
JULY 1
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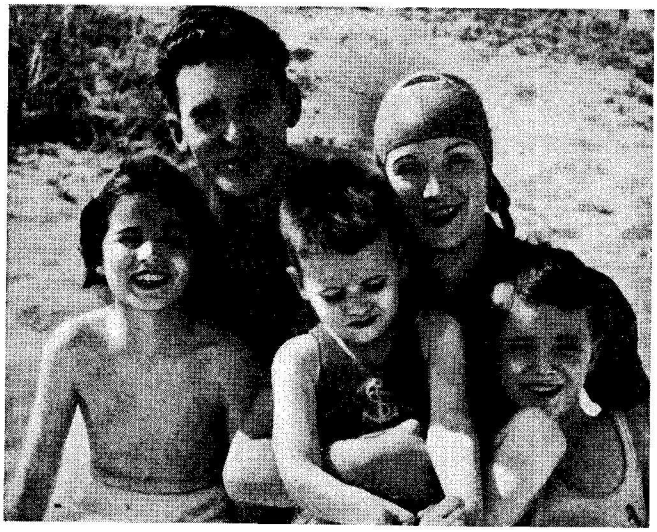
WEEKLY
Romance and Adventure
EAST OF FIJI
Complete Short Novel by
ALLAN V. ELSTON

LISTERINE ENDS HUSBAND'S DANDRUFF IN 3 WEEKS!



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COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

East of Fiji

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "Lost Harbors," "Pacific Passage," etc.

Cockroach Inn **read the sign on that mildewed, ramshackle island-hotel; and there the rats waged midnight battle with two ghosts who greedily presided over a mystery**

CHAPTER I

BANYAN ISLAND

EVERY prospect pleased except Cockroach Inn. Otherwise the beach was an arc of flame trees and spreading banyans, with clusters of coco palms bowing seaward. A trio of administration bungalows stood to the left, vine-draped and spotless white. Even the trading store here was sightly, verandaed on four sides, ginger blooms hedging the neat shell paths of its compound. And through a grove of breakfruit Jimmie Powell glimpsed thatched *fales* of a native village, with shy and smiling brown folk peering from them toward newcomers on the wharf.

"But that thing!" murmured Jimmie Powell. "What an eyesore!" He was staring not at vistas of enchantment but at Cockroach Inn. This grotesquely dilapidated hotel, apparently, had been long abandoned. Its rusting iron roof had caved in at one corner, while hurricanes had battered away windows and doors.

"She's overrun," explained the ship's mate who had brought Jimmie ashore, "with centipedes, cockroaches and rats."

Cockroach Inn! The faded sign over this ghost of a tavern was still readable. No wonder the place was abandoned. How had it ever hoped to invite patronage with a name like that?

"I'll stop over at Cushman's Trading store, sonny," the mate said, "till I find out whether you land that billet at the Scotchman's."

"If I don't, I'll be on the beach," Jimmie admitted ruefully. "What sort of a guy is this planter, McQuaid, anyway?"

"Stingy. Honest as daylight, Mack is, but stingy. Good luck, sonny."

The mate took a path toward the trading store. Jimmie took another one which soon became a cart road leading toward the McQuaid plantings. Walls of lush bush closed in. Banana trees reached out hot, lazy arms to make an arch over the trail.

A coconut-laden donkey came along with a brown boy driving it. Jimmie stopped to dump sand from his shoes, flicked a shell at a scampering mongoose, then grinned at a portly Polynesian matron. "You got cigarette, please yes?" she demanded. Bare-breasted and with a basket of papayas balanced on her head, she stopped to survey a strange young white man with approval. Jimmie put a cigarette between her lips. She continued beachward, then, as Jimmie trudged on inland to the crest of a ridge.

From here he could look over a broad, fertile valley. The mountains beyond were velvet-green except for a single bald volcanic cone well to the right. Once there'd been a lava flow, Jimmie had been told, here on Banyan Island. But directly ahead, in the valley, he could see no devastation. The land was cleared of bush and planted for miles in even rows of cocoa-beans and coco palms. This, of course, would be the ten thousand acres worked under leasehold by Duncan McQuaid.

MOVING on, Jimmie saw Chinese coolies weeding in the cocoa-bean groves. The ship's mate had explained that McQuaid operated the place with indentured Chinese labor, imported by contract from the Orient at eighteen shillings the month per man. This, Jimmie knew, was common practise on South Sea plantations, the reason being that native Poly-

nesians will not drudge from dawn to dark to make profits for men like McQuaid.

Rumor had it that there was a job here for an educated white man. Just what kind of a job, Jimmie didn't know. His guess was that McQuaid needed an overseer.

"And what I don't know about farming, in or out of the South Seas," Jimmie chuckled, "would fill the Boston library."

He came to a lane lined with *kapok* trees. It led him to the gate of a compound. Then to a plantation house of many ells—so rambling that it seemed to have been built on the installment plan, as for a growing family.

A white girl of about fourteen was in the yard, hanging out a wash of clothes. And on the forward lanai Jimmie found a twelve-year-old boy on hands and knees with a scrub brush.

McQuaid, according to information gleaned from the ship's mate, was a widower with seven children ranging in ages from eight to eighteen.

A stingy cuss, thought Jimmie. With three hundred indentured Chinese and a whole island of natives, here was a man so tight-fisted that he made his own kids do the housework! Fat chance, Jimmie decided, of getting a worth-while billet here.

The porch-scrubbing boy took him to a room floored with matting, airy, clean, but severely lacking in those touches of luxury usually found on a prospering tropical plantation. Then Duncan McQuaid came in, a tall dour Scot in threadbare denims. He compressed thin lips and remained standing, like a man ungenerous even with his time.

Jimmie smiled at him. "I'm James Powell. I could use a job, Mr. McQuaid."

"I'll lay odds," Jimmie added to himself, "that he won't even offer me a drink."

McQuaid did not, and so broke all island precedents. The planter did, however, respond briskly to the application. "Your qualifications, young mon?"

"An A.B. degree," Jimmie told him, "from the University of California. Got through there three years ago and then discovered a degree in arts is a drug on the market. Best berth I could pick up was assistant purser on a Matson liner. A misunderstanding with the chief purser left me stranded in Suva. Got on as bookkeeper at a sugar refinery there until it shut down. After that, I graded bananas at Apia. Then somebody tipped me you had a job over here."

"In other words," McQuaid said coldly, "ye've been something of a failure."

"So far," Jimmie grinned. "But I'm young yet."

"Ye canna expect much pay."

"Only a decent wage, sir."

"Do yet speak French, young mon?"

The question confused Jimmie. He was an American, McQuaid was Scotch, this was a New Zealand mandate and the labor was Chinese—so why did it matter if he knew French? "As a matter of fact," Jimmie answered, "I took French four years at college; and I spent a summer in Paris."

McQuaid's eyes gleamed shrewdly. "Very well, young mon; I'll gi'e ye a trial. But mind ye, I'll expect my lads and lassies to be taught Arithmetic, History, English Composition and French."

Jimmie's jaw sagged. So that was it! He was being hired not to oversee labor but as a tutor!

THE situation was clear, though. Here was a widower with seven children. A penny-pinching planter. Naturally it would be cheaper for the man to import a tutor than to send his youngsters off to boarding schools in England, or New Zealand.

Before Jimmie could answer, McQuaid went cannily on: "I trust ye've no extravagant habits, young mon. I mind the last tutor we had here was a German doctor from Apia. The mon insisted on being served beer with his meals, so I had to let him go."

Jimmie wanted to laugh. He could imagine a long line of tutors here, each in turn to be starved and heckled by this parsimonious Scot.

"How much does the job pay?"

"Fi' pounds," the planter said, "and found."

"A week?"

"Dinna trifle wi' me," said McQuaid sternly. "Fi' pounds the month."

This time Jimmie actually did laugh. "A native stevedore makes more than that," he retorted, "on the Suva wharves."

He started for the door. McQuaid followed and just as Jimmie reached the lanai, he raised the offer. "I'll make it guineas. Fi' guineas the month and found."

"Thanks. You'll go broke, won't you?"

As Jimmie continued on to the lawn, McQuaid pursued him. What Jimmie didn't know was that McQuaid's wife, at her death ten years ago, had left a small legacy of her own specifically for the children's education. Of this McQuaid was wasting no farthing. The money was not disbursible for any other purpose—and after all tutors with A.B. degrees did not often apply.

Jimmie was overtaken at the lane gate. "Six guineas," McQuaid offered. His tone was a trifle coaxing now. "Porridge each morning for breakfast, mind you. And Chicken broth on Sundays."

Before Jimmie could decline again, a voice interrupted. It came from down the lane. "The post's in, father." Jimmie turned and saw a girl of eighteen running toward them with a packet of letters from abroad.

The sun sparkled on yellow hair hung in thick, ribbonless braids. This, Jimmie thought, would be the eldest of the seven motherless McQuaids.

"It's been in since early morn," McQuaid said sharply. "Ye should ha'e been back hours ago, Anne, and getting dinner."

He did not present Jimmie. Jimmie looked at her cheap calico dress and home-made sandals. Why couldn't McQuaid dress her like other girls? He liked her face. It was golden tan, her eyes a deep, Scotch-heather blue. "I'm sorry, father, I'll have it ready on time, though." Her response showed no awareness of tyranny. Yet Jimmie knew life had cheated her. He wondered if she'd ever been beyond the reefs of this island.

"See that it is, lass," said McQuaid.

She hurried on to the house. Jimmie's eyes followed her. A shame she had to spend her youth drudging on a bush plantation. She ought to be on a campus, somewhere. With looks like that, she ought to have dates. Dates and prom frocks and—

"I'll make it seven guineas the month, young mon," McQuaid's voice broke in, "and chicken broth on Sundays."

Anne McQuaid had reached the lanai. She turned there and looked back. And something invitingly hopeful in her smile made Jimmie change his perspectives. Seven scholars and seven guineas. Not so bad, Jimmie decided, provided he could devote most of his time to the senior student.

"I'll take the job, Mr. McQuaid. And don't forget the chicken broth on Sundays."

THE very next day was Sunday. Jimmie, sauntering into the kitchen, offered to stir the broth. "Mind you don't let it burn," Anne cautioned.

Jimmie stirred vigorously. "Why," he demanded, "does your father want you to learn French? Does he speak it himself?"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

They both laughed. She was standing at a board, bare-armed, kneading dough. Her hair was in one braid, today, and coiled on her head. How would it look bobbed? Jimmie wondered.

"The German doctor could," she said.

"And yet he got fired for drinking beer!" exclaimed Jimmie. "Well, I'll have to brush up my French. We can conjugate verbs out in a canoe some time."

"You're to give an hour a day," she said, "to each of us. It won't be hard. They're all quick at numbers. And composition. Except that Jamie can never learn to spell."

"I can't spell very well either," Jim-

mie admitted. "But don't tell your father."

Anne rolled the dough and began cutting out scones. "You'll find it dull, I'm afraid. This island's been like a tomb ever since Lulu Belle went away."

"Who was Lulu Belle?"

"A nice fat lady who ran the Palms Hotel. They call it Cockroach Inn now."

"I like the first name best. Why did they change it? And why would anyone want to build a big hotel like that here, in the first place?"

"The seat of the government was here then," Anne explained. "Most of the government clerks boarded at Lulu Belle's. There was a department of agriculture station here, too, experimenting with rubber. But we had a lava flow that destroyed all the rubber trees."

"I see. So the hotel didn't have any more customers. And Lulu Belle went away."

"She went back to the Tongas, I suppose," Anne said. "She ran a pub there once, with her husband, but he deserted her."

"But why the name, Cockroach Inn?" persisted Jimmie.

"A little while after Lulu Belle left, a ship's crew came ashore celebrating. Next morning we saw that Lulu Belle's old sign, *Palms Hotel,* had been painted out. In place of it someone had put *Cockroach Inn.*"

"Sailors will have their pranks." Jimmie grinned. Yet even as he said it, the explanation struck him as illogical. However he was sure that Anne had offered it sincerely.

Before Jimmie could question further, twelve-year-old Jamie came in with an armload of stove wood. "Say, sis," he piped, "Mr. Cushman's coming for dinner. Pa says for you to put on your other dress."

Anne flushed. Her scones were panned now, and she put them in the oven. "Keep an eye on them, Jamie." The girl went to the room she shared with her two younger sisters, Laura and Lorna.

Jimmie said to Jamie, "Cushman runs that big trading store on the beach, doesn't he?"

"Aye," the boy answered. "And Pa says he makes lots o' money."

"Married man?" Jimmie inquired.

"Not yet," Jamie confided. "But he will be before long. Pa says he's gonna marry Anne."

"The devil he is!" exclaimed Jimmie. "And he's comin' here for dinner, huh?"

With malice aforethought, Jimmie let the broth burn.

CHAPTER II

YANK SPELLS TROUBLE

THE shadows of shore palms were long, Monday evening, when from the veranda of his store Trader Cushman saw Anne McQuaid and her new tutor alight from a donkey cart. He saw them hitch the donkey to a beach banyan and then embark in a canoe at the main pier.

"Kinder beatin' yer time, ain't he, Cushie?"

The customer offering this jibe was sipping a rum punch at the trader's elbow. He was steward of a ship offshore—the same freighter which only two days ago had brought Jimmie Powell here and which was still taking cargo.

Cushman's round face reddened. With small relish he recalled dinner yesterday at the plantation. Anne had hardly noticed him. In fact, chatter from this new upstart tutor had completely engaged her attention. And now they were out canoeing. Cushman thumped his cane irritably against the railing.

The steward grinned. "Chap's makin' a dead set fer her, looks like."

"Dry up," Cushman snapped.

Tropic night came swiftly. As the canoe out there faded in the gloom, Cushman found himself more and more resentful. Anne, he knew, had no experience with men. Just like her to fall head over heels for this glib young Yankee! Not a shilling to his name, probably. That thought, at least, consoled Cushman. An impoverished suitor wouldn't get far with McQuaid.

But with Anne, it might be different. You never could tell about women. "Romantic as hell, damn 'em!" Cushman muttered.

"But what," the steward twitted him, "can yer do about it?"

Thus challenged, Cushman fell to scheming. After a while he went in to his desk. There he wrote a letter. He copied it, until the handwriting exactly suited him and was in no way like his own.

He sealed the letter, then addressed the envelope. With it and a quart of cognac he returned to the steward outside.

"Listen, Bertie. Your next port's Frisco?"

"Righto," said Bertie.

"Good. When you get there, put an American stamp on this letter. Then mail it."

Bertie stared. "But why don't you mail it yerself, from here?" The Banyan Island post office was right in Cushman's store.

"Because I want a California postmark on it," Cushman said. "Here's the letter, and thruppence to buy a stamp with, and a bottle of cognac for your trouble. Now be on your way. And if you ever let out a bleat about this I'll break your blasted head."

JIMMIE let the canoe drift. Anne, facing him, laughed nervously. "All my life I've lived here," she confided. "And not once before have I ever been on the lagoon by moonlight."

The soft light made her lovely, Jimmie thought. Her father, though, would raise Old Ned when he found out they'd gone canoeing.

