shortly, the German people of Austria will have a chance to vote. Until then, all music will be preserved. The vote will tell the world what our people want. After that—" He shrugged and tossed the score into the chest.

"*Danke, Mein Herr,*" said Judy.

In her small dressing room she changed quickly from costume to evening dress. When she opened the door, it was intermission, and several members of the band were talking outside of her room. She closed herself in again and smoked until she heard the band resume its playing. When she came out, the man who was packing the chest was nowhere to be seen.

Ten minutes later, carrying the black typewriter case, she slipped from the Café Strobel, hailed a taxi and gave the address of the Ringstrasse apartment.

The downstairs hall was dimly lighted with a small bulb. She climbed the single flight and knocked lightly on the door. It swung open instantly, disclosing two soldiers. They were thickest and blond, and might have been brothers. The light from the pink lamp glinted on the numeral 8 on their shoulder straps.

"*Ja. Bitte?*" said one.

Her head was light and singing, and the loudness of the High Command's band was still beating against her ears.

"I'm Judy Freystadt," she said. "I've been living here. I found I had left some of my clothes."

"Come in." One of the soldiers moved aside. He was looking at the typewriter case in her hand.

She set it down on the floor, crossed the room, and began to pull things from a drawer. When nightgown, negligee, and slippers were in a pile on a chair, she placed the typewriter case on the table and opened it.

One of the men moved up to her side and said, "Wait, *Fraülein!*"

He picked the case from the table and dumped its contents on the floor. Stooping over, he took up the filmy things she had carried with her to the café, but his attention was on the thick heap of paper which had slid into disarray. He gathered it together and said:

"You'll have to leave this music here, *Fraülein.* It will not be destroyed. The German people—"

He talked on and on as Judy thrust her clothes into the bag. Long before he was through, she turned on her way out the door and said, "Good night, and thank you. I'm learning about your standing orders!"

THE troops of the High Command were moving out. Sunlight touched their bayonets and burnished their helmets, but Judy had no eye for their beauty. She was watching the numbers on their regimental flags.

Gun caissons bumped and rumbled, followed by growling tanks and restive horses, and still they came, filling the street beyond the line of vision. Overhead droned the planes.

The single flower which Judy held in her hand was wilting. Near to her a woman cheered, broke through the lines and ran into the street to kiss a man. The number on his shoulder was 5.

Somewhere in a steeple a clock struck nine. The movement of men and machinery halted, leaving a sudden quiet.

Judy began to run. Ruthlessly she bumped into startled watchers, pushing them out of her way, fighting to get nearer to the end of the procession which had no end.

Blood was dripping from her finger stabbed by the thorns of the rose when she saw the 7 on the banner. As though the sight of it were a signal, the procession began to move again.

He was flank man on the fifth rank. She had figured that might be so, because he was exceptionally tall. Now, with success so near, the black sickness of reaction seized her, and for long seconds she could only watch him slowly marching by. When power to move returned and she pushed through to the street, she had to run half a block to get by his side.

She pinned the rose to his uniform and kissed him, and her words reached his ears alone, made safe by the roaring cheers.

"Find the band of the High Command in Berlin, soldier, and take the Viennese opera *Springtime* from their chest of forbidden music."

"*Auf Wiedersehen, Fraülein,*" he said.

She was back on the sidewalk when the blare of brass reached her ears. She stopped and turned, and as the glittering horns went by she mockingly raised her hand.

"*Heil!*" she said softly. "You are carrying something far more precious than you know. Guard it well, soldiers. The work of Max Lutzker is in the cover of another great composer of his own blood—a man whose music you never intend to play. Try as you will, you can never kill them. They'll live on through the years, though you burn them in a thousand fires, for the works of those inspired never die. Those are standing orders soldiers—and the High Command who gave them is higher than your own!"

EAST OF FIJI

Are you acquainted with Banyan Island's only hotel? Its sign reads *Cockroach Inn;* and in that ramshackle, mildewed edifice a legion of rats wages midnight battle with two ghosts who preside greedily over a mystery. A complete short novel of romance and adventure in the South Pacific, by

ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

SHEEP HERDER

From the night when two thousand storm-blind sheep went pitching to destruction, the Mesa held Tenderfoot Bourbon's secret and held it well. So it was fitting that when the day of reckoning came at last the Mesa itself should present the bill. A Western story of genuine power and distinction, by

CLIFF WALTERS

And more fine fiction by A. Merritt, Garnett Radcliffe, Walter Ripperger, and others

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 1st

"Drive it, you craven!" Robb cried. "We'll see who's the man here."

Voyage to Leandro

By HOWARD RIGSBY

WHEN fourteen-year-old David Lester catches a glimpse of the mutineer Jeremy Robb, brought to San Francisco for trial, the boy is captivated by Robb's gay and daring manner. For young David has the urge for adventure strong in him; his greatest joy is to sail the harbor in the *Shark* with his companion Charles Stribling; and when finally his father forbids further voyages because his lessons are suffering, David believes himself to be a companion in misfortune with Jeremy Robb. Then Robb and his fellow mutineer, Strom Sorenson, escape from jail; and, inspired by that feat, David and Charles Stribling determine to set out for the South Sea Islands on the *Shark*.

One night they sail away secretly—and on the wharf they leave the bloody, unconscious body of a night watchman, whom they are sure David has killed in a free-for-all. Now they are lawless men, never to return home. Soon, however, they realize the inadaquacy of their seamanship; and the night they hear the roar of surf, they are overjoyed to be near land. But their joy is short-lived, for the sea casts the *Shark* on a reef, batters it to wreckage, and the two dazed adventurers are swept to the shore of an unknown island.

HUNGRY and miserable, the boys explore the island—to discover strange and frightening things. In a cave they find human bones and a mysterious inscription in Spanish; they come upon a cabin, obviously inhabited, and while watching it from hiding, they see a figure approach—the figure of Jeremy Robb!

For a day or so the boys manage to evade Robb. But Charles is stricken with fever in the cave, and one morning when David returns there with water, he finds Robb and the huge Strom Sorenson waiting. These two take the boys to the cabin—to lead a fantastic life on this island called Leandro. David and Charles are prisoners and yet treated with the greatest courtesy by the gallant Robb and his monstrous, devoted follower, Sorenson. The cabin is tended by an old man

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named Tracy, who was cast up on the island years before, and spends his days writing bad poetry. His niece dwells on Leandro, too, he tells David; this mysterious girl David has never seen, though he has heard her singing in the night. Old Tracy calls her Nautilus.

CHARLES STRIBLING begins to recover at once from his fever. When Robb learns that he is a banker's son, he sets immediately to planning ransom. He talks intriguingly with David, and on hearing of the night watchman believed murdered, Robb claims David to be an adventurer of his own sort. The scheme he develops is a fantastic one: David is to disguise himself as a girl and, masquerading as Tracy's niece, to beg passage to San Francisco when a ship finally stops at Leandro. He is to go to Charles Stribling's father, demand gold and a boat as ransom for Charles, and to bring the boat back to Robb on Leandro. Enthusiastic over the idea, Robb orders Sorenson to make a dress for David's disguise. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

DREAMS OF A FAR COUNTRY

WHEN we returned to the other room, Charles must have noted my excitement and he gave me a cool interested stare that sobered me. What was I to tell Charles? In Robb's plan he would figure only as a hostage and he wouldn't like that. He wouldn't like it if he knew I was going to demand ransom from his father either. Me, fantastic in a blue blanket, facing Mr. Stribling, asking fifty thousand dollars for Charles! . . .

Robb's eyes were on me. I had been standing in the open door of the cabin and now I stepped outside. Beside the stream there was a bed of plants and flowers enclosed by a fence of splintered whalebone. I sat down on a rock there and held my confused head in my hands.

During the afternoon the mist blew off and Robb walked up toward the woods. Near sunset when he and Mr. Tracy converged on the cabin from different parts of the island, I was still sitting by the stream.

I cannot pretend to have been rational that day, to have neatly assembled the facts of my condition and reached a conclusion based upon them. Like most adolescents, my thinking was a phantasmagoria, a series of pictures in which I appeared. Reaching a decision involved a shuffling about of these pictures until I found a set that suited me. Yet I assured myself over and over that I must be realistic and rational about it.

Robb's plan at first appeared preposterous, yet I was quick to see that there was practically no way to keep him from carrying it out—if I had wished to. When a ship was signaled and sent its boat ashore I would have to go in it, and once aboard the ship I would remember that Charles' life depended on me and I would continue with the plan. By the time I got that far, the idea began to appear more sound. Mr. Stribling would not want Charles to be killed and so he would make haste to comply with Robb's orders; he wouldn't give either Robb or me away to the police.

The only way Charles and I might avoid going through with the scheme was to escape, and that seemed a pitiful alternative. Then we would be forced to wander miserably around the island, hiding, until Robb caught us again. As long as I was a criminal—I must remember that!—why not fling my gauntlet boldly in the face of the world as Jeremy Robb did?

Coloring all my reflection was the pressure of his personality, his tough witty mind and his flattering offer of partnership and friendship. He had done preposterous things before; he had stolen the *Lady Hook* and escaped from jail, and my faith in his powers was absolute. Then why did I hesitate? Was it because of loyalty to Charles? That would do neither Charles nor me any good now. Really, I thought, it was fear that held me back. I did not have in me the greatness and grand daring of Robb. Yes—I was afraid of it.

Yet there was only one set of pictures that afternoon in which I could view my future with any satisfaction, and in those I appeared as an adventurer of Jeremy

Robb's boldness and stature. It *had* to be that way. That was the set of pictures I liked.

IT WAS like strong wine in me, that afternoon's decision, and my face must have glowed with the effect of it. At dinner I know I tried hard to give the appearance of burning brightly and I think I must have laughed much too easily.

We ate my fish and the remainder of a pork pie from a previous meal. It was food unfit for hungry men, Robb said, adding politely that he meant no offense to my fish.

"Tomorrow," he told Mr. Tracy, "serve up one of those fat pampered hens of yours—with dumplings."

Mr. Tracy started so violently that he dropped a tin plate. "If you eat my hens," he protested, "you'll have no eggs!"

"A fat hen," Robb repeated. "And you may instruct the rest to lay overtime and cluck less or they will meet the same fate."

Charles, to my knowledge, had not spoken all afternoon, but now his voice, thick with contempt, came from his bunk. "The great Jeremy Robb," he said, "telling a hen how much to cluck!"

Was Charles out of his mind, I wondered. My eyes met Robb's briefly; his were amused. He did not answer and Charles said nothing more, but the memory of those words stayed on the surface. That had been funny about the hens and Robb had meant it to be. Charles' sarcasm, I decided, had been childish, humorless and rude. Yet I couldn't help thinking that he had made my way easier for me.

Mr. Tracy cleared the table and later on we could hear his pen scratching in the kitchen. Sorenson had not just been whittling idly all day; he had carved a small flute. He sat down on the floor in front of the fire and played a few notes on it. Robb glanced over his shoulder at Charles.

"I think he's going to sleep," he whispered.

Sorenson put the flute back in his pocket and we three sat staring into the fire. After a while Robb leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"China," he said softly. "That's where we'll go, Dave." He opened one eye and looked at Sorenson. "And you, too, Baby."

"Chinee?" said the Dane. "How we go there, Jer'my?"

"We'll manage that. And when we get there, we'll go inland, we'll ride far back into the country on camels to the fastnesses of one of those ancient walled cities of theirs where the little heathens all worship the great god of Buddha, where there's the sound of temple bells to wake you instead of a ship's bell, and where no white men ever come."

"And would we dress as they do?" I asked.

He nodded. "And live in their kind of a house. A home it would be." He paused. "A home . . ."

Sorenson looked up at him. "A home, Jer'my?"

"All my life," Jeremy Robb said, "I've had only the sea, always rolling, and tossing up and down the world on it. I'm tired of it. I am weary of looking at it and sailing on it. Of what good is it to me, Dave? I cannot drink it; if I'm pitched into it I drown. From where we'll go we never will catch sight of it, or hear of it. We'll live in a palace, us three, and you and I, Dave, will have a great room full of books—all the books we can ever read—and there are a lot of tricks to living I can teach you, and all about the stars. We'll eat fine food and own a cellar of wines and bring in musicians to play for us. And each of us will have a dozen pretty little yellow wives."

Sorenson was rigid, with his head cocked on one side staring at Robb, and I clung to the edge of my chair. My stomach was captivated, yearning for the fine food and I was seeing the dainty wives in their long robes dancing for us. Jeremy Robb could make me hang on his slightest word; I never knew where his mind was going; he could pull things from the air and make them special and real to me. I saw tiered

pagodas rising in the dying fire and Jeremy Robb looked like the great god Buddha.

I went to my bunk and lay down with the sound of the temple bells, and in my dreams I met one of my wives, a lovely doll whose eyes had not the slant of other, ordinary members of her race. We chatted in fluent Chinese which was, it turned out, similar to Latin.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BROWN MERMAID

CARE and rest had made Charles well. He was not in his bunk when I woke that morning. They were all up, although only Sorenson was visible, crouched on the doorsill sewing the blanket. The sun was streaming into the cabin making bright patterns on the clean puncheons of the floor and for a while I lay in my bunk, charmed by my own good humor. I had never felt quite so light-hearted and free.

When I stepped past Sorenson to go out to the stream and wash, he caught my arm. "See how now," he grunted and held the blanket up against me. He had cut it out and was sewing the sides together. I began to laugh over the top of it and I saw a glint of humor in his eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen him amused by any other agency than Jeremy Robb.

As I withdrew my head, gasping, from the stream, Charles came up from the cove. He was limping.

"How do you feel?" I asked. I could not see what caused his limp.

His jaws were set and his eyes were gloomy and intent. "I could have escaped," he said.

"Escaped?"

"Sure. I was down there all alone. If you'd been there we could have gotten away. No one was watching."

"Where would you escape to?"

"We could hide somewhere. That girl, Nautilus, does."

"I don't see much point in escaping," I said.

"I was afraid you wouldn't. I heard him talking to you last night about China. You thought I was asleep, but I wasn't."

"Oh, that—" I said. I bent over the stream and began to wash my hands.

"He's told you something, Dave. You're planning something together. What is it?"

I stared at his shadow before me on the surface of the water as I rubbed at my hands and arms. I had known that I would come to this cross-roads. Here it was and there was nothing I could say.

"You are a traitor," Charles said after a minute. "You are a Brutus."

I turned and looked up at him. "Don't be childish," I said, and happened at that inappropriate moment to notice that Charles was getting a beard. The sun made one of his ears, now red with feeling, translucent and highlighted the growth of down along his jaw.

"All the time I've known you I never thought you would act like this!"

"Where would you rather be now," I asked, "here or in San Francisco?"

He hesitated, his eyes wary. "I don't see what that has to do with it," he said.

"Well, I'm not a traitor. I'm your friend, just as much as I ever was. And it does have something to do with it. I only want to do what's best for you."

"For *me!* What do you mean? You and Robb—you're going to do something!"

"We are different than you are," I stated. "We're outlaws. We have to live by our wits."

I stood up, waving my hands to dry. Charles looked for a minute as if he might be going to hit me. Then he turned away and went limping toward the cabin. And all my buoyancy was gone. *Why* had I done it? With sudden heedless anguish I kicked a rock with my bare toes, then sat down, almost crying with the pain.

PRESENTLY Jeremy Robb came down the path from the woods, whistling. He waved and called out, "Breakfast, Dave," and entered the cabin.

Going inside I found him on one knee, looking at Charles' foot. The place where Charles had cut the arch of his foot

gathering mussels our first day on the island was now red and swollen.

"It isn't anything," Charles was saying impatiently.

"Maybe not," Robb said. "You can never tell about an infection." He went over and sat at the table. "We must take special care of you, Mr. Stribling. You appear extremely liable to the aches and ailments of mankind. The aristocrat in you, no doubt."

Charles came over and sat down and we all ate. There was no conversation, only in Robb's eyes, two bright points of vitality above his plate. Toward the end of the meal I asked Charles politely if he cared for more tea, as the pot was near my hand. He would not answer me. Robb grinned.

Mr. Tracy appeared to be quite sad and nervous. It was only by chance I noticed this, as I had quickly gotten into the habit of paying no attention to him. His presence was so wraithlike that he could be around, but not felt. If you looked at him directly, his eyes and his fine teeth would gleam as if the two of you shared a secret. But it was meaningless. His attention appeared to forever be on some esoteric rhythm in the world, perhaps the sound of his own blood pumping through his frail old body. And it would have been difficult to take seriously anyone in his costume. He had several changes of tunics, all neatly sewn of goatskin. These reached nearly to his knees and under them he wore long quilted drawers made from flour sacks. He always looked like a man who had forgotten to put his pants on.

Robb leaned back in his chair, sucking on his empty pipe. "Tracy," he said, "the fact that the axe has disappeared will in no way alter the fate of that red hen of yours."

"I cannot do it!" Mr. Tracy said. "You may kill me, but I cannot do it!"

"What happened to the axe?"

Mr. Tracy's manner changed. He plucked at the end of his nose and looked archly at Robb. "You know that as well as I do," he said. He picked up a plate and went out into the kitchen chuckling. "The axe. She took it. Ho, ho. She's much too smart for them."

Robb got up. "You wring that chicken's neck, Baby."

Sorenson pawed at some egg yolk on his huge stubbly chin. "Sure," he said.

"I refer to the one that clucks but does not rhyme."

Sorenson heaved gently, eyeing the returning patriarch. "Sure. Old rooster is too tough!"

After that whenever I realized that Baby was making a joke I moved off to a safe distance. Charles had never heard his mirth and so he had no way of knowing what was happening. He sprang straight out of the chair while thunder rumbled in the man. I think Sorenson really suffered agony when he laughed. With him it was a reaction of the bowels.

I FOLLOWED Robb up the path to the woods. He had come out of the bedroom with a roll of linen, motioning to me to accompany him and now we moved quietly through the trees. The early sun was driving into the woods and at the southern cliffs we could hear the racket of sea birds and the trees were full of the gossip of their land brethren. Underfoot Leandro was springy and bleared with dew. The vivid beauty of the day touched me with pleasure and I started to laugh at a little pig that twitched squealing from us around a tree, but the pig reminded me of the first time Charles and I had come up to the woods and the laughter in me died a guilty death.

Where the gully pitched down from the woods to the windward beach we stopped, looking out at the shining carpet of sea. The channel islands stood forth like plums against the purple coast, but what made me suddenly catch my breath was the sight of sails. There were half a dozen of them sprinkled between Leandro and Santa Rosa, so distant that the canvas of the nearest vessel seemed no larger than the head of a pin, yet so very close, the first tangible evidence of the world outside

that I had seen since arriving on the island.

"Fishermen," said Jeremy Robb.

They would glance up, I thought, from bringing in their nets and they would see the high brow of Leandro. They would look at it and go on with their work; they wouldn't know.

We went down the gully to find the beach occupied only by a strutting gull. I moved along the wet-packed sand and the water, shorn of all menace this bright morning, made playful gurgling dashes at my toes. An affable element now, it lapped blandly around the island, a posturing deceitful body, pretending that its gray sulks, its green-eyed passions and black lashing rages had never been.

"We are going up to the tower to raise this flag," Robb told me. "We can use that boom of yours for a pole." He handed me the flag. "This is Tracy's distress signal."

We entered the cave. The sun lighted the outer cavern and I could see the boom and the mast, but the sails were gone. Robb picked up the boom and balanced it on his shoulder.

"She's taken your sails, too," he said. He turned a little, staring back into the dark cavern. "I simply cannot figure it out. Where does she take these things? Where does she go?" He smiled. "Perhaps she *is* too smart for us. Perhaps. We'll see. Bring along that coil of rope that she was kind enough to leave us, Dave."

"I'll take one end of that boom," I said.

"That will not be necessary," Robb replied, starting out, "although I probably shan't walk quite so lively as you."

I would not have believed that any man, even Sorenson, could pick up that heavy boom, make the rough journey the length of the island, and then, without pausing, climb the cliffs with it. But Jeremy Robb did, and he sang at the top of his voice all the way, strange gay songs about labor at sea. Although unencumbered but for the flag and doing no singing, I was staggering with fatigue when at last we stood on Tracy Tower. Robb flung down the boom and stood outlined, godlike, against the sky. He was grinning, laughing inwardly at me. Perspiration shone at the roots of his dark hair, but otherwise there was nothing to indicate how he had labored. Before I had recovered enough strength to help him, he had already begun to tear down one of the cairns.

AS I went over with the flag he was looking down into the interior of the pile. He tore away more rocks and then reached in, bringing up some bones. These he tossed away but held a circle of metal and rubbed it on his dungarees.Where he rubbed it, it began to shine. He held it out to me.

"A nice silver bracelet for your best girl." He looked at the other cairns. "There's probably quite a lot of it around here. Perhaps some gold, too." He pulled at his beard and smiled, gazing out at the vacant western horizon where clouds slid off toward China. "We'll not need it," he said. "We shall have plenty of that—eh, Dave?"

He tied the flag to the smaller end of the boom and I helped him to step it in the center of the cairn. He paused, staring down at the human remains inside. "Isn't it odd," he said; "to them silver meant only bracelets or earrings." He swung an arm toward the coast. "Out there it means life and death."

"Who do you suppose they were—these people buried here?"

"You went back in the cave and saw the skeleton and the inscription there?"

I nodded. "I couldn't read it."

"'Hell,'" he said, "'is the only place where the devil women will not follow.'"

"'Devil women!'"

"That's what the fellow in there wrote long ago. A Spaniard, Dave, and a grand man; lying down in there to choke to death or starve, yet capable of writing an epitaph like that. I should like to have known those bones, so blithely ironic."

We piled the stones back around the boom so that it stood firm. The flag of

distress shivered lazily. Robb sat down, leaning back against the pile. "That's who I think is in here," he said, slapping a stone. "One of those *damas diablas,* a woman chief. I can see that gallant man staggering up the beach from a shipwreck. He probably made a polite bow when he first saw the native women and when he saw that they wanted his head, he fled into the cave. Or perhaps he preferred hell to too many savage caresses."

"How did *you* get here?" I asked, after thinking about the Spaniard a moment.

Robb laughed. "Just as you did. Just as he did, as even Tracy did. By shipwreck —wet and half-drowned. I cannot swim, you see, nor can Strom. We were very fortunate."

"But how did you get out of San Francisco?"