"It ought to be part of every girl's education," Jimmie said. "And that's what I'm hired for, isn't it?"

"Oscar Cushman calls three times a week," she said. "But usually he plays dominoes with father."

Sympathy sobered Jimmie. Poor girl! She'd missed all the fun in life. No beaus except that moon-faced trader, Cushman.

"You've other white men here, though?" Jimmie nodded toward a cluster of lights which marked the administration cottages on the south arm of the cove.

"Only three," Anne said, "since the commissioner's staff moved to Nukulese. A deputy commissioner, a magistrate and a commander of police."

"That ought to be enough," Jimmie said, "to keep law and order. Your father went over to see them tonight, didn't he?"

She smiled guiltily. Both of them knew that it was because Duncan McQuaid had gone tonight with some complaint to island officers that Jimmie and Anne had been able to slip away.

"Some disturbance in the coolie quarters took him there," she said. "It's been that way before—and always when a ship's in port. Father thinks it's opium."

"Maybe he's right. Ships could smuggle it in, easily enough. To the Chinese labor, I mean. And for a few days it'd show in their discipline."

"Usually they're good workers, though," Anne said. "The coolies. I feel terribly sorry for them, sometimes."

"They're better off here," Jimmie said, "than they'd be in China."

He heard the dip of an oar. A skiff was rowing out to the anchored freighter. In the dim starlight Jimmie recognized the ship's steward. Having traveled on that ship, he knew the crew. The steward now let his oars rest for a moment, while he drank from a bottle of cognac.

"We'd better go home now," Anne said.

Reluctantly Jimmie paddled toward the beach. Yes, it would be discreet to be home before McQuaid got back from his call on Deputy Commissioner Wythe.

"Look," Jimmie exclaimed. "There's a light in Cockroach Inn. I thought you said it was deserted."

A candle gleamed at one of the old hotel's battered windows.

"It *was* deserted for years," Anne said. "But a few boats ago a man they call Swabber Wally came here. He's been using Cockroach Inn for shelter."

Jimmie grimaced. "Funny he'd want to go in there, with all those cockroaches. By the way, is this Swabber Wally by

any chance the same playful seafaring man who painted out *Palms Hotel* and put *Cockroach Inn* in its place?"

"Oh, no. The sign was changed long before Wally came."

"Don't the centipedes, rats and cockroaches sort of get on his nerves?"

"Usually he sleeps in a hammock outside," Anne said. "And only goes in when it rains."

"It's not raining tonight," Jimmie said. As he spoke, the candle gleaming within Cockroach Inn went dark.

THE canoe bumped at the pier, Jimmie helped Anne out and they went to the donkey cart. They squeezed into the cart seat and Jimmie chanted: "Put on your old gray bonnet, with the blue ribbons on it, giddap, there."

Nothing could hurry that donkey. Not that Jimmie cared. He wouldn't mind how long it took to get home. A canopy of fronds over the trail shut out moonlight. As the beast went plodding leisurely on, Jimmie, driving with one hand, suppressed an impulse to slip his other arm around Anne. No use rushing things. He looked at his watch; the radium dial showed ten minutes to ten. With luck Anne could be home soon after ten, and possibly old Scotty would never know she'd been out.

Suddenly the donkey stopped. "Giddap," urged Jimmie. But no persuasion could make the animal advance further. The trail was inky, here. "Balky little devil! Guess I'll have to lead him." Jimmie got out and went to the donkey's head.

There his foot touched something. An obstruction lay athwart the ruts. Jimmie stooped, groping to discover what it was. He gave a start, then, and a shiver ran up his spine.

He lighted a match. The sight of what had kept the donkey from advancing made the blood drain from Jimmie's face. A Chinese coolie lay sprawled there. A few turns more and the cart wheels would have run over him.

The flame of the match revealed a copra knife plunged hilt-deep in the coolie's back. The body was still warm. But the man was dead.

For a moment horror petrified Jimmie. Then he managed to back the cart a few paces away. In a hoarse whisper he told Anne. She did not cry out, but he felt her shiver against his arm.

"We've got to report it," Jimmie said.

He began shouting. At a distance through the trees he saw candlenuts glimmering at a native village.

His shouting brought three chiefs. They stood shocked and staring at the dead Chinese. Jimmie sent one of them on a run for the deputy commissioner, another back to Cushman's store, a third ahead to the McQuaid plantation.

In half an hour the trail was filled with bobbing lanterns. Duncan McQuaid was there, and Trader Cushman. Also the three island officials, Deputy Commissioner Wythe, Magistrate Bellamy and Commander of Police Shoop.

"Who did it?" "Who found him?" "What's the bloody racket, anyway?" Sharp inquiries rang through the dark.

Of the three officers, only Wythe struck Jimmie as particularly intelligent. He was a slight man with a thin, sensitive face, and a habit of pointing his cane at you when he asked questions.

Shoop, his hard, scarred face illumined by Bellamy's lantern, kneeling beside the body. "Humph!" he growled. "Ordinary copra knife." He withdrew it from the victim's back.

"Aye," agreed Bellamy. "A hundred more like it at any island village."

They turned the body face up. Wythe, his cane swishing jerkily, said: "Looks like a burn on his chin. Head's gashed, too, what?"

"He's been in a fight, all right," Shoop said.

Bellamy, a florid man with bushy white eyebrows, swung his lantern closer to the dead man. "He's got a burn on his left hand, too. Like someone put a hot iron there. Let's see who he is."

He delved into the coolie's shirt pocket for a possible identification. What he brought out was confusing. It was a shotgun shell, unused. An ordinary twelve-gauge shell such as might be used in a pigeon gun.

"What," queried Wythe, "would he be doing with that? We don't allow these chaps to have firearms."

"We'll have a hearing at court in the morning," Magistrate Bellamy announced. "All witnesses be on hand, please."

Jimmie was detained for a few minutes, while McQuaid took Anne on home. When Jimmie himself arrived there, he met a stern rebuke.

"I'll not ha'e my lassie out romancin' wi' her tutor, young mon," the planter said. "If it happens again, I'll be givin' ye the sack."

"Yes, sir," Jimmie said, and went to bed.

TESTIMONY was written into the records at an official hearing next morning. The murder victim was identified as Chong Foy, and had been one of three hundred indentured workers on the McQuaid plantation.

Jimmie and Anne told of finding the body. McQuaid said he was on the way home from Wythe's when a native messenger found him and announced the crime. Oscar Cushman claimed to have been in the act of locking his store for the night when a commotion summoned him to the cart road.

Swabber Wally was called from Cockroach Inn. He impressed Jimmie as an utterly derelict beach tramp, a ragged and disreputable old scarecrow with deep eye sockets and a bony, bearded face. In his palmiest days no more than a deck swabber on inter-island freighters; and now, truant from even that questionable dignity, he was rotting at Cockroach Inn.

"I dawn't know nothin' abort it," wheezed Swabber. "I was out on the freighter till midnight, 'avin' a spot with an awld shipmite."

"The face and the eyes of the deceased," Wythe offered quietly, "make me think he was an opium addict. I'll bank on it he had a run-in with some other coolie over opium brought in on this last boat."

Bellamy looked over his spectacles, adding, "Which weighed anchor at daybreak."

Commander of Police Shoop stood scratching at an old saber scar on his jaw. He had once been, Jimmie learned later, in the British cavalry. "My own idea," Shoop advanced now, "is that opium's got nawthin' to do with it. This Chinaman probably had an affair with some native woman, and her man knifed him."

"Open up that shell," Wythe directed. His cane stabbed toward a shotgun shell on Bellamy's desk. "I want to see if it's got opium inside, instead of powder."

It would be a smooth idea for dope smuggling, Jimmie thought. But when the shell found on Chong Foy was opened, it was found to contain only wadding, smokeless powder and number six pigeon shot.

A score of the brown villagers were questioned. Also various of the Chinese from McQuaid's plantation. Nothing came of it and the inquiry adjourned.

"I'm in the doghouse," Jimmie whispered to Anne, "for taking you out last night."

For weeks to come, Jimmie continued in the bad graces of his employer. Life settled into a routine of tutoring by day, and of lonely evenings in his room.

Sometimes he took long walks about the plantings, always alone, observing with curious pity the stolid, machine-like Orientals at work there. And once he hiked all the way to the lava barrens, where a department of the government had one time set out vast plantings in rubber, an area which was now a waste of volcanic ash.

An hour a day each he gave to eight-year old Bruce McQuade, to eleven-year old Laura, to Jamie who was twelve, to Lorna, aged fourteen, to fifteen-year old Rabbie and to Donald, sixteen. Teaching these sandy-complexioned youngsters was not onerous; they were exceptionally quick-witted; and Jimmie's immediate prede-

cessor, the German doctor, had laid sound foundations.

TO ANNE, who was assumed to be a graduate from the elementaries, he gave instruction only in History and French. Mainly French, which Jimmie soon discovered as a means of outwitting McQuaid. The planter kept a sharp watch where Anne was concerned. With his most advanced student Jimmie was never allowed to be alone one minute.

Yet under the very eyes of McQuaid Jimmie carried on.

"You know why I'm staying here?" he asked her one day in French.

"Why, *monsieur?*" They were supposed to be at lessons.

He continued in French. "Because you are, Anne. You're not just a luxury any longer. You're a necessity. If it weren't for you, I'd ship out on the next boat."

The brightness of her eyes was not missed by McQuaid. "What are ye saying, young mon," he demanded, "to get her all flustered like that?"

Jimmie looked up innocently. "It's the regular assignment, sir. First person singular of the verb *aimer.*"

Still suspicious, the planter packed Anne off to her housework. The game kept on, week after week. The only effect of the restraint on Anne was to make her rebellious, while Jimmie became all the more determined to crash barriers.

At the end of the first month, McQuaid grudgingly paid over seven guineas. "I trust ye'll be savin' of your wage, young mon," the planter admonished.

Jimmie looked down ruefully at his threadbare whites. "Sorry, sir. But I've got to blow it in right away."

He hurried down the cart road to Cushman's store. "A decent suit of whites, please. And a couple of silk shirts."

Cushman, emerging from behind his post-office wicker, waited on him personally. By luck Jimmie got a fair fit, but the price was outrageous. These items at Suva could have been had for four guineas. "They'll cost you seven, here," insisted Cushman. He knew Jimmie's wage to the farthing.

"Well," Jimime grimaced, "if I'm stuck I'm stuck. I wanted some white shoes and a pith helmet, but they'll have to wait till next month."

Cushman, himself nattily groomed as always, lighted a cigar. Omitting to offer his customer one, he cocked a derisive eye at the purchases. "Figure on cutting a dash around Anne, do you?"

"Nope," Jimmie said cheerfully. "I just don't want to look like a tramp, that's all. I notice you yourself doll up like a head waiter every time you go courting there."

Cushman's face darkened. It was true that he'd been particularly dudish in his efforts to outshine the tutor at McQuaid's. His cream-colored dinner suit, three times a week, had made Jimmie appear rather seedy.

"If you know what's good for you, Powell," the trader warned, "you'll take the next boat out."

Just then Magistrate Bellamy and Police Commander Shoop came in. Both looked disgruntled.

"See here, Cushie," Bellamy growled, "you got to help us out on that Chong Foy murder. It's a month old now."

"Wythe's yelling for a conviction," Shoop put in. "He just had us on the carpet."

"The commissioner over at Nukulese's riding him about it, so Wythe's riding us," Bellamy complained. "This makes two unsolved killings, you know."

"Two?" Jimmie inquired. "What was the other one?"

The saber-scarred Shoop ignored him. But Bellamy explained: "The other was three years ago. The last guest at Lulu Belle's hotel, a few days before she closed the place, was found in bed with his throat cut."

"At Cockroach Inn?" Jimmie prompted.

"It was the Palms Hotel, then. This chap was an American named Tromble."

"By the way," Cushman inquired, "what ever became of Lulu Belle?" He passed his box of cigars to Shoop and Bellamy.

"Nobody knows," Shoop said. "But she was in the clear, all right. Upstairs with her native maid when Tromble got sliced. Last chap to see Tromble alive was that German doctor tutoring at McQuaid's. But he can prove he wasn't there when it happened, same as Lulu Belle."

"Speaking of alibis," Bellamy put in, "Swabber Wally's stands up, too. I mean in this Chong Foy business last month. He said he was out on the *Reefrunner*, drinking with an old shipmate. And we've just got word from the *Reefrunner*. He was there, all right."

Jimmie remembered something. "Miss McQuaid and I saw a candle burning that evening," he said, "at Cockroach Inn. It was only about half an hour before we found the coolie's body."

Bellamy turned briskly, arching his white, bushy eyebrows: "The deuce you say! If the beachcomer was out on a ship, why would a light be burning in Cockroach Inn?"

Shoop asked peevishly: "Got any ideas, Cushie? Bellamy and I'll get the sack if we don't turn up a conviction."

The trader looked at Jimmie and his eyes flickered. "The only idea I got, Shoop, is that this island has all its bad luck right after a Yankee shows up here. Tromble was a Yank; one of these mysterious, tight-lipped Yanks. He comes here three years ago, and gets his throat cut. Then we don't have any more murders till Powell pops in, last month. And right away we find a dead Chinaman."

Jimmie grinned. "Cushie," he suggested to Bellamy, "doesn't seem to like Yankees. Before you drop the Tromble case, maybe you'd better think that over. It might be an angle."

The trader reddened furiously as Jimmie went out.

CHAPTER III

THE HOST OF COCKROACH INN

A HUNDRED yards up the beach Jimmie saw Cockroach Inn, with a trampish figure reclining in a hammock in front. Swabber Wally. On an impulse Jimmie strolled over to make Swabber's acquaintance.

The outcast being fast asleep, Jimmie turned to give close inspection to this shabby and deserted hotel. Bamboo, trumpet vine and creepers from the jungle had invaded from all sides except the front, shutting off light from the battered-in windows. And in front the sign *Cockroach Inn* struck Jimmie more than ever as inconsistent with reason.

He mounted the rickety steps and looked inside. Cobwebs everywhere. And dust. A slatternly lobby office with its yellow-paged registry book still open on the desk. Furnishings mildewed and moth-eaten. And cockroaches! The gloomier corners were alive with them. Ugly, black, beetle-like creatures scurrying for cracks and crevices at Jimmie's step at the doorway. Only the better lighted area by this entrance was devoid of them.

Adjoining the lobby office Jimmie saw a tap room. The bar there had a brass footrail. Cobwebs spanned from the bar, along which a rat now ran impishly, to a cracked mirror beyond. And here again, in the gloomier corners, Jimmie could see and hear cockroaches. Too many of them, Jimmie thought, to be convincing. The rat hopped with a thud from bar to floor. Jimmie shuddered. How could anyone, even a wastrel like Swabber Wally, hang out at a place like this?

Thunder cracked across the sky. Jimmie looked out and saw dark, rolling clouds. A tropic squall was beating in from the sea.

That was the answer. Where else could Swabber Wally find shelter in storms?

Jimmie hurried home to the plantation, arriving there just before the storm broke. Rain came in torrents.