"We walked. We knew that with sailors escaped they would watch the sea, so we kept inland down the peninsula and followed the mountains as far as Santa Cruz. All one day we lay in the brush on a hilltop while we chose our boat in the bay. At night, when the fisherman who owned it rowed ashore, we came down, rowed out and hoisted sail. But there was no water aboard to drink and when we saw this island we made for it. A few rocks did not frighten us. We came on, in the night, with our tongues hanging out with thirst. And then that current down there took us and crunched its jaws on us and spit us up on the beach."

"And you met Mr. Tracy and Nautilus?"

"They took us in the cabin and dried us out."

"You saw her?"

"Well," he said, "not exactly. Like your friend Charles I was out of my head with fever. She was leaning over me. I thought I was Ulysses looking at Circe." He broke off abruptly and ripped a thread from his bleached dungarees. He glanced at me curiously, his eyes squinted against the glare.

"Dave," he said seriously, "You've a young mind, a good mind. Do you feel I always make sense?"

"You are," I said grandly, "the only person I have ever known who did."

He looked surprised. "Thank you, Dave. Thank you very much. Sometimes— like that time I saw her—I reach out a hand in the dark, but none has ever taken it. She could have, but she was afraid of me, of something she had seen when we looked into one another's eyes. She walked out the door singing one of her hymns and she did not return."

These words, perhaps because I did not fully comprehend them, affected me profoundly. For a moment I sensed Jeremy Robb's spirit groping blindly, unsure as my own. Nothing I think could have roused me then but what did.

BEYOND and below the periphery of the cliff's rim the sea was in apparent chaos. Yet if one watched it, as I had been doing, design became evident in the rush and recoil; between the rocks tracings of foam repeated themselves; and at regular intervals spray, like counterpoint, would fly. It was a full minute before I realized that the head I saw was no part of this pattern. Robb became aware of my absorption and followed my gaze. As we watched, the head sprang from the water and a brown body followed it to find foothold on a water-swallowed rock.

In that gleaming nudity there was no shock; it was as natural there as the body of a fish, belonging with the sea and the rocks. She stood motionless for a second, her dark hair streaming down her back and with one arm poised, ready to fling a small spear into the churn at her feet. Then all in one movement of incredible swiftness the spear was flung and she was gone after it.

We hurried to the edge of the cliff and watched for her head to reappear. We circled the edge, looking down, but we did not see her again.

There was excitement in Robb's voice when at last he spoke. "That's all you ever see," he said. "A flash like that, or perhaps you hear the hint of a hymn in the air.

Afterward you think you might have dreamed it; like sometimes on deck at night, in the tropics, when you haven't been near a female for a year and you see mermaids in the wake. Damn pretty ladies, too, far prettier than you ever see ashore."

"But *she* had feet, didn't she? Legs?"

"I am positive that she did," Robb said. "I looked especially."

"Where could she have gone?" I wondered. "Where does she stay?"

"Many a day I've sat here and thought about that. Perhaps it is at the foot of this cliff. There may be a cave there with an entrance only from the water."

I was remembering the footprints that Charles and I had seen the morning we found the food, a journey one way, ending in the cavern where the bloody river ran.

"You can swim," Robb mused. "But could you swim in that, Dave?"

I looked down at the currents writhing and chattering far below us. I shuddered. "No," I said. . . .

At mid-day we returned to the cabin and Sorenson, taking along his sewing, went up to the tower to relieve us. Now that the flag was up, said Robb, we would have to keep a lookout on the Tower during clear days so that we should have time to prepare against the arrival of a ship once one, heeding our signal, came on toward the island. And this reminded me that any day now I might have to hurriedly put on the blue blanket, to go and intrigue all on my own as a freebooter with the lives of us all dependent on my wits. But this prospect so paralysed me that I refused to think of it.

CHAPTER XVIII

BRANDY, MATES

WE spent the afternoon out by the stream. Jeremy Robb read to me from Mr. Tracy's volume of Pope while I sat fashioning a pair of canvas slippers. Charles had made himself a pair that morning while we were gone.

Toward mid-afternoon I looked up and saw Charles watching us from the door of the cabin. He looked lonely and unhappy and I was oppressed with a sense of faithlessness. After a while he limped over to us and sat down on a rock behind Robb, dabbling in the stream with a stick. Robb had stopped reading and was telling me about a typhoon he had once been in. He shifted his position so that he could see what Charles was doing and went on with his story.

It was getting cooler and I could smell the chicken steaming in the cabin. Robb abruptly stopped talking. He leaned back against a rock and began whistling through his teeth. I realized later on that this habit of his was a part of the acute nervousness that seemed, without warning, to grip him at times. It was tuneless, just breath coming shrilly through his teeth, but it gave his face an odd expression, an absent-minded one; his eyes got vacant and I had a feeling his mind was going places I would not care to follow it. I put on my slippers and wriggled my toes in them. Charles looked at me and then away. Presently he got up and went to the cabin.

"Is he going to try and escape, do you suppose?" Robb asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Couldn't we do something so that he could live in China with us when we get there?"

"We'll have to keep our word and send him back." He smiled at me. "You must not feel badly about it."

"He's my friend. He called me a traitor."

"Do you feel a traitor?"

"No," I said. "I feel all right."

Robb sat up, all alive again, and grinning. "You'll go far, Dave—in this line that you and I are in. It isn't just a game of cricket, and that's why those like Charles cannot play."

"Charlie's all right," I said.

"But not mad enough, Dave."

"Are we mad?" I asked.

"Of course! Charles may be the salt of the earth, we are the cayenne."

While I thought that over he began that tuneless symphony through his teeth again and drummed his fingers on his knees.

To the west the mist was pink where the sun was sliding down. I could feel his sudden tension, like something that was rising in him with the dark and it made me uncomfortable and a little frightened.

"That's just the trouble," he said. "I wasn't meant to rot like this. Dave, you've no idea how glad I was to see you come here to have someone to talk to. Oh, there's Strom and old Tracy—but how's a man to talk to idiots? It reminds me of when I was a child, before I went to sea. My father kept a cow, and evenings when I went out to milk the old beast I would chat with her, as if I were talking to a friend. I'd tell that cow things I could tell no human. It was nice for me, but you see, Dave—I might have been mad as far as the cow was concerned. It would have been all the same to the cow.

"And here, in this 'cursed prison, I could talk to Strom or Tracy—I talked my head off—yet sometimes I would wonder. I'd say to myself, 'Are you making sense, Jerry Robb? You may be mad for all you know.' You see, Dave, I couldn't tell by those two any more than I could tell by the cow.

"I'm glad you're here with your keen young mind," he continued. "If I should speak a bit wildly you'll notice it and you'll tell me. Won't you, Dave? And with you here that feeling of tragedy I've got about this place will go away and I can have patience, I can wait a little longer."

I wanted to get up and go away. This wasn't the Jeremy Robb who had inspired me to revolt. His face wasn't the gay bold one I had remembered for so long. He was earnest now and had a kind of frightened, hunted look about him. He began to whistle again and I stood up.

THERE was a sound then, breaking in on us, that could not be ignored. It was the cracked bass voice of Sorenson, coming from the cove, singing a song in a language I supposed to be Danish. In a moment his great form partially blocked out the last light, hurrying up the path toward us.

Robb uncoiled and in one rubbery motion was erect. "A ship!" he cried. "It must be a ship!"

But Sorenson was waving something at us and as he came up I saw that it was a wicker-bound bottle. "Ho!" he cried. "Jer'my, look at here! The old sea give a gift for us."

Robb took the bottle, his hands treasuring it, his eyes delighted. He was again the Jeremy Robb I knew and I could forget how he had been a moment before.

"Why that's ours!" I said, recognizing the bottle. "We had it on the *Shark*."

"What is it?"

"Brandy," I said.

Robb bowed and handed me the bottle. "I'm very happy to return it to you."

Sorenson's face sagged. His eyes were on me glumly. I smiled, also bowing. "And I am very happy to present it to you and Mr. Sorenson."

Robb waved the bottle and shouted, "A feast day! Chicken, and now brandy from the sea. Come Strom, come Dave!"

We followed him to the cabin. Charles was in the kitchen with Mr. Tracy and when he came to the door I saw that he too, recognized the bottle. Robb set it on the table.

"Cups!" he cried. "Dear Bacchus shall rule on Leandro tonight!"

Mr. Tracy and Charles refused the brandy but I accepted a toddy which Robb made by simply pouring hot water from the kettle on top of the liquor in our tin cups.

"To China," said he; "and to us—shipmates!"

We drank. The toddy was strong and scalding, yet after I had recovered from my first shock I decided that I liked it. I felt the draught I had taken charging around in me. It leaped to my head and I laughed. Sorenson and Robb gulped down their drinks and were starting another before I took a second sip. Mr. Tracy entered from the kitchen bearing a kettle of steaming chicken and set it on the table.

He eyed the bottle. "Perhaps I might have just a drop of that," he said.

"Here," I told him, offering my cup, "you may have mine."

"What sort of a shipmate are you?" Robb said. "You'd give my toast away? Drink it, Dave! If you're to stand a man's watch on my ship you must learn to drink like a man. So, down with it!" He sloshed some brandy into a cup. "Here, poet."

I took a careful sip, the aroma welling up out of the cup to meet me. Christopher Tracy tossed off his portion and made a noise like a bird chirruping.

WE sat down to the red hen. I could not keep my mind on what anyone was saying but ate with a great appetite. The faces around the table wavered in the beams from the fire and Jeremy Robb's was red and his eyes were glistening as if they were full of tears. I realized that he was shouting, roaring with laughter about something. Everything seemed greatly exaggerated, even Charles' quiet; he sat gloomily eating a heap of dumpling.

"That's the last of the flour, men," I heard Mr. Tracy say. "Eat it up. Go ahead. Glut on it! And tomorrow the tea will be gone, too."

No one appeared to hear him. Sorenson held a cup of brandy in one hand and a drumstick in the other. His chin shone with gravy and his eyes were big and popping; inside him there was a continous eruption.

"Go ahead!" Mr. Tracy yelled belligerently. "Stuff yourselves!" He hopped around in the kitchen door. "I prefer goats!"

"Flour, tea—what difference does it make when we dream of nightingales' tongues!" Robb's gaze explored the room. "A sty," he said, "when we dream of palaces. One last voyage, mates, and then peace. Like the rose, to never toil again, to never climb the climbing wave, to go where the shadow of the gibbet never falls." He stood, pushing back his chair, knocking it over with a careless gesture. "Hear that, poet?" he cried. "That's a duet, with Lord Tennyson singing tenor and Jeremy Robb the bass."

"I still prefer goats!" Christopher Tracy said.

"Some men," said Sorenson with surprising glibness, "cannot take a little drink of some brandy!" He slapped the table violently so that everything jumped, including Charles and me.

Robb said, "Please do not act like a lout, Baby. These are gentlefolk."

Sorenson picked up the bottle and filled their cups. "You have a drink, Jer'my. It's one long time since we are getting drunk, you and Strom."

I was present, but all around me was gossamer and my impressions of it were only fragmentary. I did note that Robb had changed again; he was quite pale now. Suddenly I felt a quick throb of fear. Robb drank the cupful Sorenson handed him and wiped his lips. Now his movements lacked that fine restraint and timing that so characterized him. Even the hand that pushed back his hair seemed brutal, and wild with relaxed undirected tension. But most shocking of all were those eyes. Always you noticed his eyes, magnetized by the mirth there, by that amused derision of his own magnificence. Yet now all this had fled and the emotion in him was staring out hard and bitter with no kindly amused depths behind it. I was horribly afraid. I wanted to laugh and say something that would bring him back, smiling again.

"You know Latin," said he, "but what do you know of the night?"

I laughed and slid my hand across my forehead, finding it damp with sweat. "Nothing," I said. I laughed again, feeling sickness creeping in my gullet.

THAT bottle we had got so long ago at the German grocer's below the square stood on the table, casually, as if unaware of the preposterous chance that had brought it to Mr. Tracy's cabin to change us all. Its nice poison had acted upon minds long free of alcohol with cobra-like decision and swiftness, accelerating calm blood, stirring old stagnant pools.

Robb contorted abruptly, wriggled and ripped his jersey over his head. In the

firelight his torso writhed, great muscles, like uneasy snakes, rippling under the skin. He turned, displaying stripes of scar tissue on his back.

"See those," he said. "That was my lot when I was your age. I got those because I fainted when a gun mate fell headless in my arms. And I laughed when they lashed me. I was hard. I was so hard they could drive nails in me and I would laugh at them until it was they who fainted." He laughed, looking at Charles. "What do you think of that, Stribling? You with your little fevers and infections."

"I think you're a liar," Charles said.

"Ah," Robb said, "a liar. I'm a liar and Dave here is a traitor. You have judged us and stuck your labels on us. You are a very dull fellow, Stribling. That's my label for you. You belong at home in your father's counting house. Money changers should not go adventuring to sea; they haven't got the spirit for it. Eh, Dave?"

There was a moment of silence while they all stared at me. I glanced at Charles and my skin crawled with shame.

"It seems the brandy has stolen your wits," Robb observed. "Well, I forgive you. You'll be laughing with me some day about Stribling here. He'll never have any fun all his life because of the fifty thousand gold his father's going to have to pay out for him. He'll think about that, even when he's an old dry man and it will cut into him so's he'll never have any peace. He'll beat his wife and be mean to his brats because of it and they and the men who owe him gold will hate him. And he'll have to think of us, somewhere at our ease, laughing at him."

Robb grinned at Charles who stared steadily at him. "That's the way it will be," he said. "You must believe me, Stribling, because I never lie. I did not lie about the nails. I can see thoughts of escape in your eyes, but that will do you no good. Nothing will help you, Stribling. That's the way it will be. The ship that will take Dave to windward is somewhere on the sea and the gold that will buy us freedom lies waiting in your father's vaults. I don't lie, Stribling. That's the way it will be. Ask Baby here if I lie. Ask him what I did to Captain George that day. You can't ask him why I did it because Baby doesn't really know those things. Yet I don't lie, Stribling. I wasn't lying about the nails."

Jeremy Robb lurched forward from the hearth and hung onto the back of a chair. "Tracy!" he cried. "Belay! Bring me that mallet and two big nails."

We heard Mr. Tracy fling a pot violently against the kitchen wall; and Sorenson, his pale lids sagging over his big vacant eyes, slapped the table again. "Some people!" he said. "Some people . . ."

Robb swayed slowly, hanging onto the chair and grinning at Charles. Mr. Tracy entered bearing from his tool chest in the kitchen the mallet and two spikes. He put them on the table, looking at the bottle.

"I might have another drink of that brandy," he suggested.

Robb picked up the bottle and took a long drink from it. "You might," he said, "but you won't. You're an old man—a crazy old man. You'll be dead soon. And you have nothing to look forward to and nothing to forget. You see—it makes no considerable difference to you."

"Ah, God," Mr. Tracy said. Tears spurted suddenly from his eyes and began to slide down into his beard. "Death. Where shall I be then?"

THE clearer my perceptions became, the more I was confused. I longed to be out of the room, away from the horrible sight of this new grotesque, senseless Robb. I thought of my father and of my home. I saw my room as I had left it that night we fled in the *Shark;* I heard the Washington Street cable clanking in its slot and smelled the fog. Again I saw my father's clever face, his dark eyes probing me. And in me now there was a sudden new agony, a pang of nostalgia so urgent that I sprang up, sick, and longing to be away.

I wanted to blot out forever the weak addled presence of old Christopher Tracy. I wanted to shut my eyes and wake up in

my own bed to realize that it was all just a dream and that Jeremy Robb was only a name in the papers. My spirit was pale and wavering for my idol was crumbling before me.

"Dave," he said to me, "sit down. We'll see what he's made of—this fine friend of yours." He moved around the table to Charles and held out the mallet and one of the spikes. "I'm not a liar," he told Charles. "You must find that out for yourself, Stribling. I despise your father's gold and my own flesh. I only use them." He stood up stiffly, there in the center of the room, thrusting his arms rigid at his sides so that the muscles squirmed and strained. "Here," he said, lifting his right arm and pointing at the shoulder of the left. "Drive it here."

Charles got slowly to his feet, hesitating, all his dislike of Robb concentrated in the stare he gave him. "We'll see, Stribling," Robb said. "We'll see. Come along, young moneybags. Drive it, I say!"

"I don't want to," Charles said finally. "It won't prove anything."

"Drive it!" Robb cried. "You petty craven, drive it. We'll see how your labels fit. We'll see who's the man here!"

Charles took a step toward him. He held the mallet and the spike and his face was stiff and very white. He put the point of the spike against that glistening swell of muscle Rob pointed to and then he stood there, as if unable to make another move.

"Afraid?" Robb taunted.

Charles lifted the mallet slowly. I could see him grit his teeth and then he suddenly drove it hard against the head of the spike. The iron entered and blood welled out around it.

Laughter broke from Jeremy Robb. "So you don't believe it?" he cried as Charles shrank back. "Well, I'll tell you, Stribling, it's only a hateful shell and I don't give a damn for it. Go on! You've hardly begun. Drive it, I say. Drive it, Stribling!" He looked at me with his lips strained back in that awful grin. "We'll see what he's made of, Dave!"

Charles seemed then to lose his head. He lifted the mallet and struck furiously, but the spike made little headway through the resilient fabric of muscle. He struck wildly, missing. Biting his lip, he set himself and hammered the spike again. And all the time Jeremy Robb was jeering and shouting at him:

"Drive it, Stribling! Drive it! Come, dolt, let's see the strength in you. Let's see what sort of putty you're made of!"

I turned my head away. "Oh! Oh!" Robb cried. "Harder, Stribling, harder! Why I can't even feel it. Bideford men are made of English oak, seasoned through centuries with the salt of the seven seas!"

They began to sway nightmarishly before me, the mallet rising and falling. The blood bubbled out around the embedded spike and ran down Robb's arm, dripping from his fingers to the floor. "Drive on!" he was crying. "I'm laughing at you, don't you see? Look at me—I'm laughing!"

I wanted to go, or to scream, but I was numb, and each time there was the flat sound of the mallet striking the nail I shuddered. Oh, I was a coward. I knew it then when my spirit was cringing within me. Yet it was not so much the bestial sickening spectacle that terrified me. It was because this glittering, madly laughing stranger was Jeremy Robb, the archetype of all that I had come to believe was brave and bold and free. This drunken jeering devil was my idolized shipmate of an hour ago, for whose bright promises I had betrayed my true friend, Charles.

Charles swayed back, leaning against the table. Taking long painful breaths, he stared whitely at the blood pooling on the floor. Robb caught him by the wrist.

"Oh! Drive on. You've only struck the bone."

"I can't do it any more," Charles whispered as if appealing to me.

"Ah—can't do it!" Robb cried. "You see, Dave? You see what sort of a fellow this Stribling is. A sniveling sister!"

Charles looked at the spike and then he shut his eyes. I watched him drop the mallet and stagger over to his bunk where he lay down.

Robb raised his crisp brows in triumph. Sweating and bloody, and laughing as if he would never stop, he looked at me. And then, I had to, I turned, flung open the door, and rushed out.

Over the whalebone fence I was sick on Mr. Tracy's geraniums.

CHAPTER XIX

ILLO!

I WENT over and plunged my head in the icy stream and sat on a rock with the wind drying me. There was a rind of moon with clouds sporting around it and I was aware of a rumble of sound from the cabin and later the reedy uncertain notes of a flute and a bellow of a song. Later still the door opened and Sorenson swayed in the light for a moment and then pitched out. Vomiting, his noises were as fundamental and titanic as his laughter.

I waited for a long time, until the clouds finally got the best of the moon and the wind was rising and whining through the oaks, but Sorenson did not go back into the cabin. Cautiously making my way to the front door, I found him lying on his back, his arms flung out above his head, snoring and choking, with his gross face strained toward the sky. On impulse I bent down and drew his sheath knife from its scabbard. Then I stood holding it for a moment, wondering why I had taken it and what I was going to do.

When I opened the door the lamp had burned very low and the first thing I saw was Jeremy Robb lying on his face before the dying fire. The spike still protruded from his shoulder. Entering with the naked blade, I became aware of whispering in the kitchen and Charles, hearing the door shut, came to the kitchen doorway and looked at me.

Across the prone sated body of Jeremy Robb we faced one another and I know that for a moment the thoughts of us both flashed back. We were on the yard-arm again watching a gay buccaneer enchant the crowd in the square, or we were on the playing ground at school singing the song that had swept the city. Yes, we were boys, back in safe homes and dreaming of Adventure that wore a bright mocking smile and laughed outright at gravity.

Now, at our feet lay Adventure itself, stripped to the bone and showing its ribs, forever dead to both of us. It was no longer a dream; for we had shaken its hand and we knew it for what it was. Its belly ached with hunger and the kiss of its lips was parched with thirst, its maddened enflamed eyes roamed dark empty horizons and it was sea-lump and heartbreak. It was false, a monster with a grinning mask.

"Charlie," I said, "—well—" My eyes again strayed down to Robb. He groaned and stirred, breathing very loudly. I swallowed back a tide of feeling that threatened to engulf me and did not quite know whether it was because of Robb or Charles. I noticed the gray hair creeping in the dark head on the floor and the tanned neck, I saw, was deeply scored by wrinkles. Jeremy Robb was old, yet I had always thought of him as ageless.

"Dave," said Charles at last, "we can go now. We can get away—if you want."

"Yes," I said. And I didn't need to think, it was automatic.

"I tried to get his gun," Charles said, "but it's in his pocket under him and he started to wake up when I tried to move him. It was—funny. He was sitting at the table swearing at me and all of a sudden he just closed his eyes and fell out of his chair. "Gosh"—he rubbed a hand through his hair— "it was funny."

Yes, it was funny.

CHRISTOPHER TRACY gave us a skin of food and promised—in some underground way that he would not reveal —to communicate with Nautilus and beg her to admit us to her secret lair. We had no plan at first, only the simple desire to escape from Jeremy Robb.

I followed Charles up the path into the wood and we stood there by the spring for some time, in the gloom, with the trees threshing uneasily above us. I do not know what Charles pondered, but I looked

into the nebulous future, trying to imagine some life as an alternative to a pagodaed ancient city and a career of blithe outlawry with Jeremy Robb. And I know that I would have been ready to despair completely if it had not been for the presence of Charles. I was aware of him at my side, staunch and thoughtful and I knew that I ought to find words somehow to beg his forgiveness for my conduct.

"Where can we go?" I wondered at last.