All that week, and the next, downpours flooded Banyan Island.

The McQuaid household was immured indoors. The only attraction being indoors, Jimmie didn't mind. One day he stood with her at a window, looking out at the dripping fronds.

McQuaid was in the room with them. He was always there, watching dourly. Anne had orders never to be alone with her tutor.

"Some day," Jimmie said in French, "I'll take you away from here."

"Father," she answered, "will take care that you don't."

But the wish in her voice thrilled Jimmie. "All right, Anne. Then just as soon as I can save up the price of two passages to America, we'll elope."

Anne looked at him. The response he wanted to see was in her eyes.

McQuaid wasn't quite deceived, though. "Anne," he barked, "I'll ha'e no more whisperin' in French except at lessons. Go to the laundry and help Lorna with the wash."

When she was gone he turned severely upon Jimmie. "Ye've been making love to the lass and I'll ha'e no more of it. Understand, young mon? And you without a shillin' in your pocket!"

Jimmie checked his retort. There was no use arguing. The parental choice was Cushman. Cushman, with his thriving trade, was a man of substance in these islands.

So Jimmie waited, watching his chance. Anne, he knew, was waiting too. The girl would follow her heart. In five months, Jimmie calculated, he would have thirty-five guineas and they could slip away on some ship.

When the second payday came, rain was still lashing the bush. Anne said at breakfast: "There's a ship in, father. Shall I go for the post?"

McQuaid shook his head. "Not in this weather, lass. If it doesn't clear by noon, I'll go myself."

IT HADN'T cleared by noon. Shortly after, however, the post was delivered personally by Cushman. The trader, wrapped in a slicker, came riding on a lean island pony and holding an umbrella over his head. He stopped only long enough to hand the usual package of newspapers and letters to McQuaid.

"Wanted to find out if you've got any cargo for this ship, Mack."

"I ha'e not," the planter answered.

"Very well. I'll be trotting along back, then."

Off went Cushman, back to his store.

McQuaid sorted through the mail. One of the letters was addressed in a bold round backhand to:

Mr. James Powell
Care of Duncan McQuaid
Banyan Island.

The planter turned with accusing eyes to Jimmie. "It's from your wife, young mon."

Anne looked startled. Her eyes questioned Jimmie. McQuaid was exposing the envelope to them both, and Jimmie took it in confusion. The sender's name was written in the upper left corner.

From
Mrs. James Powell
General Delivery
San Francisco, U S A

The envelope had a properly canceled American stamp and a San Francisco postmark.

"What's the gag!" exclaimed Jimmie. "I haven't got any wife."

"Dinna lie to me!" McQuaid's voice was scorching. "And dinna be tellin' me I canna read the King's English. Ye're a married mon—and ye've been makin' love to my lassie!"

Anne's blue eyes looked searchingly. "It's not true, Jimmie?"

"Of course it isn't, Anne. Somebody ribbed this up. Not a soul in the states knows I'm here. So how could I get a letter?"

But he *had* received one. It was in his hand, and difficult to deny.

"Go to your room, Anne," McQuaid commanded.

The girl amazed him with defiance. "I'll not go, father. Not till I make Jimmie sure I trust him."

She stood her ground, close to Jimmie's

elbow. Anger at her disobedience, the first he had ever known, made McQuaid's face like white hot iron.

"I'll prove it's a phony," Jimmie said. "Wait till I open this." He tore away the envelope. Then his jaw dropped as he read lines in that same round, backhand:

My dearest husband:

What a relief to know you've finally picked up a job, even if it's only to tutor on a jungle plantation—

There was a page of intimate chat. The letter was signed,

Your lonely and loving wife,

Corrine.

"It's crazy, Anne," Jimmie yelled. "I don't know anybody named Corrine. And I'm single, so help me!"

"If ye want her to believe ye," McQuaid challenged, "ye'll show her what it says."

"You can both see it," Jimmie blazed back. "It's funny as Hamlet's ghost!" To withhold the letter, he knew, would put him in a less convincing light than ever. So he gave it to McQuaid, who glanced through it grimly and then extended it toward Anne.

"I do not care to see it," she said. "No matter what it says, I believe what Jimmie tells me."

She smiled at Jimmie, then turned and went to her room.

Jimmie continued his protests to McQuaid. "Can't you see it's a plant? Somebody wants to get me in Dutch with Anne."

McQuaid answered by counting seven guineas from his wallet. He thrust them into Jimmie's hands. "Pack your kit, young mon, and be off. An' dinna let me catch ye back here romancin'."

NOTHING could convince him. Jimmie packed his kit and got out. It was still raining. Furious, Jimmie sloshed through two miles of dripping bush to the beach.

A freighter lay at anchor offshore. The seven guineas would buy passage to the next port. Jimmie stepped into Cushman's store to inquire when the ship would weigh anchor.

Cushman faced him. The trader's grin was derisive. "So you got the sack, did you?"

One look at the malice on those lips and Jimmie knew the answer. Cushman himself must have inspired that letter. Jimmie remembered the night, two months ago, when the *Reefrunner* had left here for San Francisco. Someone on that ship, a tool of Cushman's, could have been bribed to post this letter from California.

"Sure, I got the sack," Jimmie answered. "And here's something you're getting." His fist drove out and smashed into Cushman's face.

The trader staggered back, cheeks livid. Then Jimmie was on him again. He crossed rights and lefts, with half a dozen native clerks looking on. Blood spurted from Cushman's nose at the next punch.

An uppercut lifted Cushman from his feet. The man got his balance, then charged in, roaring. Jimmie side-stepped, swinging one which closed the trader's left eye.

Cushman was jolted to the wall. He made a snatch for a machete hanging there. "I'll kill you!" he screamed. But Jimmie's next swing spun him to mid-floor.

"Want to take a walk," Jimmie challenged, "and tell Scotty who mailed that letter?"

"No, blast you!" shrilled Cushman.

Jimmie drove in, punching, swinging, slashing. His left closed Cushman's other eye and his right jarred out a front tooth. The trader's knees buckled and he fell heavily.

"Now eat this!" Jimmie stooped to cram into the man's bleeding mouth the letter signed *Corrine.*

Then Jimmie picked up his bag. He walked out into the rain and stood gazing dismally at the ship offshore. He knew he couldn't go on that ship now. Not till he could make Cushman digest that letter.

And when he did go, Jimmie vowed, he'd take Anne with him. In the meantime, here he was, a bedraggled outcast on the beach.

He looked to the left. Through sheets of rain he saw five official structures. An administration building, a jail, three bungalows. The bungalows housed Wythe, Bellamy and Shoop. He could go there and beg shelter.

But stubborn pride disinclined him to beg favors. Wythe would only point to the ship out there, and suggest that Jimmie, an unemployed alien, take passage on it. But he wouldn't. He'd stay here, on his own, until he could vindicate himself at McQuaid's.

He looked to the right—and saw Cockroach Inn. Shelter, of a sort. For the moment, at least, that sagging old roof could cover him.

So Jimmie went sloshing down the beach to Cockroach Inn. He mounted to a porch whose rotting boards were strewn with banana peelings dropped there no doubt by Swabber Wally.

Looking in, Jimmie saw Swabber sitting on the bar. The unkempt wastrel was sucking a mango.

Jimmie, himself drenched and dishevel ed, went in.

Swabber grinned. "Look like yer've been in a fight, mitey."

"I tossed a few punches," Jimmie admitted, "at Cushman."

The derelict was delighted. "Allers kinder 'ankered to do that meself, mitey."

THE hammock, Jimmie noticed, was now suspended from rafters of the barroom. There were two decrepit chairs and a table. The lobby office adjoining was still furnished with an old mildewed couch. The brass footrail of the bar here was tarnished. Cobwebs hung everywhere. Yet the dominating exhibits were cockroaches. They were creeping in every dim corner, on the walls, on the floors, even on the rafters.

Something uncanny about those cockroaches. Jimmie couldn't explain why they kept outraging his reason. Times before he'd looked into deserted tropical shacks and seen a few cockroaches, but not such swarms of them as here.

"Yer warna look out fer that trider, though," warned Swabber Wally.

"Cushman? Why?"

" 'E's got influence in 'igh plices," Wally confided. "Got an uncle in the government at New Zealand. Up to 'is blarsted neck in politics, that bloke is. It's through 'im that McQuide 'olds a long lease on the big plantation. Even the depitty commissioner 'ere owes 'is job to Cushman."

"Well," Jimmie shrugged. "That won't bother me any. I'm an American."

"Thort so, mitey. Workin' up at the plantition, are you?"

"I was." Briefly Jimmie told about the letter from a non-existing wife. "Cushman arranged that. So I bashed his face in."

"Bashed 'is face in, did yer?" Wally cackled. "Well, then yer a man arfter me own 'eart, mitey."

"I'm soaked to the skin," Jimmie said. "With your permission, I'll change." He opened his bag and took out dry clothing. Then he stripped off his soggy whites and changed. Carefully he transferred the wallet, containing seven guineas of wage, from suit to suit.

Wally hopped from the bar. He obliged by hanging up the wet clothes to dry. "Warnt to stiy 'ere all night, mitey?"

Jimmie fixed his eye on a centipede which crawled along the brass foot rail. "I might take a chance," he said, "if I could keep these playmates of yours off me."

"They won't bother yer in the 'ammock," Wally said brightly. "Yer can 'ave the 'ammock and me, I'll sleep on the blarsted bar."

Jimmie grinned. "That's what I call hospitality. But what and when do you eat?"

"Clams on the beach, mitey. Coconuts and papayas in the bush. Any time I feel like it, I can bike up some breadfruit and yams."

Jimmie had a feeling he'd starve before being able to relish food in a place like this. He refrained from saying so, though.

"Warnt to 'ave a look around?" Wally asked.

Curious, Jimmie nodded. Wally led him on a tour of inspection. Nearly every room, Jimmie discovered, was furnished. Lulu Belle had evidently considered the furnishings not worth shipping away. In the bedrooms, mattresses were discolored by leaks through the roof, and from storms which had smashed out all window panes. A rear corner upstairs, where the roof had caved in, was a shambles.

Wherever the light was dim, Jimmie saw cockroaches.

ONE bedroom was on the first floor, adjoining the bar. It was quite dark, a trumpet vine completely smothering its one window. Wally lighted a candle and Jimmie saw that this, in the days of the Palms Hotel, must have been the most select accommodation of all. A faded landscape of the Welsh countryside hung on the wall. And here the bedstead was of brass, whereas the others were of crudely home made bamboo.

"The bridal suite, I calls it," cackled Wally.

Due to the darkness of this room, there were more cockroaches here than in the others. Hundreds of them went creeping under the bed to evade, now, the light from Wally's candle.

"And by the way, mitey," offered Wally, "the larst Yankee 'ere, afore you, got 'is throat cut right there on that blarsted bed."

"The devil!" exclaimed Jimmie. "Chap named Tromble, wasn't he? Were you here then?"

"No, mitey. I only been 'ere a year. They shut down the plice three year ago, just arfter the bad luck 'appened to Tromble."

They went on to the kitchen, which, like other areas, was swarming with insects. Wally pulled a well-baked breadfruit from the coals of a stove. " 'Ave some, mitey?"

"No thanks," declined Jimmie.

Forward in the barroom again, he probed for information about Cushman. "I'd like to get something on that bucko."

"Charnces are," supplied Wally, "that 'e's peddlin' opium to the Chinese libor. But yer'll never prove it. An speakin' o' Chinese, yer recollect Chong Foy wot got done in coupla months ago?"

"I'm not likely to forget," Jimmie said.

"They think it 'appened on the cart road." Wally lowered his voice. "But it didn't, mitey. The way I figger it, it 'appened right 'ere in Cockroach Inn."

"You mean his body was carried from here to the cart road?"

Wally's nod was wise. "Because I seen the knife 'e was kilt with. And blarst me, it was me own copra knife. I left it right 'ere on the bar, that night, when I went out to 'ave a spot with an old shipmite on the frighter. I'd know that knife anywhere, by a split in the 'andle."

Jimmie considered. "It doesn't prove much, Wally," he argued. "Simply means someone slipped in here, snitched a copra knife off the bar and later used it on Chong Foy."

"But there's somethin' else," Swabber insisted. "Next mornin' I seen there'd been a rumpus 'ere in this barroom. The chairs was tipped over. They found Chong Foy with a gash on 'is head, didn't they?"

Again Jimmie considered. There had, he recalled, been very little blood on the victim's back. A blow on the skull might have killed him. The body could then have been carried to the cart road, and a knife thrust into the back to confuse investigators. Too, a candle had been gleaming here at the time of the crime.

"This dump's punch-drunk with mystery, all right," said Jimmie.

"That she is, mitey."

"But why don't you tell the police about leavin' a knife on the bar here?"

"An' get meself in a jam?" Wally protested. "They'd think I 'ad somethin' to do with it, wouldn't they, if they knew it 'appened with my knife. 'An in me own 'ouse 'ere."

"But you've got a shipboard alibi."

"They'd figger I slipped ashore, some

way. Nope. That copper Shoop is 'ard as niles, 'e is. 'E's arfter someone to convict, an' I ain't tikin' no charnces."

Rain, outside, was beating steadier than ever now. A relentless pounding on the iron roof jarred Jimmie's nerves.

Dusk was closing in. Jimmie, scowling out at the dripping palms, said: "Looks like I'm stuck here. For the night, anyway."

" 'Elp yerself to the 'ammock," Wally offered again. He took a pair of frayed blankets from it and spread them on the bar. "In the 'ammock, mitey, yer won't need any. But it'll be blarsted 'ard on this bar."

The tramp put a lighted candle on the bar. Jimmie climbed nto the hammock and fired his pipe. A few mosquitoes were buzzing and with smoke he might keep them away. He stared up at the cobwebbed rafters. Nothing but mosquitoes could bite here, he decided.

"Let me get it straight, Wally. This joint used to be the Palms Hotel. Last paying guest was Tromble. When he got murdered here three years ago, Lulu Belle moved out and the joint went to pot."

"Lulu Belle was gettin' ready to leave anyway," Wally told him.

"Then somebody painted out the sign Palms Hotel and made it read Cockroach Inn! That last doesn't c.ick, Wally. There's a missing angle."

CHAPTER IV

"WALLY ARE DRUNK"

NIGHT fell, and Jimmie continued thinking aloud. After a while responses no longer came from the bar. Deep breathing told him that Wally was asleep. How could he sleep, with a million cockroaches inside and rair drumming an inferno on the roof?

Jimmie leaned from the hammock, blew out the candle. Inky darkness, now. And after a half hour of it, Jimmie began to hear the dry, harsh crackle of beetle wings all over the floor. Cockroaches. Legions of them, now. Nocturnal in habits, the complete darkness was drawing them from numberless cracks and chinks of the walls.

Jimmie listened, smoking pipe after pipe. Rain kept drumming overhead. Beetles kept crackling and crawling on the floor. Cockroach Inn! Jimmie smiled in the dark. What a hole to be stranded in! That ship was still at anchor. Probably be loading here for a couple of days yet. In the morning he'd go aboard and—

But no, he wouldn't. He couldn't. His thoughts went back to Anne McQuaid. He must see her tomorrow. They must make plans.