"We'll have to keep on the move," Charles said. "Until we can find where she hides."

"I didn't mean that," I said. "If we get away from here—where can we go?"

"I don't know," he said.

But I did; even as he spoke I knew. "Home!" I said suddenly.

He gripped my shoulder in the dark. "Dave," he said, "do you mean it?"

I said, "I'm going to get home—somehow. I'm going back to San Francisco. It doesn't make any difference what they do to me, I've got to go back!"

"Dave!" Charles was wringing my hand, just as he had that day when we stood on the hill above the school and pledged ourselves to the South Seas. "I've been hoping you would say that!" he cried. "I couldn't say anything about it because you would of thought that—well—that I knew I hadn't been the one who killed the watchman. Gosh, I never would have said anything about going back. I couldn't have. I would have gone on wherever you wanted to. That's why I felt so—so blue when you were getting thick with Robb, because he let on that I wouldn't stick by you because you and he were different than me—because you'd both killed someone."

"Oh, hell," I said. "Oh, Charlie—I couldn't *think* right when he talked to me."

"Dave, when we go back, I'm just as guilty about the watchman as you are. You got to remember that. We're in this together, like we always have been."

"But it wasn't your fault," I protested. "You didn't do it. It was me—it's always been me—ruining things!"

"I'm guilty, too! I'll tell them so!"

The happiness that filled me was almost like pain.

The future was clear now and Charles and I would move through it together, no matter what happened. "Right," I told him and I took his arm and shook it clumsily.

He was silent a moment. "You don't really want to go to China, do you?"

"Oh that," I said. "Hell, no."

PRESENTLY we moved down toward the beach, discussing where it would be best for us to hide. The wind was growling now and the sea was pale with fury, yet I felt like skipping and singing. Home! I was going home.

Above the beach where the brush was thick and tall would be as good a place as any for us we decided. It was near the water and, Charles said, we could always take to the sea if we were hard pressed. They wouldn't catch us, we vowed.

We burrowed into the brush out of the wind and scooped places in the sand, lying on our backs with the pleasant scent of the *manzanita* close about us. Immediately I saw Jeremy Robb, glittering with madness, the spike quivering in his arm. No, I thought, even if it meant death among the rocks and currents he would not get us. Curiously I recalled what he had told me about Nautilus; she had looked into his eyes and then she had walked out singing a hymn, afraid of what she had seen. She could have taken that hand he reached out in the dark, he said. I pondered this and came to the conclusion that perhaps I had seen what Nautilus had. I did not know what it was but it had terrified me. No one would ever wish to look twice.

We didn't talk any more. Once or twice I heard Charles groan softly and twist in the sand. I didn't ask him what was wrong for I knew that he thought me asleep. His foot might hurt him, I supposed, or it might be what he was remembering. I lay still for a long time, simulating sleep and trying to think of something I might say to him that would make him

realize how sorry I was for my light-headed unfaithfulness and how much I really thought of him.

He had, I knew, something I had not previously possessed, a staunch core, a character. Contrasting my conduct with his own, I despised myself, for I realized that I had been like a leaf, my course at the mercy of any whimsical air. And Charles had been like an oak, steadfast in his convictions, standing up bravely even to Jeremy Robb, before whose wit strong men quailed. With some surprise I realized that Charles had conquered Robb.

I came again to what Nautilus and I had seen, and now I thought I knew what it was. Before each of us, Jeremy Robb had for a moment dropped that veil of self derision and we had stared into a pit, a yawning abyss of spirit where all was purposeless chaos, where there was nothing steady that one could hang onto and believe in. I knew that I had seen that pit just in time to be saved from it. Yes, I knew Latin, thank God, and nothing of the night.

"Hic, haec, hoc . . ." I whispered. It was an incantation against the unknown, a psalm honoring the dull, the familiar, dear things that I had left behind. *"Huius* throughout . . ." How infinitely wise my father had been. Knowing something of the dark, he had tried to force on me some of those qualities and talismen that would carry a spirit through and not leave it wandering tortured down an endless corridor to grasp always at things that would forever crumble at a touch.

"Ille, illa, illud . . ." I went on toward the awful ablative where I had stumbled so often before. I could not remember. It would not come. Oh, if only I could be back at school! How I would study, reel it off. "Charles!"

His quick concern calmed me. "Yes?" he said. "What's wrong, Dave?"

I sat up, fully awake, and felt embarrassed. Yet I must know. "What's the masculine ablative of *ille,"* I asked casually.

"Illo," Charles said promptly and without seeming much surprised.

"Illo!" I repeated. "Of course!" Good old Charles, dependable Charles. He had known. Charles wouldn't let you down when you were counting on him.

CHAPTER XX

FLIGHT ON FOURS

WE WOKE at dawn and peered out of our shelter to find the sea, under a sullen mackerel sky, looking like a plowed field in the wind. I stood up and looked cautiously around. To the north of us Tracy Tower humped up dark and forbidding and, even at that distance, I could hear the sound of the distress flag cracking on its mast like gunfire. The whole world seemed to glower and spit and hiss at me. The sea bombarded the land as if it hated it, and guttering in and out of the passing wind came the sound of voices, jeering.

Charles sprang up beside me. "What's that?"

We listened, hearing the sound again and locating it as coming from the north of us. Watching, we saw the head and shoulders of Jeremy Robb appear above the brush in the distance and advance to the cliffs. He started up the path and then turned. Cupping his hands to his mouth he called:

"Day-ave! Oh, Day-ave!"

We shrank down deeper into the brush. Lying on our stomachs and sighting through the leaves we followed his progress up the cliff to the Tower. He gazed out to sea on all sides and then went back to the cairn, climbed it and hauled down the flag, gathering its wild-beating folds to his chest. Presently he came back to the edge of the Tower and stood with the wind flinging against him while he looked down at the length of the island below.

A dozen times his roving eyes must have passed over our place of concealment, for he stood there for more than an hour. During the whole time Charles stared out

from the brush fiercely, but after a while I turned over on my back and nibbled at a raw potato. As Robb came down from the cliffs we first heard Sorenson. He was cursing. Later we caught a glimpse of him, not fifty yards off, walking north, beating at the brush with a stick. I smiled. I knew why he was so angry. I took out the sheath knife and showed it to Charles. We knew it was very sharp because we had seen Sorenson shave with it.

Presently we could hear Robb calling something to the Dane but could not make out what he said. Time passed and, as we did not hear them, I stood up and looked out over the chaparrel. It was all twitching and waving in the wind; an excellent day for a game of hide-and-seek. We curled up in our shelter and chewed on the jerked meat Mr. Tracy had given us.

"We won't be able to signal a ship," Charles pointed out. "What we have to do is find where she hides and build a raft, or some kind of a boat. She has the axe."

"And the sails," I said.

"On a clear day we could make it easy to the mainland." He paused. "Dave, I wonder what she's like."

"She's all brown," I said, and I told him of how Robb and I had seen her the day before. After that we were silent, lying on our backs, speculating about her.

Charles raised up on one elbow, listening, and then stood up. He ducked again quickly. "They're coming down from the woods," he said. "They're spreading out and criss-crossing through the brush."

I glanced out at the surf. "Well," I said, "we can swim."

"We don't have to do that. Anyway I'm thirsty. Are you?"

I nodded.

"Well, we can jump down to the beach and sneak up the gully to the spring. They won't see us. They're going toward the other end of the island so they won't be back around the woods for a while."

"Let's go." I laughed. "He's not so smart."

Charles' eyes gleamed as he tied our skin bundle.

WE WRIGGLED out of the dense clump of *manzanita* on our stomachs, then crawled on hands and knees to where the sandy soil dropped away to the beach. We slid down, finding ourselves only a few yards from the entrance to the cave. The wind slapped me wetly and flung my breath back down my throat.

"Come on!" Charles hissed. He started off, bending down and limping greatly.

"Look!"

He turned and I pointed out Robb's boot prints. They came down from the gully and went up to the cave.

"He must have come at dawn, or before, while we were asleep," I said. "Why, he was right under us!"

"Come on!" Charles said again.

I was looking back at our own prints. "They'll come along here and they'll know where we've gone!"

"Can't be helped!" Charles snapped. "Come on!"

We went along to the sandstone outcropping and, climbing it, saw the backs of the two of them, moving slowly through the scrub. It was good we had left; they certainly would have found us. For a moment I was keenly aware of the absurdity of it. Yesterday Jeremy Robb had been reading poetry to me and today he sought me with a gun. It was like a school game, but inordinately grim.

Concealed in the high woods, we could look out the length of the island and observe our pursuers, with plenty of time to anticipate their movements. They were, we saw, still working north, their obvious purpose to beat the scrub thoroughly to the cliffs and as this would take them several hours, Charles and I settled ourselves comfortably by the spring.

Charles pulled the fraying canvas slipper from his right foot and examined it. It was swollen half again its normal size and the cut on the arch was open and suppurating. The flesh was brilliant as a sunset. Charles scooped water from the spring onto it.

"Gosh," I said, sickened.

"It isn't anything!"

Charles was angry. He acted as if he hated his foot. And, without quite reasoning it out, I knew why. I refrained from solicitude, knowing that Charles' mind was still full of a man who laughed when you drove spikes into his flesh. Charles wasn't going to whine over a mere infection.

He put his slipper on. "It'll be all right," he said firmly. "It doesn't bother me much."

I went to the edge of the woods and looked out. Robb and Sorenson were combing the island's waist and far off, at the base of the cliffs, I could make out a group of goats, huddled against the wind, looking down at them curiously. I returned to Charles and said:

"I'm going to run down to the cabin and see Mr. Tracy. It's safe enough now."

"What for?" Charles asked.

"I want to get a bottle," I told him, "so we can carry water with us when we have to leave here."

Charles thought a moment and evidently considered it a sound idea, but not without risk. "Well, hurry," he said finally. "I'll keep a lookout."

The sight of Charles' foot had frightened me. I did not see how we could keep mobile and maintain our freedom with him so crippled. It was with the idea of persuading Mr. Tracy to tell us how to reach Nautilus' hiding place at once that I ran down the path to the cabin.

I OPENED the kitchen door without knocking and brought Mr. Tracy out of his chair with a clatter of tin-ware. He looked at me and began swabbing with a cloth at the tea he had spilled on his manuscript.

"What a nuisance," he complained. "I was just doing a long poem about the events of last evening. There's a big theme there, David Lester. I plan to show the influence of spirituous liquor on men's minds. Although I must say it has never affected me particularly. I can take it and be quite well, or leave it and be the same." He paused reflectively. "How calm I am," he said. "I'm like a tree."

"With the wind in it," I said.

"Yes," he agreed, smiling, "with the wind in it."

"I came," I told him, "because Charles can't walk on his foot. You've got to tell us how to get to Nautilus—please!"

"I was just speaking to Nautilus," he said. "She wanted to know what had happened here. I told her that you and Charles wished to stay with her and she said it would be all right."

I stared at him suspiciously. "She was here?"

"Just a minute ago."

Following his glance just then I saw convincing evidence. On the white scrubbed floor there were small sandy tracks drying. He got the broom and swept them up.

"Well, when?" I said excitedly. *"Where* will we see her, or how do we get there?"