Mosquitoes were zooming now. The rain was driving them indoors. One lighted on his ear and Jimmie slapped at it. Then he heard rats. Tiny scampering feet on the floors.

A snore from the bar. Sound asleep, that tramp. "But I'll never sleep here myself," thought Jimmie. "Not in a million years."

He did, though. Jimmie was young and he was tired. In spite of zooming mosquitoes he dozed off for an hour or so.

Something crawled on the flesh of his leg. He sat up, shivering. In the dark he whacked his hand there. A centipede might have fallen from the rafters. He brushed it away, then heard a rat scamper in the lobby. Crackle, crackle, crackle, beetles crawling everywhere. Then a crunching sound. A heavy step. Jimmie thought he heard the creak of a floorboard from the lobby. A furtive presence in there. Was Wally up? Why would he be prowling in the dark?

Again a board creaked. This time Jimmie was sure of it. Source of the sound was uncertain, though, because of rain banging on the roof.

Damn the rain! Drum, drum, drum! Jimmie sat hunched in the hammock. In the dark he couldn't see Wally. But he could hear the breathing of a sleeper. He reached out and his hand touched the tramp, who still lay sleeping on the bar.

Jimmie got half out of the hammock and then froze, in a new tension, as once more a floorboard creaked. This time it was further toward the rear. Another.

Then another. The steps, crunching cockroaches with each stride, were retreating. Some intruder was prowling toward the kitchen of Cockroach Inn.

"Wally!" Jimmie whispered. The tramp did not answer.

Then a faint point of light. It came from the wall beyond the end of the bar, about three feet above the floor. A mere pinpoint of light. It came, Jimmie decided, from a door which gave to the first floor bedroom. They'd closed that door, he remembered. It led into the room where the American guest, three years ago, had been murdered.

The keyhole! That was it. A candle was lighted in there. A glimmer from it now leaked through the keyhole.

Jimmie got softly to the floor. He tiptoed to the door, knelt there, put his eye to the keyhole. The room beyond was in mellow light.

"Hi!" Jimmie yelled, and kicked the door open.

A Chinese coolie stood there, the bones of his face knife-sharp, a lighted candle in his hand. Then, as Jimmie burst in, the man dropped the candle and the room went dark. Jimmie heard him running. "Hi!" he yelled again, and gave stumbling chase.

THE commotion awakened Swabber Wally. He appeared at Jimmie's elbow. "Wot seems to be the trouble, mitey?"

"Maybe it was a bad dream," Jimmie said. He struck a match. On the floor lay a candle. He picked it up gingerly, and because the wax was hot he knew it was no dream.

He explained to Wally.

Wally grinned eerily. "Another Chinaman, huh?"

"You mean they've been here before?"

"Aye, mitey. This mikes four times they've been 'ere. I'm gettin' so it dawn't even wike me up any more."

An idea struck Jimmie. He lighted the candle and they went into the barroom. "Listen, Wally. It might be opium."

"Why would they look for it 'ere, mitey?"

Jimmie shrugged. "Search me. But that Chinese was prowling for a purpose, and you say they've been here before. They're low-caste Orientals. Chances are every shilling they earn goes for opium, which gets smuggled in somehow. Suppose a can or two got stashed here once, and these poor, dope-starved beggars 've been looking for it ever since."

"Chong Foy was knifed 'ere two months ago, I'm thinkin'," offered Wally.

"And a candle burned here that night," Jimmie reminded, "Just like tonight."

The rain slackened. Above its patter Jimmie could hear a swish of waves on the beach. Wind was rising. He looked out and saw the dim outlines of tossing palms.

Then he perched himself on the bar beside Wally. For an hour there they mulled the mysteries over. By then gray dawn was showing outside.

"I'd like a look at that registry book," Jimmie said. He took a candle and went into the office lobby. Cockroaches. His feet crunched them at every step.

"Maybe this gent Tromble, wot got 'is throat cut 'ere," Wally suggested, "was peddlin' opium. 'E 'ad a cache of it, an' the Chinese are still arfter it."

Jimmie stopped before the tattered register on the lobby desk. It lay open, fastened by a slim chain. Faded signatures were on the open page. The last name signed there, Jimmie noted, was: *Adam Tromble, New York.*

How, Jimmie puzzled, could the Tromble murder be hooked up with later mysteries here at this inn? Nothing seemed to connect. Wally's slant on it struck him as vague and unconvincing.

Jimmie turned from the desk. Invading daylight, and his candle, were causing cockroaches to scurry into darker corners. Then Jimmie saw ants. Big ants. Little ants. Red ants, black ants. Ants and cockroaches.

They were especially thick at definite spots. Jimmie went to one of these—and his shoe stuck to the floor. He stooped,

touching a finger there. He straightened, turning in amazement toward Swabber Wally. "I'm beginning to get it, now, Wally!"

"Wot's that, mitey?"

"Your pets," Jimmie said, "are being fed."

Wally gaped. "Yer wouldn't fool me, would yer?"

"Believe it or not. Last night someone slipped in here and dropped quarts of sweet, gummy stuff all over the floors. Feels and smells as if it might be mango juice mixed with a cheap grade of molasses."

"The 'ell 'e did!"

"Why?" argued Jimmie. "To attract cockroaches and ants. They'd swarm in here, for bait like that. I thought there were too blamed many of 'em for reason. Means he's done it before."

"But why, mitey?"

Jimmie concentrated. "Suppose he wants to drive you out of here, Wally. So he figures to make the place uninhabitable. Simple, too. All he needs do is smear the floor with bait. Billions of crawling things come in from the bush to feed on it—and you're supposed to move out."

"Blow me! Yer gort a 'ead on yer, gov'nor."

"Which gives me another hunch, Wally. About that sign, Cockroach Inn. To figure some playful sailor painted it as a gag doesn't wash down very well. A drunk from a ship might think it was a swell idea, all right, and suggest it over beers. But by the time he found a can of paint and a brush, and a ladder to reach the sign with, he'd be too sober to go through with it. So the idea's cockeyed. Whoever painted that sign did it for a sober reason."

"But the sign was chinged," Wally protested, "afore I come 'ere."

"That's just it. The place was deserted. Someone wanted to keep it that way. So he gave it an uninviting name. Then he made the joint live up to it."

"It'd tike a Chinaman," Wally wheezed, "to think of that."

"Let's keep open minds," Jimmie urged. The motive, he thought, now seemed to go deeper than an appetite for opium.

IT WAS quite light without now. A halloo came from in front. Jimmie emerged on the porch and saw Commander of Police Shoop standing there, flanked by two swarthy native sergeants. The sergeants, in knee-length *lava-lavas* with uniform stripes, were bare chested and each carried a carbine.

Shoop's hard, scarred face was like granite this morning. "Come along," he said to Jimmie. "I got a warrant for you."

"A warrant?"

"Cushman swore it out before Magistrate Bellamy. It's for assault and battery."

Jimmie grinned. "And believe me, he had it coming."

"Tell it to the magistrate," Shoop said.

Confident that he could explain to Bellamy's satisfaction, Jimmie went along with him. They passed the store; then on to the administration buildings. One of these was a small concrete jail whose open door indicated no occupant.

"Not locking me up, are you?"

"Not," Shoop answered shortly, "unless you're convicted."

He took Jimmie to his office in the main building, and there served coffee. "Hearing'll be at nine," he said.

At nine they proceeded to a cubbyhole courtroom and found Bellamy waiting. Seven witnesses were on hand, these being Trader Cushman and his staff of native clerks. Cushman, with two blackened eyes and a missing front tooth, glared venomously as Jimmie entered.

Bellamy read the charge, which was that the prisoner had entered Cushman's place of business and had there without provocation mauled Cushman to the jeopardy of his life.

"I beat the tar out of him," Jimmie admitted. "But he played me a dirty trick. Listen, Judge, he had a letter posted at San Francisco that got me in bad at McQuaid's."

"It's a lie," Cushman cut in. "I know nothing about any letter."

It couldn't be proved. The provable points were those stated in the charge.

Bellamy arched his bushy white eyebrows at Jimmie. "You admit beating Cushman in his own house?"

"He had it coming," Jimmie insisted. "And I'd do it again."

Witnesses confirmed the soundness of the thrashing.

Bellamy wiped his spectacles and his florid face, as he looked at Jimmie, did not seem unsympathetic. "I have no choice, young man. Thirty days."

"How much will it come to," Jimmie asked, "if I pay it as a fine?"

"Two pounds, six."

"It's worth it." Jimmie grinned. His hand went for his wallet, and found nothing. The pocket was empty. Someone had picked it, Jimmie realized in dismay, during his brief nap last night in the hammock.

With humiliation stinging him, Jimmie was taken next door to the jail. Bellamy followed and was decent about it. "Sorry," he said, and gave Jimmie a package of cigarettes.

The cell had two cots, a washstand and a bench. It was clean. Through stout bars Jimmie stared glumly at the beach. Palms and flame trees out there swayed derisively. Beyond them he could see the lagoon, blue under drifting white clouds, and a single freighter anchored offshore.

THIRTY days! The dismal prospect made Jimmie's lips droop. Who could have picked his pocket? The Chinese prowler? Or Swabber Wally? After all, what did he know about Swabber? Jimmie had changed from soggy clothes to fresh ones in Swabber's presence; so the tramp must have seen him shift the wallet from suit to suit.

There was no American consul, of course, on Banyan Island. Or even at Nukulese at the far end of this insular group. And what good could one do him, since he had pled guilty? These New Zealand officers naturally had to keep order and punish disturbers of the peace.

Jimmie couldn't blame them. He could blame only Cushman—and McQuaid. McQuaid for discharging him yesterday. And Cushman for not being able to settle a personal feud man to man.

Thirty days! "And even when I get out, I'll be stony broke!"

At noon a substantial ration was brought in. To the native policeman who brought it Jimmie said: "Will you send Swabber Wally here? I want to talk with him through the bars."

"Wally are drunk," the man answered.

In midafternoon this was confirmed to Jimmie by sight of Wally on the beach. The tramp was lolling under a coco palm with a quart of Square-face gin.

It meant, thought Jimmie, that Swabber was in funds. How else could he supply himself with liquor? "After this," Jimmie muttered, "I don't trust anybody."

Then he corrected himself. "Except Anne. Wonder if she knows I'm in the jug."

She did know. Her voice, calling to him through the barred window, cheered Jimmie about an hour after dark. Her face appeared there, desperately sympathetic. She reached her hands through to him.

"It's a shame, Jimmie!"

"Bless your heart, Anne."

"Do you like me, Jimmie?"

"I love you, Anne."

He wanted to shout. Nothing else mattered now. "Listen, Anne," he whispered. "I'll be out of here in thirty days. Will you run away with me, on the next ship?"

"If we only could, Jimmie!" Her face was close against the bars. Jimmie kissed her lips.

"I'm broke, Anne. Means I'll have to work my passage. In the meantime, don't be bamboozled by Cushman."

"I can't bear him," she said. "But father—"

"I know. He's the fair-haired boy with your dad. Not so strange, either. On the surface, Cushie's a success and I'm a failure."

"I don't think you are, Jimmie."

He looked past her to the lights of a freighter. "Wish we could get away on this one!"

"And I wish I could help you," Anne said. "But father never lets me have any money. If I had two pounds six, I could pay your fine."

"I'd be a heel to let you," Jimmie told her and grinned. "I'll still be alive after thirty days."

A guard's step came from the corridor. Anne quickly passed a package through the bars. "It's some cookies I made. Are you comfortable in there?"

"After Cockroach Inn it's a palace."

"I must go now. Father mustn't know I've been here."

He kissed her again and she left him.

Jimmie stood at the bars, munching cookies. Then he saw a boat rowing in from the freighter. White-clad figures disembarked on the beach. The ship's officers were coming for an evening ashore at Cushman's store.

The cell door opened. Wythe came in with Bellamy. The deputy commissioner hooked his cane over his forearm and smiled regretfully. "Just want you to understand, Powell, that I hate this like the devil. On account of your being an American citizen, I mean. Makes it deucedly embarrassing."

"You could pardon me, couldn't you?" challenged Jimmie.

Wythe shrugged. "I could. But it wouldn't be quite cricket. I mean it wouldn't be quite fair to my constituent, Cushman. After all, you did beat him up."

"Yes, and it was a pleasure," said Jimmie.

"You see our official position?" Bellamy put in.

Jimmie grimaced and said nothing.

Bellamy again gave him a package of cigarettes. Wythe offered a conciliatory pat on the back, and the two went out. When they were gone, Jimmie remembered an angle mentioned by Swabber. That these officials owed their political heads to Cushman. At heart, possibly, they didn't like the trader. But they were afraid of him.

In spite of this, Jimmie was inclined to believe he'd get fair play from both Wythe and Bellamy. Of the scar-cheeked Shoop he was less sure.

An hour passed. He looked out and saw the boatload of ship's officers return to the freighter. When he took to his cot, sleep came easily. He awakened at daylight. A native policeman came in with bread, yams and coffee.

CHAPTER V

GOLDEN HATFUL

FROM his window this morning, Jimmie saw a lighter-load of copra bags being towed to the freighter. The sky was clear. Cushman, both eyes still ringed blackly, stood on a mole directing the loading of a second lighter.

Then a hoarse voice called and Swabber Wally sidled up to Jimmie's window. Yesterday's spree had left the tramp bleary and haggard.

Jimmie remembered his stolen wallet.

"Some pal, you are!" he said. "Got any of it left, or did you blow it all in for gin?"

The surprise in Swabber's eyes seemed genuine. "Blow wot in, mitey?"

"My seven guineas. You snitched it, didn't you?"

"Hornest I didn't," Wally swore. "I ain't seen a guinea in so long I wouldn't know wot it looked like. So 'elp me!"

A bare chance that he was telling the truth. "Well, someone did. I went to sleep in your hammock with a month's pay; and woke up busted."

"Yer dawn't siy!" Again the tramp seemed sincere. "Well, mitey, come to think of it, I 'ad the sime 'ard luck meself, first night I slept at Cockroach Inn."

"You were robbed?"

"I was picked clean, mitey."

"Of how much?" Crime at Cockroach Inn interested Jimmie. There might be a connection between thefts and murders.

"I didn't 'ave no money," Swabber confided. "It was a pearl. Just one little pearl, mitey, with a flaw in it, and worth miybe ten quid. But it was all I 'ad, and some bloke frisked it from my pocket the first blarsted night I ever stiyed in that plice."

"What," Jimmie inquired curiously, "were you doing with a pearl?"

"Well, mitey, it was this way. Yer've 'eard about Lulu Bell, ain't yer? Long time ago she run a pub in the Tongas. She 'ad a no-good 'usband who deserted 'er and went to 'ell at sea. Yer lookin' at 'im now, mitey."

"You? You mean you used to be Lulu Belle's husband?"