"She will come to you tonight," he said. He looked at me, observing my excitement, and then he had one of those rare perceptive moments when he forgot the little merry-go-round in his own head. "Don't worry, David," he advised me kindly. "She'll find you and take you to her place. You'll be safe there. I know how you feel, believe me, because sometimes I can remember quite clearly how it feels to be young. Full of passion are the young, but pure, resilient, yet not strong; they are courageous as lions and possessed of the imaginations of madmen." He sighed. "Be good to her for she's probably not like the girls you know. Nautilus has no vanities."

"Tonight!" I felt like hugging him. I rushed across the room to the brick sink and got the empty bottle that had held our brandy. As I went past him on the way to the door I gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder and was amazed at his lack of substance. He was no heavier than a bird. "Goodbye," I said, but he wasn't listening. He had just snapped his fingers over his head and swung back to his manuscript.

After I shut the door I thought I heard a sound in the wind, but as it was not

repeated, I could not be sure. But it had sounded like a shout and I started up the path at a hard run.

CHARLES was not at the spring, but he whistled and beckoned to me from over in the trees. I went to him and followed him to the edge of the bluff. He had to point before I saw Robb, for the day had grown quite gray and there was a hint of drizzle in the wind. Robb was standing at the edge of the brush, near where we had hidden, looking down at the beach. He had evidently shouted to Sorenson and was waiting for him to come over from the other side of the island. As we watched he turned and looked up toward where we were standing, his eyes roving along the edge of the woods.

"We've got to move now!" Charles said suddenly. "He's seen our footprints and they'll be trying to trap us here. Quick! Down by the cabin while they're both on the other side."

We paused at the spring to fill the bottle and I told Charles what Mr. Tracy had said about Nautilus.

"How will she find us?" he asked.

"Perhaps she'll sing."

"Sure," he agreed. "That might be it. She'll sing somewhere and then we'll know where she is and go to her."

Now our flight became more like a game. Bending low we ran down the slope toward the cabin. When we reached the chicken house Charles crouched down by it, looking back up at the woods and pondering.

I realized that we might be nicely trapped in our present position if Robb should come down the path after us while Sorenson crossed over through the brush.

"The thing to do," I suggested, "is to work our way to the other end of the island. They'll probably search the woods thoroughly first."

Charles agreed it was the move to make and we went around the cabin, planning to go to the north end of the cove and then take to the brush. To do this we had to cross the open flat before the cabin. Once we reached the cove we would be concealed by the overhanging brush.

Afterward, it always seemed incredible that Jeremy Robb appeared where he did; but at the time there was too much sudden panic in me for thinking about it. We were hurrying across the exposed ground and, feeling suddenly naked, were anticipating the shelter of the bank and the brush when a shout burst out behind us. As I dived for shelter, I flung a glance back up toward the woods to see Robb traveling like a beam of light down the path.

"Stop!" he cried. "*Dave!* Stop!"

It was no longer a game as we raced along the cove. I was energized by complete nerve-shattering terror and I traveled blindly, by muscular instinct alone. We came to the end of the cove and climbed up into the brush. I started to run, then tripped and went down in the sand, tearing my clothes and face on the spiney chaparral. Charles pounced on me. He was sobbing for breath.

"You fool! Hands and knees!"

I followed him, shuffling, animal-like, as I was never meant to move, through the brush. My heart was struggling to burst from my chest, my hands slipped and my open straining mouth was plunged into the sand. The fierce prehensile growths sought us and clawed us, ripped our clothes and punctured our skins as we went on. We crawled until my arms were like dead poles dragging my body through that strange close world, full of the droppings of goat and pig, and the catacombs of insects.

AT LAST we stopped, turning over on our backs to suck in breath, and listening. The air we gulped was wet now. It filtered down through the growth, neither rain nor mist. The sky was darker and the tops of the brush shuddered as the wind died.

"It'll soon be dark," I said.

"We'll get to the other side. If we have to, we can go in the water."

"Why not stay here?"

"The other side. They come on us here —we're goners."

There was a moment of silence while neither of us moved, then Charles spoke again.

"Will you look?"

I turned over and looked at him, questioningly.

"No," he said. "See if you can see them."

He had lost his slipper and I could see the swollen inflamed mass that seemed out of place on the end of his leg. It must be agony for him to stand.

I got up with my muscles aching and sighted cautiously out over the field of brush. We had come about three-quarters of the way across the island, but northeasterly, so that we were now nearer to the north than to the south end of Leandro. The mist was beginning to roll over thickly. It was saturated with the salt of blowing spindrift and I could no longer see the tower or the woods. I was thinking that we no longer had to worry, that in a moment the mist would cover us. Then Robb called to me:

"Dave!"

My head whipped toward the voice and I saw him, perhaps a hundred yards to the rear of us, standing on a mound that thrust up out of the brush. And even as I looked the mist swirled between us and he faded away.

"Lad!" he cried. "Please—*wait!*"

But we were already on our way. We headed for the sea. Charles gasped once and nearly screamed; he pitched forward and I caught a lock of anguish on his face, but he recovered himself and plunged on. We were almost to the edge where the brush dropped off to the beach when there was the sound of a shot behind us. I ducked for the last few yards and heard Robb's voice very close behind, crying, "Stop! You fool!"

We moved in whiteness now and could not even see the water before us. Charles leaped to the beach ahead of me and as I was dodging around the last rank of brush to follow him I was aware of the flat *pop* of another shot. It seemed to me that I jumped yet never landed on the beach. Instead I was falling endlessly toward Jeremy Robb whose face, bright as new steel, was grinning at me from under a halo of gun smoke. And later, very lazily, I thought I must have landed and somehow caught my forehead on the point of a knife.

CHAPTER XXI

NAUTILUS I SEEK

EITHER it was night, or the pain that throbbed intolerably in my head had blinded me. And there was a thunder to which I quaked regularly. I tried to raise an arm and put a hand to my head but I could not move. I was bound tightly all around. I did not struggle, for I did not care. I let myself sink back into that land where time faltered and nothing mattered.

Next it was day and the thunder had subsided to become the complicated flux of the tide in the rocky bight. My head ached, but the tissue-searing pain no longer flashed behind my eyes. I could see, but I could not understand what I saw. I was looking up through tiny leaves to a patch of gray sky and I was neither on the ground nor in the air. Then I realized that I was suspended and held fast in a clump of *manzanita*. I tossed around and the branches gave so that I was let to the ground where I wriggled out of the brush and stood up. Below me was the beach. I put a hand to the sting-spot on my temple, feeling the clotted blood, and I knew then what had happened; I had been shot by Jeremy Robb and had fallen into the brush. Robb, because of the fog and because the brush had concealed me so well, had evidently not seen me. But where was Charles?

There were no tracks on the beach, only those higher up where the tide had not reached. I slid down the bank onto the sand and saw near me a canvas slipper—Charles'. Charles must have reached

the water. I glanced apprehensively along the beach again, not admitting to myself what it was I looked for. Picking up the slipper, I entered the cave. The mast still lay along the wall and the black embers of our fire were there, too. I passed on and advanced a few steps down the dark sulphur-tainted corridor. The cave, I thought, would be the last place he would be if he were alive. But I licked my dry lips and called for him: "Charlie!" And after exploring the emptiness within, my voice came echoing back to me, thin and lonely: *"Char-lee . . ."*

I stumbled back and sat down on the mast. And as I stroked its varnished sheen the long bleak passage of time since it had soared upright dissolved while Charles and I were aboard the *Shark* again for just a moment. Then the whole bottom dropped abruptly out of my world and I flung myself hopelessly on the sandy cave floor. . . .

Finally, driven by thirst, I left the cave and climbed the gully to the woods. I scarcely cared then if I did come face to face with Robb; perhaps they had caught Charles and it would be just as well. At least I would be out of the cold and there would be food.

As I lay on my face drinking, a wan shaft of sunlight broke through the trees and glinted on the surface of the spring and when I raised my lips I saw my face shivering in the water and I was as shocked as if it had been some other boy looking up at me from the bottom. It was a savage, hunted face. The hair was a matted tangle and the eyes flashed wildly in the gaunt dark face.

Most of the day I lay in a thick clump of scrub oak near the spring. I tried to keep warm by covering myself with leaves and brush and attempted to lift my spirits by telling myself that Charles had surely survived. Perhaps he had found Nautilus and soon they would come to the woods and find me. But it was mostly a time of unalloyed misery.

Toward dusk I went to the edge of the woods and saw Robb about a mile north walking along through the brush. Once he stopped to search a clump carefully and then he went on, down to the cove and the cabin. I circled, descending the stream as far as Mr. Tracy's oranges. I picked one and chewed on the green pulp. Smoke was coming out of the cabin's chimney and it looked very cosy.

I passed the night back in my nest in the scrub oak, waking several times to listen. I was numb with cold and completely disheartened and my mind was sore and dark with terrible dreams. I did not get up and go to the beach as I had planned. It just did not matter any more.

THERE was a steady sound, somehow familiar and comforting, that was urging me to stir, to open my eyes, but I would not, for my dreams had become pleasant. Again I was walking up that cool hill, the cable car passed me but I kept my eyes ahead on the neat brick house. I was at the door. The sound kept saying *wake-up, wake-up,* but I fought against it while my father opened the door. He stood there smiling at me.

"Father, I've come home." "My son, come in. I'm so glad to see you, David. And who is the little lady with you?" "Nautilus, sir. She's to be my wife. She's really no mermaid. You will, father, observe the legs especially . . ."

"Yo!" the voice said, and there was the rasp of a saw. The voice went on, rhythmically, each time the saw bit into the wood. "Yo . . . yo . . . yo . . ."

I opened my eyes. About fifty feet from me Sorenson and Robb were laboring at the ends of a timber saw, cutting down a large tanbark. Sorenson was doing the chanting, and birds were yammering shrilly at the sacrilege of it. It was very early, but bright, a nice day. *Charlie,* I thought suddenly. Oh, God—Charlie! Where are you? I thought that immediately, before I had time to be afraid, because I knew as soon as I saw Robb and Sorenson together that Charles could not be in the cabin; they wouldn't have left him alone.

My arms and legs were cramped but I did not dare move and I had to lie there,

peering out through the tangle of brush at them and hating them with all the feeling left in me. If Charles was dead I swore that I would see Jeremy Robb hanged for it. He bobbed back and forth on the end of the saw, facing me and his face looked set and cruel; he was sawing as if his life depended on the tree falling.

Yo . . . yo . . . yo . . ."

Each stroke of the saw seemed to cut sharply into my brain, bringing memory of what had happened in the cabin the night before. I remembered Jeremy Robb as he had seemed to me before that time, and that and the agony of waiting kept my hate for him at white heat. How much longer must I wait?

Presently the tree began to tremble and they took out the saw. Sorenson pushed against the trunk and the tree tottered and then came loafing down, tearing through smaller growth. Robb sprang forward with an adze and began to hack off limbs while Sorenson seated himself on the bole and watched him.

"Come on," Robb told him sharply, "you can get some of the bigger ones with the saw."

Sorenson did not move. "Why you want to build a boat for, Jer'my?"

"Because we're going away from here," Robb said. "Get busy."

"Where, Jer'my?"

"Just away!"

"Chinee?"

Robb swung around on him and I saw the sudden haggard lines in his face. "You want to stay here till you rot?" he cried. "*Away,* I tell you. That's all. Away, you big ox!"

The Dane's patient unemotional face changed a little; blood came to his cheeks and he frowned. For a moment he stared at Robb who had turned and was chopping feverishly again, then he stood up and went and got the saw. He worked slowly on the big limbs, still frowning.

When they had stripped the fallen tree they sawed it into two logs, and by then my body was burning, as if with pain, and I felt that if I did not move soon, I would lose all control over my muscles and they would rebel and move by themselves.

"All right," Robb said. "Pick out one more like that, while I look for them."

HE MOVED off through the trees to where he would be able to see out over the island. Sorenson sat down on one of the logs, his back toward me, obviously estimating the desirability of the trees in front of him. I began to inch slowly out of my canopy of leaves and brush, backing away. It was slow work and I had just gotten free of the cover when I heard Robb. He was running. I dodged behind a tree trunk as he came up.

Sorenson had gotten to his feet and he called out, "You see 'em, Jer'my?"

Robb came to a stop twenty feet from Sorenson. He was biting his lips and thinking hard, hesitating. And then I was aware of the pulse that was in the air and beating faintly in the ground under my feet. It was slight, but it was there, the rhythm of a machine.

Robb flung an arm at Sorenson. "Stay here! I've got to get Tracy, or he'll signal them. It's the *Georgia!*" He wheeled and started running down toward the cabin.

Sorenson stood motionless for a while, listening, and then he moved off through the trees toward the windward side. The pulsing noise was louder and I began to climb the tree I had hidden behind.

When I had gone as far toward the top as I could I hooked a leg over a limb and looked around me. Except for several places where the tops of other trees interfered I had a clear view of the sea on both sides of the island. Suddenly the familiar gray bow of the *Georgia* emerged from behind some leaves, cutting the calm surface of the water cleanly. She was about a mile off the island, steaming up from the windward and rounding the southern tip of Leandro.

In my excitement I started to shout, but choked it off. Clinging with my legs I waved both arms, and then, realizing how futile that was, I began to scramble down

from the tree. I was about to jump from the lower branches when I saw Sorenson coming toward me. He was moving cautiously and he passed directly under me so that I could smell the odor of his sweat and look down upon the top of his great head where his stiff blond hair was thinning. He stopped not ten yards from my tree and, carefully moving some branches, looked out at the *Georgia*. She was steaming slowly up on the lee, curving far out to avoid the rocks.

I waited a moment, just long enough to realize that it would probably mean sudden death for me if I was caught trying to signal the *Georgia,* and then I dropped to the ground. Sorenson turned and saw me, his eyes blank and as yet unamazed but a moment later when I plunged splashing down the gully along the sulphur stream I heard him coming after me.

I ran then as I had run in dreams, with my feet heavy and my legs seeming to block the forward straining urge of my body. Surely in a moment I must hear his footsteps loud behind me and then feel his huge hand upon my shoulder.

If I could reach Tracy Tower the men on the *Georgia* could see my signal to them, but even as I ran along the beach I think I must have realized that I would probably never make it in time. I was staggering and weak when I came to the north end of the beach and clambered up into the brush. I looked back for Sorenson and saw him standing on the sandstone hump at the bottom of the gully with his hands on his hips, looking after me. Either he didn't think it worth while to chase me, or he couldn't make up his mind about it; I never knew.

In the brush I tried to keep on running but twice I fell and soon it was all I could do to walk. The blinding pain in my head had returned and my legs had lost all their strength. I gave up the idea of trying to reach the Tower and, instead, cut straight across the island. I could climb out on the rocks and wave my jacket and the *Georgia* would see me. They would send a boat ashore and find Charles and the nightmare would be all over. I would shut my eyes and open them again in San Francisco.

It seemed to me that I had been fighting through the brush all day, but I kept telling myself that it was scarcely two miles and that soon I would reach the rise that sloped down to the lee side. When at last I did reach that point I was lurching and falling like a drunken man. I had stopped sweating and my temple had started to bleed again. The blood ran down into my right eye, and the wound seemed to go all the way through my head which felt huge and hot and throbbing.

I swayed, looking out at the calm sea. The *Georgia* was stern on to me, far out and growing swiftly smaller. Her steam strung out lazily in the air behind her as she headed south.

FOR hours, while the sun climbed in the pale sky, I lay on my back, shaded by the brush. Sometimes I closed my eyes and dreamed of a roast turkey and a tall pitcher of ice water and sometimes I watched a shiny spider that was spinning an elaborate web near my face. When I finally moved from there it was not because I desired to move. I could not help it; it was a tropism and I had to submit to it. I had to have water.

I crawled, and that way it was easy to rest every little while. I had been crawling, it seemed to me, for years. Crawling was the way I lived. Like the spiders, the endless brush was my dwelling and they spun webs while I crawled. But I was not crawling now. Why not? I was lying on my back trying to close my cracked lips over a great swollen tongue. And quite near me, I realized, someone was hoeing. It was a strange sound, yet I knew what it was; I could hear the regular bite of the metal in the ground. I listened for a while, then turned over and crawled on, emerging at a cleared place in the brush above the cabin. It was Mr. Tracy who was hoeing.

I hissed at him, and when he did not

pay any attention I called out in a strange crawler's voice, "Hello."

He straightened and looked at me. "Why, hello," he said. "It's Davie, isn't it? That man Robb's out of his head since you left. He thinks you both ran into the sea and drowned yourselves."

When I told him I wanted water he brought me a pail from the stream, as well as a plate of cold pork from the cabin. I drank and afterward stuck my head in the pail, then I wolfed the meat while lying on my stomach which was the way I had arrived. Having eaten, I remembered my manners and I sat up and thanked him. Sorenson would tell Robb that he had seen me and soon the chase would be on again. I would have to be crawling along again.

"They're up in the woods now," Mr. Tracy said, "sawing down my beautiful trees to make a boat. There was a government ship just by here and I wanted to signal her to see if there was corn aboard, but he wouldn't let me. He sat in the cabin with his gun at my back and made me go to the door and wave to her just like I didn't care, just as if there was a boat by here every day and I didn't need corn at all. Look at this!"

He picked up a floursack and pulled a handful of corn cut of it. The kernels were small and mouldy. "Won't grow well," he said. "Why do I plant it? I don't know."

"Have you seen Charlie?" I asked.

He sat down on the broken earth. He shook his lean head and said, "Sometimes I wonder if it is worth it—this growing and dying of things Consider men—they keep sprouting over and over and never are able to all be good at the same time, or go in the same direction, or agree as to who is to have what. When other things stop growing and the moon never shows itself any more nights, men will still be at it, fighting and clawing and talking nonsense on a dead earth, killing and lying and cheating one another for the last scrap left."

I looked at him, wondering why his face was different, and then I realized that it was because he was entirely grave. And for the first time he looked altogether sensible.

"Well," he said, "the old earth will be well rid of us all. Let her spin on, cold, and growing nothing but some kind of pretty flowers. That would be nice."

Misery blanketed the world and all were doomed. Charles was dead and for the rest of my life I would crawl wretchedly through the brush. "Oh, Charlie!" I whispered. He who had known the masculine ablative of *ille,* he who had been so sober and thoughtful and so often right—in the sea, twitching to the tides, fettered by the twining kelp with the dumb fish nuzzling his blunt dependable face . . .

I could not bear it any longer. A desperate strength began to pound in me and I sprang up, wrenching Sorenson's knife from my jacket pocket. "I'm going to kill him!" I cried. "I'm going to kill Jeremy Robb!"

"Wait!" Mr. Tracy said. "I was just going to tell you some news that I have for you. Nautilus called to me from the hen coop last night and she said your friend Charles is safe with her."

"From the hen coop," I repeated stupidly after a moment.

Then the strength all ebbed out of me and I sat down.

"To be sure," Mr. Tracy replied. "She clucks and I go out."

I seized his arm. "You've got to tell me how to get to them!"

"I was going to," he said calmly. "She told me to tell you. Before I could not, even though I wanted to, for I was bound by oath not to."

"How?"

"You go down to the cave," he said slowly, looking at me, "and you enter. Continue until you come to a room with a stream running through it. Immerse yourself in the stream, letting it carry you along. And then, David Lester, you shall come to my Nautilus."

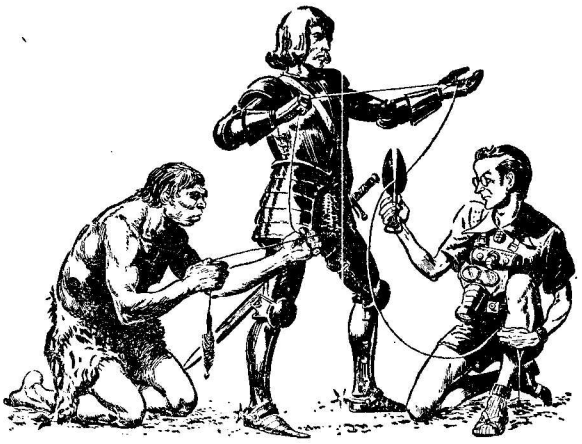
TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

The Kidder

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Board Fence," "The Pebble of Justice," etc.

AN ARGOSY ODDITY



JOE stopped at the top of the last flight of steps and swallowed. It was pretty awful. He was going to speak to Pete's mother, and they'd burned Pete this morning. Electrocuted him. He'd kidded with the guards all the way into the execution-chamber, and somehow that trick of kidding—which was Pete all over—made everything so awful that Joe was going to tell Pete's mother about it.

He'd go crazy if he didn't tell somebody. It'd cost him enough, already. Sleepless nights and tormented days. And it'd cost him Marge, too. But he'd do it again if he had to. Only—he had to tell somebody or go off his nut.

This was where Pete's mother lived. Top floor, walk-up tenement. That would be her door. Joe swallowed again and moved desperately toward it, and it opened. A child came out. Twelve—thirteen years old. Soiled dress. Hard-boiled. Pete's kid sister. She stared at Joe suspiciously.

"I'm Joe Bennett," said Joe with an effort. "I—used to be a friend o' Pete's. Can I talk to his ma?"

The child seemed to recognize his name. She jerked a grimy thumb over her shoulder.

"You c'n go in. Ma's in there. I'll be back in a minute. I'm goin' to the store."

She spoke into the door in a language of which not one word was intelligible to Joe. She went clattering downstairs. Her air was that of a swaggering pride in a brother who had merited the high honor of the hot seat.

Joe went inside. The room had a bed in it and clothes hung on nails against the wall. Pete's mother rocked by the window in a numbed, frozen silence. Her hair was streaked with gray. Her face was drawn and tired and very bitter. But her eyes were dry.

"I'm—I'm Joe Bennett," said Joe, dry-throated. "I—guess Pete musta mentioned me around home. I—had to come," he added desperately, "because Pete an' me, we used to be such swell frien's. An'—an' I guess I sent him to the chair."

HE was not able to look at her. But he felt a strange and terrible relief at saying it aloud. Pete had been a swell fella. Kidding all the time, but a swell fella—until he got mixed up with that wrong mob.

"Listen, Miz' Schiancha! I—I got to tell you how it happened. Pete an' me, we'd been goin' around a lot together before he got mixed up with that mob. We was friends! Even after he got mixed up with 'em we was friends. He never seen me that he didn't do some kinda kiddin' about how many men he'd bumped or somethin'. I didn't take it serious, knowin' how he kidded, an' I didn't take it serious, either, when he told me he was goin' after Marge.