"Still am," asserted Swabber Wally. "Leastwise I never 'eard about 'er divorcin' me. I knocked about from beach to deck, 'ere an' there, and many a time I warnted to go back to Lulu Belle. Then I 'eard she'd come over to Banyan Island and was runnin' the Palms 'Otel ere. I wrote 'er, arskin' 'er to tike me back, but she didn't answer."

"So you came anyway?" Jimmie prompted.

"Nope, mitey. I was ashimed to show up, arfter the way I'd done 'er, and me bein a dead broke bum. Then I 'ad a spot o' luck. Shipped as a deck 'and on a pearler outer Thursday Island; and when the payoff come, each 'and got one small pearl. 'I dawn't need to be ashamed now,' thinks I. 'I'll give me pearl to Lulu Belle, and then she'll tike me back."

"And did she?"

Wally gestured disconsolately. "I got 'ere too lite, mitey. When I 'it this beach, she was gone. So I been 'angin' around, 'opin' she'll come back."

Jimmie looked at him closely. "I'd believe you, Wally," he said, "if I hadn't seen you with a quart yesterday. If you didn't swipe my wallet, where did you get the price?"

Swabber rubbed a sleeve across watery eyes. "It was this way," he explained. "I follered yer over 'ere when yer got pinched yesterday. Arfter the 'earin' I went back to the 'otel. And wot did I see? Blime, mitey, I seen a full quart o' gin on th bar there. Where it come from, I dawn' know."

The man's maudlin earnestness convinced Jimmie. "Maybe Cushman put it there, Wally."

"Why would he put it there, mitey?"

"Who else would? Why we don't know. Maybe to get you soused so he could frisk Cockroach Inn by daylight."

"But it ain't Cushman been prowlin' there. It's the blarsted Chinee."

"Or maybe," Jimmie brooded, "he just wanted to get you in bad with me. He swiped my wallet, let's say, and wanted me to think it was you that took it. If I saw you celebrating on the beach with liquor, I'd think just that. I did think it, you know."

"'Old on, mitey. Why would 'e care whether you an' me's chummy or not?"

"You've stumped me there, Wally. But someone's been smearing the floors with insect bait to drive you out of Cockroach Inn. If he objected to one tenant there, he'd object more than ever to two. So when I team up with you, he tries to make a rift between us. I'd hardly go back there to sleep if I thought you snitched my wallet."

Swabber scratched his scraggly beard. "It's a deep game, mitey. The 'eathen Chinee are in it—an' miybe Cushman's tikin' a 'and too."

He went his confused way and Jimmie resumed pacing his cell.

Loose threads were everywhere, but Jimmie couldn't with any logic tie them together. Three hundred indentured Chinese, living like human cattle over on the McQuaid plantation. Cushman the trader, sly, greedy, vengeful. Was Cushman on the side peddling opium? What about the murder of Chong Foy? Did it connect with the three-year-old throat-cutting of a Palms Hotel guest?

And now Cockroach Inn. Infernally infested, that place! Mystery stalking there, night after night, groping through the cobwebs with a crackle of beetle wings underfoot. Jimmie shivered.

He looked out. Sunlight danced on the lagoon. A score of islanders were dragging a net to the beach. Further out, the big freighter still swayed at anchor.

THROWING himself on a cot, Jimmie dozed a few hours. He awoke late in the afternoon and heard a key in the lock. The door opened to admit Commander of Police Shoop.

"Your fine's been paid," Shoop announced bluntly. "Out you go."

"The dickens you say!" Jimmie jumped to his feet. "She shouldn't have done that. Her father'll—"

"It wasn't the McQuaid girl paid it. You can thank one of the officers on yon ship." Shoop thumbed toward the freighter.

Jimmie gaped. "But I don't know any officer on that ship."

"He sprang you, just the same." Shoop held the door wide open. "On your way. And keep your nose clean after this."

Jimmie walked out, puzzled. Why would a complete stranger sympathize with him enough to send in two pounds six for his release?

On a gravel path Jimmie met Magistrate Bellamy. Bellamy's florid smile suggested that he was pleased at being rid of an alien prisoner.

Jimmie grinned. "Howdy, Judge. I'm going out to that ship to thank whoever paid my fine."

"You'll have to hurry, then," Ballamy suggested. "That boat's about loaded, and she's upping anchor with the next flood tide."

The next flood tide would come soon after dark. It was now almost sundown. So Jimmie hurried along the beach to Cockroach Inn.

Swabber was draping the hammock under palms outside, since no rain seemed probable tonight.

"I'm sprung, Wally, by someone on the ship. Where can I grab a skiff?"

Swabber took him to a mole where canoes were moored. One of them belonged to a chief who permitted the beachcomber to use it at will. "Tike it, mitey. An' if yer'll use yer 'ead, yer won't come back. Yer'd better sign on with the crew and sile awiy on that frighter."

With no such intention, Jimmie pushed off in the canoe. Some officer out there, he supposed, had an old score to settle with Cushman. And so naturally had sympathized with a man reported to have thrashed Cushman.

Arriving alongside, Jimmie found the ladder down. He moored the canoe and skipped up to the deck.

A mate stood at the foredeck boom. "Someone aboard here," Jimmie smiled, "paid my jail fine. I want to thank him. Know who he is?"

The mate nodded. "It was Sawbones," he said. "Right this way."

He led Jimmie to a cabin aft. Jimmie knocked there.

"Come in," a guttural voice invited.

Jimmie entered to find the ship's doctor seated with a bottle of beer. The man's shabby whites, his indolent though amiable face, suggested that he was one of the failures of his profession.

"I'm James Powell, just out of jail. And much o'bliged for paying my fine."

The doctor beamed. "Zit right down, mine friend, and have zom beer. Baum's my name. Herman Baum. Berhabs you've heard of me at the blantation."

The German doctor! Here, Jimmie realized, was one of his predecessors at the billet of tutoring the McQuaid youngsters.

"So that was why you felt sorry for me!"

"I'd veel zorry for anyvon," said Baum, "who had to vork for dot binchbenny Scotchman. Ve can't alvays bick our chobs, though, mine friend. Otherwise I vouldn't be riding this tub of a chip."

He set out beer and Jimmie warmed to him at once. "Give me your address, Dr. Baum, and when I get funds I'll pay you back."

His host waved a disparaging hand. "Don't menchun it. And vhy don't you stay aboard? McQuaid fired you, didn't

he? I'll let you share my cabin to Apia."

It was a temptation. A long time before such a chance might come again to leave Banyan Island. But Jimmie shook his head. His faint flush made the doctor chuckle. "I zee. Der vight vas over the Fräulein McQuaid?" He hoisted his beer glass. "Vell, here's health to her, and habbiness to you both."

Jimmie told him the story of his two months on the island. "How long were you there, doctor?"

"Only zeven months," Baum answered, "about three years ago."

REMEMBERING something, Jimmie grew serious. The Tromble murder had occurred three years ago. And according to the evidence, the tutor at McQuaid's had been the last person to see Tromble alive.

Questioned about it, Baum readily harked back. "Dot binchbenny Scotchman," he said, "vouldn't zerve any beer at the blantation. So of eefnings I used to go down to Lulu Belle's bar."

"That," Jimmie prompted, "was just before she closed up and went away?"

Baum nodded. "Only von guest vas left there. This American Tromble. Many times ve drank beer at the bar. Der last night I vas vith him he zeemed nervous about zomething. Lulu Belle zerved us and then vent upstairs to bed. I vent home to the blantation. Next morning they told me Tromble vas found murtered."

"In a room right off the bar," supplied Jimmie. "Listen, doctor; I'd give an eyetooth to get the truth about that. Can you give me any new slants?"

"I told the bolice everything, mine friend."

"You say he was nervous. How did he show it? What did he do or say that last night at the bar?"

Baum tried to remember, but could summon back no new details. He was a convivial host, though, and insisted on regaling Jimmie with more beer.

Dusk had crept over the lagoon by now. Jimmie heard a rattle of winch pulleys, then sounds of hatches being battened. Evidently the loading was completed. Flood tide would soon be signal for the weighing of anchor.

Jimmie made another effort to enliven Baum's memory. It was no use.

The mate on deck called out, "All ashore that's goin' ashore."

Jimmie took reluctant leave. Baum followed him to the ladder, still urging that Jimmie change his mind and stay on board.

Stepping into the canoe Jimmie said, "Think back once more, won't you, Dr. Baum? You were at the bar with Tromble. Didn't he say or do the least little thing unusual?"

Baum rubbed his unshaven chin. "Vell, ve just stood there, mine friend, drinking beer, each vith an elbow on the bar and a voot on der brass rail. Come to think of it, Tromble did zay zomething about dot brass rail. He zaid: 'Are these brass voot rails zolid, or hollow, doctor?' And I zaid: 'Hollow, I imachine,' and then I vent home to der blantation."

"Wow!" Jimmie cried. "Maybe you've got something there. I'll look into it, anyway."

"Look into vot?" Baum yelled after him.

"The brass rail," Jimmie shouted. He was paddling swiftly toward the mole.

The mole was dark when the canoe bumped it. Jimmie hurried to Cockroach Inn.

Swabber was lolling in his hammock. Jimmie shook him. "Grab your tools, Wally. We're gonna tinker with the plumbing."

He went dashing up the steps. The inside was dark and beetle wings were already crackling. Jimmie struck a match, advancing through the lobby office to the barroom. Two candles were on the bar. Jimmie lighted them and looked down at the tarnished brass footrail.

He rested a foot on it. Just so Tromble and Baum must have stood that night, three years ago.

"It ain't rinin' tonight, mitey," piped Swabber's voice from the gloom. "So we

blime' well dawn't need to sleep in 'ere."

"Could you dig up a screwdriver, Wally?" Jimmie could see that the footrail was supported by stubby metal brackets and that these were secured to the floor by screw lugs.

"'Ave yer gone balmy?" Swabber bleated.

"A copra knife might do." Jimmie went with a candle to an end of the footrail. It was the regulation brass rail, about two inches in diameter and the full length of the bar. Brass screw caps sealed its ends.

Kneeling, Jimmie wrenched at an end cap. Rusty threads kept it from turning. "Rustle me something to pound with, Wally."

The beachcomber went out and returned with a heavy pandanus club. Jimmie used it to whack at the end cap. When next he wrenched it, the cap turned.

Screwing it off, he inserted a finger into the hollow tube. His finger felt nothing.

"Let's get the cap off the other end." This was accomplished after threads had been loosened. "Now hold a candle at one end, Wally, while I look through from the other."

Wally held a flame at one end of the now open foot rail. Kneeling, bending forward until his face was only six inches above the floor, Jimmie put his eye to the rail's other end. Wally's candle failed to shine through.

"Means there's an obstruction. Might be something Tromble hid there."

"Tromble? Why, mitey, that bloke's been dead three years!"

"And ever since," Jimmie reminded him, "someone's been looking the joint over. Bet the only place he never looked was in the bar rail."

In any event, Tromble on his last night here had wondered whether the rail were solid or hollow.

USING a copra knife as a screwdriver, Jimmie went to work on the lugs of the supporting brackets. There were four brackets, at ends and third points. Removing the screws was tedious, and Jimmie was more than an hour getting them out.

The footrail could then be moved at will.

"We'll take it outside, Wally, and poke a bamboo pole through. Heave away."

Jimmie stooped to hoist an end of the rail to his shoulder. The weight surprised him. "Lend a hand, Wally. We'll skew this end around toward the door."

Wally came to Jimmie's end and they both heaved upward. Jimmie got an end of it on his shoulder. Then came a deluge, clinking and rattling from the tube.

From the now inclined rail, minted coins began sliding out upon the floor.

Jimmie stared and Wally yelled. Dull yellow discs were pouring from the old barrail to form a heap there. "It's the whole blarsted mint!" shrieked Wally.

The pipe quickly lightened of its load and Jimmie jiggled it, shaking out the last coin. Then he dropped the empty rail with a clang. Taking up a candle, he kneeled beside a pile of golden specie.

"Double eagles, Wally! U. S. twenties!"

"Blime! Worth four quid each, ain't they, mitey?"

Jimmie nodded. Such coins, he knew, were no longer circulated. He picked up one of them and looked closely at the date. It had been minted at San Francisco in the year 1927.

How many were there he couldn't tell. But the heap would have filled a small satchel. His thoughts went back to Tromble.

"We're rich, mitey!" Swabber exulted.

With a regretful grimace Jimmie shook his head. "No such luck. This stuff's hot, on a bet. We've got to turn it in."

"'Ow do yer know it is?" whined Wally.

"If it wasn't, why would it be cached here? Looks as if Tromble was a fugitive. He lammed with the stuff three years ago and holed up here at Lulu Belle's."

"And 'id it in the bar rail?"

"It's here, isn't it?"

The beachcomber's eyes bulged. "A whole 'atful of it, mitey."

Jimmie's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "The German doctor says he was scared and nervous that last night. Suppose he had the stuff in a satchel. And knew someone was stalking him from the outside. Someone likely to pop in any minute. He'd have to hide it inside, wouldn't he?"

"Aye," Swabber agreed. " 'E'd 'ave to 'ide it someplice where not even a Chinaman could find it."

"Looks like he did just that. Although I can't quite figure the Chinese in on it. Foreign laborers on a plantation two miles away wouldn't know he had this coin. And even if they knew, it doesn't seem logical they'd make a play for it."

"They did, though," wheezed Wally. "Tromble got 'is throat cut, didn't 'e?"

Jimmie stood up. "No use guessing, Wally." The only undebatable thing was that a report must be made immediately to island authorities.

"I want 'em to see just how and where we found it, Wally. You hotfoot over to the administration and tell Shoop. Better rout out Bellamy, too. I'm not sure I quite trust Shoop. I'll stay on guard here till you get back."

Wally gave one last longing look at the coins. "A bloody shime we carn't 'elp ourselves, mitey."

Nevertheless he hurried away on the errand. Jimmie heard him running down the beach.

CHAPTER VI

THE CRAFT OF CUSHIE

CRAWLING cockroaches crackled from adjoining dark rooms. Then another sound startled Jimmie. It was a step just behind him. Jimmie whirled and saw Cushman standing there, with a shotgun.

The trader had emerged stealthily from Tromble's one-time bedroom. He aimed his double-barreled shotgun at Jimmie's head.

"Put your hands up," he commanded. "And thanks for finding it."

His bruised full-moon face was avid. The blackened eyes, sighting along the shotgun, flickered hatefully and Jimmi heard a double click. Both barrels wer cocked.

"You're too late, Cushie. I've alread sent Wally for the cops."

Cushman punched the muzzle againe Jimmie's chest. Then he dropped a stou canvas bag from under his coat.

"Sack it!"

Jimmie stooped, picked up the sack He began sacking the coins, slowly. If h could delay long enough, Swabber woul be back here with the law.

"I'll give you just one minute," Cush man rasped. "Rake it in there." H punched Jimmie again with the shotgun

"You'd kill me?" Jimmie challenged

"As quick as I'd stamp on a cockroach," Cushman said

"I'll sack it," Jimmie promised.

"And look lively," the trader warned

He couldn't get away with it, Jimmi thought. Suppose the man did take it ou in the bush, and bury it, and then murde Jimmie Powell! There'd be tracks. An how could he, Cushman, explain to Bel lamy? Swabber Wally had already see the gold here and was now reporting it presumably, in good faith to the law

Could he depend on Wally? Jimmi couldn't be too certain about that. May be Wally had gone not to the law bu to Cushman.

The gold was sacked now. It made a bulk of about fifty pounds.

"Heave it on your shoulder," Cushman directed, "and march."

Jimmie, promising himself he'd make a break in the first darkness, obeyed him The weight made him bend forward. He was in no stance to whirl and try grappling. Still, how could Cushman get away with it? Assuming, of course, no treachery from Swabber Wally.

Cushman snapped on a bull's-eye flashlight. With the shotgun prodding him Jimmie was marched out the back way. They took a path into the bush.

"Swabber'll have the law here in ten minutes," Jimmie said.

"Maybe," Cushman said. "And they'll

d you and the gold gone. What'll they nk then?"

Dismayed, Jimmie saw it. They'd think it he, Jimmie, had made off with the t. They'd rush out to look for him. t in darkness they couldn't follow cks rapidly.

The flashlight beam, shining past mmie, illumined the path ahead. The th was broad and rutted. It had once en a cart road. Cushman kept Jimmie arely in the middle of it. All the while nmie was alert for some narrow stretch m which he could dodge suddenly into sh.

BUT the path did not narrow. Then Jimmie remembered where it led. To e old government rubber plantings. A ousand acres or more, he knew, had en devastated by a lava flow. The flow d been cold and inactive for years now. it it explained this broad, unused cart il. No villages or native life down this y. Cushman's plan, now, was clear. oth Jimmie and the gold were due to sappear forever, whereupon authorities uld draw their own conclusions.

Cushman's voice came jarringly. "You ked for it, ramming in like this. Hep , there."

The shotgun prodded Jimmie's spine. s shoulder ached, from the load there. tangle of taro grew rankly on the left. it Cushman's vigilance gave him no ance to make a break. One comfort, the il was soft after the rain yesterday. ey were leaving deep tracks.

"Tracks to prove you were with me," mmie argued.

"No," Cushman corrected him. "Tracks prove I chased you when you made off th the sack."

"Just what," Jimmie wondered aloud, ill be your story?"

"That I heard a yell from the beach-mber. Which is true. That it drew me Cockroach Inn to see what was doing ere. Which is still true. That I saw you nd the tramp away to get rid of him. nen you sacked it and made off. I went back for my shotgun and gave chase. My tracks prove it. Followed hot on your tail for a while, then lost you in the bush."

It was sound. Air-tight, Jimmie admitted. Damn that sack! It was breaking his back. If the shotgun weren't flush against him every instant, he'd turn right here for a clinch.

There was no chance. Cushman pushed him on. The trail was ascending slightly. All at once it petered out. That is, there was no longer earth underfoot. Rock. It was like smooth asphalt.

Volcanic ash! The bush broke away. They were on lava barrens. "Keep moving," directed Cushman.

Jimmie, bent forward under the sack, moved on. Less chance than ever to make a break now. Nor would they leave footprints on the lava rock. There were no trees, except occasionally where some tortured snag still reached up from a crevice in the flow.

No hue and cry behind them. Why had Swabber been so infernally slow? Perhaps he'd had trouble putting spurs on Bellamy and Shoop. The officers would be skeptical about his report of gold coin in a bar rail. By the time Wally could arouse them and convince them, by the time they could rout out a guard with lanterns, get to Cockroach Inn, and ask a thousand more questions of the tramp, Cushman could easily manage his disposition of both Jimmie and the gold.

Cushman drove him another ten minutes across bare volcanic ash. He called a halt, then, beside a deep crevice. "Drop the sack in this crack."

Glad to be rid of it, Jimmie dropped his burden into the crevice.

"Now toss some rocks in," Cushman directed.

Constantly under command of the shotgun, Jimmie tossed in rocks until the sack was covered.

"Hep along," said Cushman.

Again the gun prodded Jimmie. Cushman forced him on for another half mile. Logically the man wouldn't want the

corpse of his victim found too close to the gold.

Better still, it wouldn't be found at all. They'd stop, Jimmie surmised, beside another of these narrow cracks in the flow. Such fissures, caused by vegetation which had obstructed the once active lava, criss-crossed here and there.

Clouds parted and the moon came out. Cushman snapped off his flash. A bat went winging by. Dimly Jimmie could see a wall of palms straight ahead. It was the far edge of the flow. Maybe Cushman was heading for some bushy swamp.

BUT the trader, fifty yards short of the palm trees, called halt. Here was a deep seam in the lava, although barely a yard wide at the top. The snag of a *fau* tree reached upward from it, its naked arms stretched in stubborn protest against this ravage of its element.

He too, thought Jimmie, was marked for burial here. Cushman could riddle him, push him into the crack, cover him with rocks and be gone. So it was a last ditch. Here Jimmie must force the fight. The shotgun was at his back. Nevertheless Jimmie whirled and made a snatch for the barrel.

Cushman stepped back one pace, aimed at Jimmie's head, and pulled the trigger.

The response was a click.

Cushman squeezed the other trigger. Again only a click. Then Jimmie was on him. His fingers got a grip at Cushman's throat. His knee smacked into the man's groin. The impact of his charge flung Cushman backward and both men went down there, Jimmie on top.

"Umph!" Jimmie pounded his stiffest punch into Cushman's face. *"Umph!"* Another. Jimmie pummeled with both hands and kicked with his knees. No quarter for this fellow. He rocked the man's head, jarring it time and again against the rock.

Even after Cushman stopped fighting back Jimmie kept raining shocks on him. He had to make sure. He gave him one last pounding. The trader was out, cold.

Jimmie got weakly to his feet. His breath came in gasps. He kicked the sho gun out of reach. The man might al have a pistol. Searching him, Jimm found only a knife. What to do now

The main thing was to recover the co and deliver it to the law.

Jimmie lacked strength, though, to car in both the gold and Cushman. He d cided to truss Cushman up, and let t police take him in later.

So Jimmie ripped off Cushman's duc and used the knife to cut them into bel wide strips. Knotting a rope from thes he bound the man's wrists and ankle Then he dragged him to the *fau* sna The dragging partially revived Cushma He was still too dazed, though, to mak a struggle.

Jimmie lashed him to the snag. He wa thorough. Not the faintest chance, Jimm knew, that the man could free himsel The slight breeze would keep away th mosquitoes. Cushman wouldn't suffer to much till morning, and by then polic would have released him.

About to turn away, Jimmie saw th shotgun. Why had it twice misfired Jimmie picked it up and saw that eac chamber was charged with a twelve-gaug shell. The hammer had dented the center fire caps of both shells. Yet there'd bee no explosions.

Something odd about these shells! N odor of powder about them. Jimmie ex amined them closely. From the way wad ding was put in, the shells were not fac tory-made. Home-packed shells. Wh would Cushman make his own shells?"

A similar shell, Jimmie recalled, ha been found on the murdered Ching Foy On a hunch, Jimmie split one of the shell with his knife. He shook out wadding an powder.

But no, it wasn't powder. It didn't fee like powder. It was not granular, bu gummy.

A sniff told Jimmie it was opium. Idea began swarming. Cushman had bee smuggling in opium for sale to plantatio labor. The trick was to conceal the nar cotic in shotgun shells, the shells kep

hand ostensibly for hunting pigeons in e bush.

No doubt Cushman did have bona fide ells for that purpose. But tonight, atching up his weapon in hurry and citement to invade Cockroach Inn, the an apparently had delved into the wrong x of shells. Opium instead of powder. Jimmie grinned. He put the shells back the gun, dropping the firearm right ere as evidence. Then he was off at a n across the lava barrens. After half mile, in the moon glow, he found the evice of cache. Jimmie lowered himself to it and began tossing rocks off the ck.

WHEN a voice challenged him. Jimmie was shoulder deep in the crevice. Figes emerged from the gloom. Bellamy nd Shoop. Then a half dozen native olicemen. Two of these carried lanterns.

"Well, here you are!" Shoop's voice was arsh and accusing. "A rum play, young llow. You might have known you ouldn't get away with it."

Jimmie didn't feel like being bullied. I'm not trying," he lashed back, "to get way with anything."

"Oh, no? Hear that, Bellamy? He's not ying to get away with anything. He's ist playing pussy wants a corner."

The magistrate's bushy eyebrows raised uizzically. He said nothing. Shoop eached down and took the sack. His hand elved in and pulled out gold coins.

Bellamy whistled. "And I thought wabber was spoofing us!"

"I sent him to get you, didn't I?" mmie climbed defiantly out of the hole. "He says you did," Shoop admitted. But when we got there you'd pulled a in out."

"Don't be a sap!" Jimmie protested. e told them about being held up and arched away by Cushman.

"We found tracks," Bellamy said. "Two en, one behind the other."

"He was only a step back of me," mmie insisted, "and he had a shotgun." However he realized the tracks wouldn't prove this. Cushman might have been pursuing at a hundred or more yards.

"I can prove I've been half a mile beyond here," Jimmie said, "by taking you to Cushie. I left him tied to a snag."

"Lead the way," Bellamy said gravely.

Two natives were left to stand by the loot sack. The rest of them hurried on. "We're armed," Shoop warned Jimmie. "So don't try any funny business."

"You're funny enough," Jimmie flung back, "for both of us." He could see, though, that his position wasn't any too convincing. When they released Cushman at the snag, the trader would no doubt have some fine story of his own.

The snag loomed in front of them. And Jimmie stared in dismay. This was the place, all right. But Cushman wasn't here.

He had disappeared. So had the shotgun. There wasn't even a rag of duck cloth left to verify the version offered by Jimmie.

Shoop's scarred face was like iron. "No more ribbing us, kid. He followed you, all right. But what did you do with him?"

"I left him right here, tied tight."

Bellamy shouted, in case Cushman, having escaped, might still be within hearing. There was no answer. "Maybe he took a short cut back to the beach." The magistrate seemed a trifle more inclined than Shoop to credit Jimmie's testimony.

"More likely," Shoop argued, "we'll find him dead in one of these lava cracks. I think he caught up with this fellow, and got croaked for his pains." He set his four natives to searching in nearby crevices.

"Let's reserve judgment," Bellamy said, "until we find if Cushman got back home."

In a short while the party turned homeward. Daybreak was tinting the reefs when they arrived at Cushman's store. Cushman wasn't there.

"He might be at Wythe's," Bellamy said.

At the deputy commissioner's bungalow they found Wythe up, waiting for them. "No," he said, "I haven't seen Cushman."

The trader couldn't be found. A score of native villagers were recruited and sent into the bush.

"We find nothing," a sergeant reported at noon.

JIMMIE was still being questioned by island officials. Bellamy turned to him regretfully. "It gives me no choice—except to hold you on suspicion of murder."

"But you've no case!" Jimmie exploded.

The magistrate gave a helpless gesture. "On the contrary, we've rather a complete case except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"The *corpus delicti.*"

Shoop broke in harshly. "That's all we need, Cushman's body. If we find him murdered on or near those lava barrens, you're as good as convicted."

Jimmie's face flamed. "Listen, you fools! He had opium in those shotgun shells. If he hadn't pulled that boner, I'd be the *corpus delicti* myself. Why don't you search his store for opium?"

Wythe spoke up quietly, his cane flicking toward Cushman's store. "We already have, Powell. On the strength of your testimony we've gone through his store thoroughly. No opium there, in or out of shotgun shells."

"The first hearing," Bellamy announced, "will be at nine in the morning."

Swabber Wally edged into the group. He came loyally to Jimmie's elbow. " 'E's on the level, I tell yer. It was 'im sent me fer the police."

"That's in his favor," Bellamy conceded. "Still, when we got there he was gone. So was the gold. And so, now, is Cushman. He admits a desperate fight with Cushman near where we found him hiding the gold. So if we find Cushman dead by violence out there, it's murder. Hold them in custody, Shoop."

"Me, too?" Wally whined.

"Right. We've got to hold you for a material witness."

" 'Ave a 'eart, gov'nor!"

But along with Jimmie, Wally was taken to the jail. They were both immured in the single large cell there. The beachcomber slumped in gloom on a cot. Jimmie stood at the window and stared fiercely out at the beach.

"They're frimin' us, mitey," Wally wailed.

"You're safe enough," Jimmie said bitterly. "You're only a witness. I'm the guy they think killed Cushman."

"But yer didn't, mitey. So yer dawn't need to worry."

"I'm all right unless they find a corpse. If they do find one, I'm sunk."

"But 'ow could they find 'im that way, if yer didn't do the blighter in?"

"Get this, Wally. He didn't break free himself. I left him tied tight, beaten to a pulp and only half conscious. It means he was released. Someone untied him and took him away."

"But who would do that?"

"Why not any one of three hundred Chinese coolies? They had it in for him. They're pretty sure he killed Chong Foy. A clanny lot, those Chinese. So when they found Cushie tied up in a neat package, they grabbed him."

"And did 'im in?"

Jimmie shrugged. "He can't be found, can he? Nor any trace even of rag ropes there. Figure it out yourself."

"But why," Swabber wondered, "can't the police find opium in 'is tridin' store?"

"Because Cushie's too cute to keep it there. It'd mean at least a ten-year stretch to be caught with it. So he'd keep it in some clever cache outside."

JIMMIE heard Anne's voice calling. Then he saw her pale, distressed face at the window. He went quickly to the bars. "They think I killed Cushman."

"I'm sure you didn't, Jimmie." She was frightened, because of his arrest, but her eyes showed fight.

"It'll be tough to prove, though," he admitted.

"We *must* prove it. I'll do anything to help, Jimmie."

"There's nothing you can do."

Her hands reached through the bars and he took them. "Where do you think he is, Jimmie. I mean Cushman."

He told her his theory of Chinese vengeance. "Maybe they've left him murdered in the bush, Anne. Or maybe they're keeping him alive somewhere, trying to third degree him into confessing about Chong Foy."

"The man we found in the cart road?"

Jimmie nodded. "We can bet the rest of the Chinese aren't forgetting that. And I've heard they've got ways of their own for settling scores."

"And it'll be blamed on you, Jimmie! Oh, I've got to help."

He thought a moment. "Only one way you could help me, Anne."

"How?"

"By talking to some of the Chinese on your place."

"What must I say to them?"

"Well, you might try to work up sympathy for a common enemy of Cushman's. If you remind 'em I've beat Cushman up twice, it ought to make 'em like me. If they like me, maybe they'll give me a break."

"I'll go to them, Jimmie," she promised.

He warned her anxiously, "But don't take any chances, Anne."

"Tell me, what do you think really happened? I mean, how did it all start?"

"An American fugitive started it, I think, when he came here with some gold coin. A good guess is that Cushman found out he had it, and maybe tried to blackmail him for a cut."

"But how would Cushman find out?"

"Lots of ways. Maybe he saw a news picture of this fugitive. Or intercepted a circular to the police here. Let's guess he was turning the heat on Tromble for a cut, when Tromble stopped it by getting something on Cushman."

She was confused. "But what would he get on Cushman?"