Y'see, Marge is my—girl friend, Miz' Schiancha, an' she's a swell kid. I—I didn't think he meant it—"

Pete's mother said in a hoarse, guttural voice: "Wait—"

"I got to tell you!" said Joe fiercely. "I gotta tell somebody an' you oughta know! When—when Pete got in that trouble over that killin' I felt pretty bad. When he sent me a message to bring him some cig'rettes. I took a chance to help him. He was my friend! I kep' him goin' while he was waitin' for the heat to cool off so's he could slip outa town. An' then" —Joe swallowed a third time—"then I found out Marge'd been to see him too. I raised hell with Pete, seein' Marge while he was on the lam for a killin'! He laughed at me. 'Hell,' he says, 'I told you I was goin' after Marge. I laid out a job for her to pull, to get us some cash, an' we're leavin' town together when she pulls it.' "

Joe's voice grew thin.

"I was crazy about Marge, Miz' Schianca, an'—an' to think of her goin' off with him, an' him on the lam' for a killin'—"

He moistened his lips. The old woman in the rocking-chair said something in the language Joe did not understand. It was bitter and it was full of hatred.

"So I called up the cops on the phone," said Joe thinly, "an' when the desk sergeant answered, I told him where Joe was. An' if you want to get even, Gawd knows I ain't had any fun since—"

He half sobbed. But then he heard footsteps. And then a voice, a strained and utterly familiar voice, called:

"Miz' Schiancha! Miz' Schiancha!"

It was Marge. Joe Bennett turned blindly to hide. A coat against the wall behind the bed. He cowered behind it. He heard Marge come falteringly into the room.

"Miz' Schiancha . . . a little girl told me you'd be here. I'm—I'm Marge. I guess Pete told you somethin' about me." Her voice broke. "I—I hadda come, Miz' Schiancha! Pete was such a swell fella until he took to runnin' around with that mob! Such a swell fella! Always kiddin' . . ."

Then Marge sobbed.

"But I ain't been able to sleep for weeks! I—I'm the one that sent him to the chair! Listen! He was hidin' out for that killin'. An' he sent for me. An' he says him an' Joe was goin' to pull a big job an' skip out West an' did I wanna come along. Joe was feedin' him. I knew that! But he was gonna take Joe—an' get Joe in killin's too. . . . An' I'd been hopin' for Joe an' me—an' I couldn't bear it. So I called up the p'lice station—"

Joe came blundering out, staring queerly. She saw him. Her face went even whiter.

"Listen!" said Joe, through stiff lips. "He was kiddin'. It wasn't so. He was tryin' to get a rise outa you. Like he kidded the guards this mornin'. He kidded you an' he kidded me an'—an'—"

There was the clacking of high heels. The child with the dirty dress came in, swaggering proudly, with a paper bag in her hand. Pete's mother spoke to her in the language Joe did not understand. She poured out a flood of incomprehensible syllables. The child listened disdainfully.

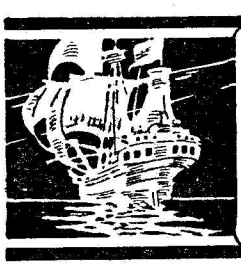
"She says," she translated scornfully, "she figgers you' friends of Pete's, an' to tell you that Pete's lawyer found out that the fella he was rentin' a room from turned him over to the cops. Pete'd said somethin' to him, just kiddin', an' he got scared. Pete's lawyer seen the letter he wrote to the bulls. So Ma says that if you' friends of Pete's you might like to know that some of Pete's other friends got that stool-pigeon las' night an' he's floatin' in the river this mornin'."

Joe gulped. Marge caught her breath.

"Ma don't talk English," said the child contemptuously. She added: "You comin' to the funeral? It's goin' to be swell! An' didja see the papers? Pete was kiddin' all the way in—"

"Gawd!" said Joe, choking. "Shut up, kid. We—uh—we got to go. You' comin' with me, ain't you, Marge?"

"Sure, Joe," said Marge, unsteadily. "For always. An' no kiddin'."



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ALL we seem to have space for this week are a few short takes, mostly of a complimentary nature—and *that* never did us or anyone else much harm. So we'll just sit quietly back and let ourself be patted. Go ahead, fellers, and watch us beam.

MERLE CRANDALL

What is wrong with Hollywood? A good ARGOSY story comes along and they buy it. Then they turn out a picture on which the critics can go to town.

"Young Doctor Kildare," in the ARGOSY was one of the best stories of the year. But Hollywood had to use Lew Ayres in the character role. He most certainly wasn't the type. Barrymore turned in an excellent job as Doctor Gillespie but the picture as a whole was very disappointing.

Spent the day in the attic reading ARGOSIES, some of which dated back to 1913 and can't see where people have any grounds for claiming the ARGOSY is losing its stuff.

JACKSON, MICHIGAN

WE DIDN'T think the Kildare movie was as bad as all that, Mr. Crandall, and, granted that Lew Ayres wasn't exactly the Jimmy Kildare we mentally pictured when we read the story in manuscript, we thought he did a sincere and competent job. The new Kildare picture, by the way, is playing around the nation's Bijous, Roselands, Capitols, and Orientals now—and a vague whisper has drifted out of Hollywood that Max Brand has a third Kildare novel under way. More Kildare-ana below, from:

C. S. COULTER

Although I have been a reader of your ARGOSY magazine for a little over nine years this is the first time I have ever written to you. ARGOSY always has been a source of great enjoyment to me but for the past year I have appreciated it even more as I have been confined in a sanitarium.

"Dr. Kildare" is my recent favorite. Just as Max Brand has always been my favorite author.

I also like Erle Stanley Gardner, Frank R. Pierce and H. Bedford-Jones.

Stookie Allen is to be highly complimented on his illustrated articles. He is one of the few who can tell a very interesting and instructive story on a mere page or two.

In closing I would like to inquire if Frank L. Packard, the author, is still alive. Also what has happened to Gillian Hazeltine?

WATERTOWN, N. Y.

FRANK PACKARD is very much alive, Mr. Coulter—but we hope we can end the recurrent Gillian Hazeltine discussion by saying that that eminent lawyer-detective has indeed passed into Limbo. At least his creator, George Worts, doesn't seem inclined to turn out any more Hazeltine yarns.

Stookie Allen sends Mr. C. his thanks.

WE CLOSE with a few stray nosegays from

R. J. WALSH

I have just finished reading William Gray Beyer's novel, and in my opinion it was very good.

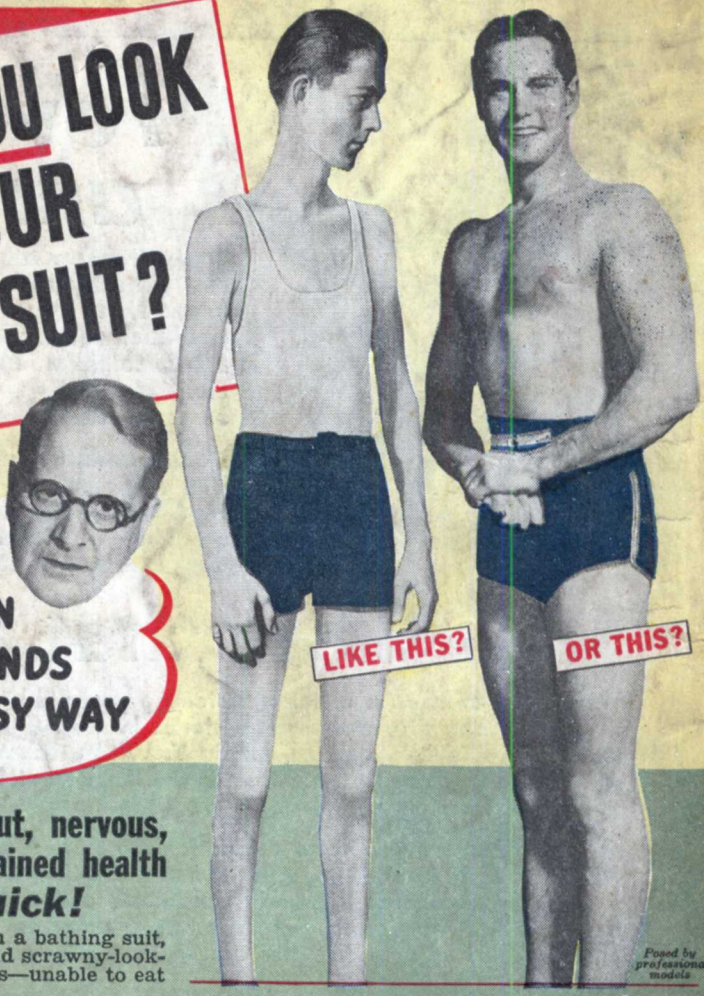
A few of your readers have criticized Edgar Rice Burroughs' "Synthetic Men of Mars". I did not enjoy it so much myself, but Burroughs has written so many other good novels that I did not mind reading one that was not up to his standard of writing. I especially liked his VENUS stories, I wish we could have more of them.

In your April 29 issue there was a short story by William Byron Mowery, is there any chance of ARGOSY publishing one of his novels?

For many years I have enjoyed ARGOSY and I expect twice as much enjoyment, and pleasure in the future.

AKRON, OHIO

HOW DO YOU LOOK IN YOUR BATHING SUIT?



SKINNY? THOUSANDS GAIN 10 TO 25 POUNDS THIS QUICK EASY WAY

Read how thin, tired-out, nervous, rundown people have gained health and strength—*quick!*

ARE you ashamed to be seen in a bathing suit, because you're too skinny and scrawny-looking? Are you often tired, nervous—unable to eat and sleep properly?

Then here's wonderful news! Thousands of skinny, rundown men and women have gained 10 to 25 pounds, new pep, new popularity—with this scientific vitamin-rich formula, Ironized Yeast.

Why it builds up so quick

Scientists have discovered that countless people are thin and rundown—tired, cranky, washed-out—only because they don't get enough Vitamin B and iron from their daily food. Without enough of these vital substances you may lack appetite and not get the most body-building good out of what you eat.

Now you get these exact missing substances in these marvelous little Ironized Yeast tablets. No wonder, then, that they have helped thousands of people who needed these substances to gain new naturally attractive pounds, normal health and pep, new popularity and success—often in just a few weeks!

Make this money-back test

Get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today. If with the first package you don't eat better and FEEL better, with much more strength and pep—if you're not convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the new pounds, new energy and life you've longed for, the price of this first package promptly refunded.

But just one warning! Due to the success of Ironized Yeast, a number of cheap, inferior substitutes have sprung up. Of course inferior substitutes do not give the same results. So insist on genuine Ironized Yeast. Look for the letters IY stamped on each tablet.

Special offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this special offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 376 Atlanta, Ga.

TUNE IN ON JOHN J. ANTHONY'S GOOD WILL HOUR. See your local newspaper for time and station.

Irvin Echard

Gains 14 lbs. in 5 Weeks

"I was so skinny I didn't want to go out. Finally, I tried IRONIZED YEAST. In five weeks I gained 14 lbs. Now I go out regularly, have good times."

Irvin Echard, Barberton, O.

R. Loeffler

Gains 12 lbs., admired now

"Was losing weight and pep. Then I got Ironized Yeast. In 6 weeks I gained 12 lbs. and am full of pep. Everybody admires my physique, too." Ralph Loeffler

Arlington, Wash.