"Opium traffic, for instance. So when Cushie couldn't get away with blackmail any longer, to get the gold he murdered Tromble."

Anne shuddered. "I remember—it was horrible!"

"Of course we can't prove any of this, Anne. But it fits what Cushman said when he held me up in the barroom: 'Thanks for finding it for me.' And I know that Tromble was nervous that last night when he drank at the bar with Dr. Baum. He knew Cushman was watching him every time he left the hotel. So he didn't dare bury his loot in the bush. It must be hid inside. Where? He was the last guest there. Lulu Belle was about to close the place and go away.

"His foot was on a brass bar rail and it gave him an idea. He asked Baum if the rail was hollow. Then Baum went home. Later, with the house dark and Lulu Belle asleep upstairs, Tromble slipped in to cache the gold in the bar rail. Before morning he was murdered in bed. And ever since then, Cushie's been prowling for the loot."

Swabber Wally piped from his cot. "Not only 'em, but the blarsted Chinese."

Anne was mystified. "Were the Chinese looking for the gold too, Jimmie?"

"Opium, more likely," Jimmie thought.

"You mean Tromble hid opium there too?"

"Doesn't seem logical. I can't figure that angle, Anne."

"I'll go to the coolie quarters," she said, "and see what I can find out. Goodnight, Jimmie."

"Goodnight, sweetheart. And be careful." Jimmie kissed her hands and she was gone.

CHAPTER VII

WALK SOFTLY TOWARD A MURDERER

DARKNESS had come and Wally was already dozing. Jimmie took the other cot and lay brooding. His brain buzzed. Cockroaches, gold coin, opium! Chinese faces, peering from cobwebs, haunted him. Yet he kept doggedly concentrating. From the tangle of these shadowy elements he must weave a pattern.

A pearl brought here by Swabber Wally. His own stolen wage. Shotgun shells. A copra knife on the bar there—and found

plunged into Chong Foy! Floors and walls crawling with insect invaders, fed maliciously by someone.

All night Jimmie lay wide awake and thinking. Dawn glimmered through the bars and he got wearily to his feet. He shook the tramp. "Maybe I've got it, Wally. Not that I can prove anything. It just fits."

Wally sat up, drowsily. "Wot fits, mitey?"

"The pieces."

"But if yer can't prove it, wot's the good?"

Jimmie shrugged. "No good at all, I'm afraid. Except that if I'm right, the Chinese are on my side."

"I 'eard yer tell the girl to 'ave a tark with 'em."

A guard came in with breakfast. When he was gone Jimmie said: "Listen, Wally, and see if you can shoot any holes in it. You heard how I doped out the Tromble angle?"

Swabber nodded.

"Begin from there, then. Let's say Cushie starts prowling the joint just as soon as Lulu Belle vacates. Leary of competition, he doesn't want anyone else in there. A ship drops anchor every now and then, and sailors come ashore. Some of them wander to Lulu Belle's old bar and find it deserted. They explore curiously. And this worries Cushie."

"Aye," Wally agreed. "'E'd be afried they'd 'appen on to that gold."

"So he changed the sign, on a dark night, to Cockroach Inn. With molasses and mango juice he lures in armies of insects. No human, for mere idle curiosity, is likely to go in after that. Which gives Cushie a clear field for himself."

"Until I show up." Wally grinned.

"Right. And you had an especial reason to go in there, because you're the husband of the absent owner. When Cushie finds out you're Lulu Belle's husband, he's suspicious. He wonders if Lulu Belle knew about Tromble's gold, and sent you back for it. So he pays a call while you're sleeping. If you've found the cache you'll have gold coins in your pockets. He searches you. All he finds is a pearl."

"Which 'e tikes fer 'imself, blarst 'im!"

"Cushie tries to drive you out with cockroaches, and almost succeeds. He gets you to where you only go in there when it rains. Rest of the time you're on the beach. Cushie keeps prowling the place by night, searching, searching—

"Until certain furtive customers notice it. Chinese coming by night to his store for opium. A dozen times they see Cushie slip over in the dark to Cockroach Inn. Why would he go there? They know nothing about any gold. But they do know that Cushie must have an outside cache for his opium. He wouldn't dare keep it on a shelf at the store. So they assume he keeps it hid at Cockroach Inn."

"Blime!" approved Swabber. "No 'oles in it so far, mitey!"

"So the Chinese," Jimmie resumed, "begin prowls of their own. Looking for the opium.

"That brings us to the time I came here two months ago. I take Anne out canoe riding. A customer, Chong Foy, comes to Cushie for opium. The opium is in shotgun shells. But two shells have become confused. Cushie has loaded his shotgun with two opium shells by mistake, and the two powder shells which should have gone into the shotgun get sold to Chong Foy. Cushie, with a sour eye on Anne and me in the canoe out there, doesn't know he's made this miscue.

"Chong takes the purchase to his hutch at the plantation coolie quarters and breaks one of the shells open. Out comes something brown and granular, and he wonders if it's opium in a strange form. It doesn't smell like opium. He holds it to a candle light, sifting it from hand to hand, and then—"

"Blewie. It blows up in 'is fice!" supplied Wally.

"We conclude it did," Jimmie said, "because Chong was later found dead with a burnt hand and powder pits on the chin. The blowup wouldn't kill him, of course, but it'd make him sore at Cushman. So

he hikes back to complain. Cushman isn't at the store. But a light shows at Cockroach Inn. Chong goes there and braces him. There's a row. And Cushie's got a grouch on that night."

"Account of you bein' out with Anne?" Wally suggested.

"And on account of him being fed up with running into Chinese at the hotel. He knew they'd been prowling there. This time he cracked down on Chong Foy and—"

" 'Old on, mitey," Wally cut in, " 'e wouldn't kill 'em would 'e? 'E might slap 'is fice and kick im to 'ell outer there, but 'e wouldn't kill the blighter just fer complinin' abort them shells."

JIMMIE considered this fairly. "I believe you're right, Wally. I've slipped up somewhere. There's some motive or contact missing. Let's skip it. But Chong Foy *was* murdered that night. That finishes it, except that two months later I take a few punches at Cushie in his store. I get thirty days, am bailed out and stumble on Tromble's loot. Cushie sticks me up with a shotgun—which he doesn't know is loaded with what he meant to sell Chong Foy."

"Orl of which," Wally fretted, "yer can't prove."

"No one," Jimmie admitted, "can prove it except Cushman."

"And 'e bloody well won't."

A key rattled and the cell door opened. Shoop and two of his brown sergeants came in.

"You haven't picked up Cushman?" Jimmie asked.

Shoop stared hard. "*You* ought to know. What crack in that lava bed did you drop him in? Come clean."

It was no use arguing "I want the nearest American consul," Jimmie demanded, "notified of my arrest."

"He'll be notified by the next boat. But it won't do you any good if we find that *corpus delicti.*"

"What degree murder," Jimmie asked, "are you charging me with?"

Shoop's stare hardened. "By New Zealand law we don't have degrees of murder. Murder's murder," he announced grimly, "and the penalty's death."

"I'm entitled to a lawyer," Jimmie maintained.

"You won't need one just now. That's what I came in to tell you. Bellamy's decided to postpone the hearing."

"Until when?"

"Until we find the body." The police commander turned brusquely and went out.

Later, Wythe called. Worry lined his thin, sensitive face. "A plague take you Yankees!" he complained. "You make trouble everywhere you go." He sat down and puffed uneasily on a cigarette.

Jimmie said wearily, "It was Cushman made all the trouble."

Wythe swished his cane, demanding sharply: "If you know anything to throw a new light on this, let's have it."

Jimmie gave him the same patchwork of conclusions he had already given Swabber Wally. Wythe, leaning forward with chin resting on cane, listened intently.

"I want to be fair." He frowned. "But you've nothing to prove it. On the other hand, Shoop's official report is supported by witnesses."

"What witnesses?"

"Swabber Wally who saw you find the gold. Also Shoop, Bellamy and native police who caught you hiding it."

"I wasn't hiding it."

"You had it in a hole. And Cushman, whose tracks trail yours, has disappeared. You admit fighting with him over the gold. There was already bad blood between you two, account of the McQuaid girl. In the event we find Cushman murdered, it means your indictment."

"If you'd spend less time looking for dead men," Jimmie retorted, "and more time looking for an opium cache, you'd get somewhere."

Wythe gave a sigh. "There's no opium at Cushman's. Every inch has been gone over there. And we've got fifty natives beating the bush for his body."

Since Jimmie could offer no further defense, the deputy commissioner left him. Hours dragged by. Jimmie paced the jail restlessly, more convinced each moment that Cushman would never be found alive.

At sundown Anne came. "I've talked with a dozen of the Chinese, Jimmie."

"What did they tell you?"

"Nothing," she confided through the bars in a whisper. "But by the way they avoid me I'm sure they know something. I found a crew of them jabbering in a drying shed. They all ran out when they saw me. I found others and begged them not to let you be punished for something they've done themselves. They say they know nothing. But they look all keyed up and guilty."

"Well, maybe you didn't waste your time, Anne. But don't go near them again. I feel certain they've killed Cushman to avenge Chong Foy."

"They'll never admit it, Jimmie."

Anne left him, and again Jimmie passed a sleepless night. He was haggard by morning when Shoop looked in. "You're still in luck," the police commander reported. "I mean we haven't found him yet. But we will."

"Where?"

"Who knows? Maybe a tide 'll wash him ashore. Or we'll dig him out of some crack in those lava beds. We've doubled the search crews. And we don't mean to give up."

The stubborn angle of his jaw wasn't reassuring.

No stone or tuft of sod would be left unturned. It might take weeks, months. But they'd find that body. Jimmie sat down with his head between his hands. Damn those coolies! Their pussyfooting vengeance had woven a noose for him.

"Tike it easy, mitey," advised Wally, "Miybe somethin' 'll turn up."

THE day passed and nothing turned up. Throughout the evening Jimmie waited hopefully for Anne. But tonight even Anne failed him. He stood watching the moon rise over palm trees. He listened to the swish of surf, nerves ragged, until past midnight. Then he threw himself wretchedly on a cot.

Swabber, as usual, was sleeping soddenly. Jimmie closed his eyes. For a long while he lay there, forlornly wakeful. A mosquito buzzed. Then he heard a stealthy step on the path outside his window.

Jimmie sat up quickly. It might be Anne out there. Before he could move, something heavy and globular came flying through the window.

It was a ripe coconut, hulled, and its brown shell cracked when it landed on the cement floor. Jimmie ran to the bars, heard retreating steps in the darkness. Whoever had tossed in the nut was now gone.

The cell candle was still lighted. With it, Jimmie kneeled beside the cracked coconut. A hole, he noticed, had been cut in the top of it. He shook it. There was no swish of milk within. Inserting a finger he felt a paper there. A message? Why should anyone so mysteriously toss him a message from the night?

Jimmie gave a pound on the hard jail floor and the shell smashed. A small rolled note fell out. He held it to the candle. Breathless, he saw two columns of Chinese characters.

A tip from the Chinese! Anne's intervention must have borne fruit after all. Jimmie yelled, "Wake up, Wally. We've got friends."

The tramp sat up. "Wot's stirrin', mitey?"

He could make nothing of the message.

"But we'll get someone who can," Jimmie said, "if we have to yell the roof off."

A sleepy sergeant came when Jimmie banged on the cell door.

"Bring the commissioner," Jimmie demanded. "And the magistrate. And Shoop. Rout 'em out."

"They are sleep," the native answered, yawning. "More better wait morning."

"No. Now," Jimmie stormed. "I'll keep bawling till you bring 'em."

Although it outraged all precedents, the policeman was finally persuaded. He

aroused his superiors one by one. First Bellamy, then Wythe and then Shoop arrived in poor humor at the jail.

Shoop had a flashlight. "What's all the row?" he growled.

"Read this." Jimmie exposed the Chinese message.

No one could translate. But when Jimmie told them it had come flying through the bars in a coconut, Wythe's interest quickened. "Fetch my Chinese house boy here," he directed.

The house boy was sent for. Being shown the message, he translated:

"Go to Cockroach Inn. Him you seek is there. Walk softly. Listen to his words of wisdom."

"The devil!" exclaimed Wythe.

"A break for me!" Jimmie grinned. "If Cushie can talk words of wisdom, he's not dead. And if he's not dead, I didn't kill him."

"It sounds balmy," Bellamy murmured. "Why would Cushman be at Cockroach Inn?"

"I'll go see if he's there," Shoop offered.

But Wythe said: "Wait, we'll all go. And take a police guard along. Might be a squeeze of some sort, for all we know."

"Take me, too," Jimmie urged. "The message came to me, you know."

Wythe gave a nod to Shoop. "All right. Take him along under guard. Leave the tramp here. Get lanterns and tell your sergeants to come armed."

IN A FEW minutes they were trooping toward Cockroach Inn. They passed the trading store, dark and silent at this hour. Jimmie judged it couldn't be much before dawn.

Beach shell crackled underfoot. "It said to walk softly," Jimmie whispered to Wythe.

Walking softly, they approached the inn's front entrance. The shabby old structure had never seemed more uninviting. No sound or light came from it.

"A blind haul," Shoop predicted. "Rigged up, I'll wager, to give Powell a chance to leg it."

"We've an eye on him," Wythe said. "He won't get away."

"'Walk softly'," Jimmie quoted again. "And listen to words of wisdom."

Wythe led with a lantern. As the others followed him into the cobwebbed lobby, only a scampering rat greeted them.

They turned to the left into the old barroom. Wythe, in the lead, played his flash about it. The disattached brass rail still lay askew on the floor there. On the bar lay a shotgun. The sight of it transfixed Jimmie. It was the same double-barreled firearm with which Cushman had—

Before Jimmie could remark on it, a scream came from rearward. It was a cry to curdle blood. The intruders stood still, frozen by it, and gave ear.

Again the scream. It was Cushman's voice. Terror was in it. And tortured agony.

"I didn't do it!" shrieked the voice. "Blast you, I didn't. It was Shoop, I tell you! I wasn't even there. You know I was here. Stop, blast you! You'll kill me!"

The screams came from beyond the door which gave into Tromble's old bedroom. Wythe, after a stunned moment, made a rush for it. As he crashed against it, the voice inside stopped.

Shoop! He was behind Jimmie. But Jimmie glimpsed his reflection in the cracked bar mirror. The man's saber-scarred face was ghastly. He was trembling, his brow beaded with guilt.

Shoop! Two of them in on it. Cushman and Shoop!

Wythe had kicked the bedroom door open. The room was pitch dark, until Wythe's flashlight shot a beam in there. Something he saw in the circle of his bull's-eye shocked Wythe to a pallor even whiter than Shoop's. Jimmie crowded to his elbow. So completely unnerved was Wythe that his arm shook and it made the beam of his flash dance crazily over exhibits exposed in the room.

Jimmie took one look, then stood like an icy image.

He saw Cushman.

Cushman, naked except for a breech

cloth, lay on the bed. Stout cords pinioned his arms and legs, stretching each of them diagonally to a corner bedpost. No captors were in evidence. But vaguely Jimmie was aware of retreating steps at the rear.

It was the bed of Tromble's murder. And now what paralyzed Jimmie, and Wythe, and Bellamy, and the native police, was the peculiarly sinister system of pressure which tormentors had inflicted upon Cushman. The man had been daubed from head to foot with treacle. At least a gallon of it, some saccharine mixture of mango juice and molasses, had been smeared on his nude and helpless flesh.

Cockroaches, a legion of them, crawled over him. He was black with them. They swarmed on his legs, his body, his face.

And Cushman writhed in his bonds, screaming: "Cut me loose!"

Wythe went swiftly to work and freed him. Cushman was more than half demented when they dragged him from the bed.

Shoop, still chalk white, pushed to the fore. "It's no go, Wythe," he protested hoarsely. "What a man says under torture won't hold by law."

The commissioner nodded gravely. And Cushman reclaimed part of his wits to deny shrilly: "I didn't mean it. I didn't do anything. Neither did Shoop. They drove me crazy, blast them!"

Wythe's reaction confused Jimmie. "I'm convinced you're in the clear, Cushman," he said. "And Shoop too, of course. They tried to make you say you'd killed Chong Foy?"

"And I didn't."

"You weren't even there."

"No," cried Cushman wildly.

"Weren't even where?" Jimmie asked. He couldn't understand why Wythe was accepting denials so readily.

"I don't know anything about it!" babbled Cushman.

Wythe turned to his police commander. "I'll leave him with you, Shoop. Talk to him. Try to find out what happened. Poor chap! He must have gone through hell."

"I'll get the straight of it," Shoop promised. Jimmie saw that he was intensely relieved.

"And the rest of us," said Wythe, "will try to run down those Chinese."

Leaving Shoop with Cushman, he herded the others from the house. Outside the commissioner whispered: "Hurry along. I'm just trying to beat Shoop home, that's all."

Jimmie grinned his approval. The strategy was clear.

AT SHOOP'S cottage, in the false back of a desk, they found evidence. Opium in shotgun shells. A thousand dollars in gold coin, presumably blackmailed from Tromble. A small pearl stolen from Swabber Wally. Even Jimmie's seven guineas was there.

"It patches up that rough spot in my theory," Jimmie said to Wythe.

"About Cushman not having enough motive to kill Chong Foy?"

"That's it. Remember, tonight we heard Cushman screaming: 'I wasn't even there. I was here.' And he accused Shoop. It means Cushman, at Cockroach Inn, only cuffed Chong Foy and kicked him out. But not before Chong had time to snatch a knife from the bar in self defense. Then Chong went tearing to the other partner in the opium traffic—Shoop."

"You mean he came here to Shoop's house."

"And began raising some rumpus about being cheated in an opium buy. And do you remember what was going on at that very moment, next door?"

Wythe harked back. "Yes. McQuaid was at my house, next door, complaining about opium. He said whenever a ship came in, his coolies were disorganized for a week."

"So you and McQuaid," Jimmie pointed out, "might have heard the rumpus next door. Shoop couldn't risk it. To shut Chong up, he cracked down. Remember the gash on his head. Killed him with a gun barrel, maybe. Then had to get rid

of him. And the man's knife. So he took 'em to the cart road."

"This opium charge," Wythe muttered, "is cinched on 'em anyway." To Bellamy he added: "Let's pick 'em up."

The magistrate was a bit nervous. "They'll have noticed by now that we've got Shoop's house ablaze with lights. It means they know they're cornered. The two of them might be hard to handle."

"Rout out the full guard," Wythe snapped.

Dawn was breaking as Banyan Island's full *Fita-Fita* guard, armed with carbines, marched upon Cockroach Inn. A sergeant had been left outside there. He reported that Shoop and Cushman were still within, talking.

"Rigging up a story," Wythe thought.

He went in at the front with Jimmie and two policemen. The door of the bedroom was closed. Low voices came from beyond it.

As Wythe advanced across the barroom, Jimmie caught his arm.

"Careful!" he warned. "It's gone."

A double-barreled shotgun had been on the bar. It was not there now.

"Means they've got it," Jimmie whispered. "Better watch out."

Two criminals with a shotgun, one of them half crazed, were not to be intruded upon without caution.

The house was surrounded.

Wythe then stood in the barroom, shouting: "Come out, Shoop. And Cushman. With your hands bloody well up!"

There was no answer.

"No use holding out," Wythe yelled. "We've searched Shoop's desk and found everything."

For half a minute more the bedroom was quiet. Then a shotgun boomed. First one barrel, then the other.

Wythe rushed the door, kicked it open.

Jimmie was at his heels. They saw Cushman and his confederate on the floor there, both dead. The shotgun, twice discharged, lay between them.

Wythe looked down at them grimly. His white lips murmured, "Which one of them shot the other, and then himself, we'll never know."

●

Out on the beach, Jimmie came face to face with Duncan McQuaid.

The planter offered a hand. "Mayhap I've misjudged ye, laddie," he said.

"Think nothing of it," said Jimmie.

"We'll be havin' chicken broth for supper," announced the planter.

Finding Anne under a flame tree, Jimmie took her in his arms. "I'm coming along home with you, precious.

"And after that, we're goin' on our honeymoon."

He kissed her lips in full view of McQuaid. "Where would you suggest?"

She looked over his shoulder. And even in his arms she couldn't help a shiver. "Any place," she whispered, "except Cockroach Inn."

From the wall, the figure of Satan, surrounded by the Fates, stared balefully dowr

Seven Footprints to Satan

By A. MERRITT

Start now this greatest of all stories of mystery, adventure, and terror

JIM KIRKHAM, engineer, globe-trotter and adventurer, has just returned from his latest exploit—securing a fabulous jade treasure for a New York millionaire. He is conscious constantly of furtive eyes watching his every move; and determines to force his enemies into the open by going for a nocturnal stroll in the city's deserted, tomblike financial section.

Here he is accosted and virtually kidnaped by one Dr. Consardine, aided by two accomplices—Walter Cobham and the girl called Eve. He is taken to a monstrous palace of a house and introduced to his captor—an extraordinary genius of crime who is known simply as Satan.

Satan deals in souls, and the proposition he makes to Kirkham is a gamble—of life or living death, of fabulous power or abject thralldom. In a huge chamber, on a dais, stands a throne, twenty-one steps above the floor. Seven of these are marked. Any aspirant must set foot on at least four of these footprint-marked steps. Four of them are good; three evil. If Kirkham steps on the four good steps, Satan's resources and power are his to command. If he steps on one evil step, he must do Satan one service; if on two, he must serve for a year; if on three, his life is at Satan's command.

Kirkham, who is telling the story, has no choice. He must take the gamble. Satan and Consardine lead him away. . . .

This story began in last week's Argosy

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE FOOTPRINTS OF SATAN

THE chamber was suffused with a dim amber light from some concealed source. Its domed roof arched a hundred feet above me. Only one wall was straight; the others curved out from it like the inner walls of a vast bubble. The straight wall cut across what was the three-quarter arc of a huge hemisphere.

That wall was all of some lustrous green stone, malachite, I judged. And upon its face was carved in the old Egyptian style a picture.

The subject was the Three Fates, the Mœra of the ancient Greeks, the Parca of the Romans, the Norns of the Norsemen. There was Clotho with the distaff upon which were spun the threads of human destiny, Lachesis guiding the threads, and Atropos with her shears that cut the threads when the trio so willed. Above the Fates hovered the face of Satan.

One of his hands grasped that of Clotho, he seemed to whisper to Lachesis, his other hand guided that of the Fate who wielded the shears. The lines of the four figures were in blues, vermilions, and vivid greens. The eyes of Satan were not upon the threads whose destinies he was controlling. They were looking out over the temple.

And whoever the unknown genius who had cut that picture, he had created a marvelous likeness. By some trick, the eyes blazed out of the stone with the same living, jewel-like brilliancy of those of the man who called himself Satan.

The floor of the temple lifted toward the back in row upon row of seats carved out of black stone and arranged like those of the old Roman amphitheater.

But all of this I noted only after I had forced my gaze away from the structure that dominated the whole strange place. This was a flight of semi-circular steps that swept out in gradually diminishing arcs from the base of the malachite wall. There were twenty-one of them, the lowest, I estimated, a hundred feet wide and the highest about thirty. They were each about a foot high and some three feet deep. They were of inky black stone.

At their top was a low dais upon which stood two elaborately carved thrones—one of black wood, and the other, resting on a pedestal which brought its seat well above the first, apparently of dull, yellow gold. The black throne was bare. Over the back of the golden throne was a strip of royal purple velvet; upon its seat was a cushion of the same royal purple.

And upon that cushion rested a gorgeous crown and scepter, ablaze with immense jewels.

Ranged down each side of the one and twenty steps were seven men in white robes shaped like the burnooses of the Arabs. If they were Arabs they were of a tribe I had never come across; to me they appeared more like Persians. Their faces were gaunt and of a peculiar waxen pallor. Each carried in his right hand a snakelike rope, noosed like a lariat.

From every third ebon step a footprint shone out, the footprint of a child outlined as though by living fire.

There were seven of them, shining out with an unearthly brilliancy as though they themselves were alive and poised to march up those steps.

I had looked first at the crown and scepter, and the sight of them had fanned within me such desire as I had never known; a burning lust for possession of them and the power that went with them; a lust that shook me like a fever.

I HAD looked next at those gleaming marks of a babe's feet, and the sight of them had stirred within me an inexplicable awe and terror and loathing as great as had been the desire which the sight of them had swiftly numbed.

And suddenly I heard Satan's voice:

"Sit, James Kirkham!"

There was an armed chair, oddly shaped, almost against the circular wall and close beside the edge of the first curving step. It was somewhat like a lesser throne. I dropped into it, glad of its support.

Instantly, bands of steel sprang from the arms and circled my elbows; other bands bound my ankles, and from the back where my head rested a veil dropped, covering my face. Its lower edge, thick and softly padded, was drawn tight across my lips.

I was held fast, gagged, my face hidden, all in an instant. I made no attempt to struggle. These, I realized, were the "precautions" of which my host had warned me. The bonds held but did not constrict, the silencing pad was not uncomfortable, the veil was of a material which though it hid my face enabled me to see clearly.

Satan was at the foot of the steps. His enormous body was covered from neck to feet by a black cloak. He paced slowly up the flight. As he trod upon the first step the white-robed, rope-bearing men bent before him, low. Not until he had seated himself upon the black throne did they straighten.

The amber light dulled and went out. Before there could be anything but a thin slice of darkness, a strong white light beat down upon thrones and steps. Its edge formed a sharp semi-circle three yards away from the curve of the first. It bathed Satan, the fourteen guardians and myself. Under it the seven footprints leaped out more brilliantly, seeming to be straining against some invisible leash and eager to follow their master. The unwinking eyes of the man on the black throne and their counterparts in the stone behind him glittered.

I heard a movement at the rear of the temple among the seats of stone. There were rustlings as of many people seating themselves, faint whisperings of panels sliding back and forth in the black walls, openings of hidden entrances through which this unseen audience was streaming.

Who they were, what they were—I could not see. The semi-circle of light glaring upon steps and thrones formed an impenetrable curtain beyond which was utter darkness.

A gong sounded. Silence fell. Whatever that audience, the doors were now closed upon them! the curtain ready to rise.

Now I saw, high up and halfway between roof and floor, a globe gleam forth like a little moon. It was at the edge of the white light and as I watched, its left half darkened. The right half shone undimmed, the black half was outlined by a narrow rim of radiance.

Abruptly the greater light went out again. For an instant only was the temple in darkness. The light blazed forth once more.

But now he who called himself Satan was not alone on the dais. Beside him stood a figure that the devil himself might have summoned from hell!

IT WAS a black man naked except for a loin cloth. His legs were short and spindly; his shoulders inordinately wide, his arms long, and upon his shoulders and arms the muscles and sinews stood out like blackened withes of thick rope. The face was flat-nosed, the jaw protruding, brutish and apelike. Apelike, too, were the close-set beady eyes that burned like demon lights. His mouth was a slit, and upon his face was the stamp of a ravening cruelty.

He held in one hand a noosed cord, thin and long and braided as though made of woman's hair. In his loin cloth was a slender knife.

A sighing quavered out of the darkness beyond me as from scores of tightened throats.

Again the gong clanged.

Into the circle of light came two men. One was Consardine; the other a tall, immaculately dressed and finely built man of about forty. He looked like a highly bred, cultured English gentleman. And as he faced the black throne I heard a murmur as of surprise and pity well up from the hidden audience.

There was a debonair unconcern in his poise, but I saw his face twitch as he glanced at the horror standing beside Satan. He drew a cigarette from his case and lighted it; in that action was a touch of bravado that betrayed him; nor could he control the faint tremor of the hand that held the match. Nevertheless, he took a

deliberate inhalation and met the eyes of Satan squarely.

"Cartright." The voice of Satan broke the silence. "You have disobeyed me. You have tried to thwart me. You have dared to set your will against mine. By your disobedience you almost wrecked a plan I had conceived. You thought to reap gain and to escape me. You even had it in your mind to betray me. I do not ask you if all this is so. I know it is so. I do not ask you why you did it. You did it. That is enough."

"I have no intention of offering any defense, Satan," answered the man called Cartright, coolly enough. "I might urge, however, that any inconvenience to which I have put you is entirely your own fault. You claim perfection of judgment. Yet in me you picked a wrong tool. Is the tool to blame or the artisan if that tool which he picks cannot stand up under the task for which that artisan selects it?"

"The tool is not to blame" answered Satan. "But what does the artisan do with such a tool thereafter? He does not use it again. He destroys it."

"The perfect artisan does not," said Cartright. "He uses it thereafter for work for which it is fit."

"Not when he has more than enough good ones to choose from," said Satan.

"You have the power," Cartright replied. "Nevertheless, you know I have answered you. I am simply an error of your judgment. Or if your judgment is perfect as you boast, then you deliberately picked me to fail. In either event, punish yourself, Satan—not me!"

For a long minute the black-robed figure regarded him. Cartright met the gaze boldly.

"I ask only for justice," he said. "I ask no mercy of you, Satan."

"Not—yet!" answered Satan slowly, and the flaming eyes grew bleak and cold and once more a sighing passed me from the darkness of the temple.

There was another interminable minute of silence.

"Cartright, you *have* given me an answer," the organ voice rolled out, emotionless. "For that answer you shall be credited. You have reminded me that a wise artisan uses a faulty tool only for work it can do without breaking. That, too, I set down for you.

"Now, Cartright, this is my decree. You shall take the four steps. Now. And all of them. You shall have, first of all, your chance to win that crown and scepter and the empire of earth that they carry with them. This if the four footprints that you tread upon are the four fortunate ones.

And if you place your foot on three of the fortunate prints and on but one of mine—I forgive you. This in recognition of a certain justice in your parable of the artisan and the faulty tool."

I saw Cartright's tenseness slacken, a shadow of relief pass over his face.

"If you tread upon two of the fortunate prints and upon two of mine—then I will give you choice of a swift and merciful death or of joining my slaves of the *kehft*. In brief, Cartright, your pick between quick escape from your body or slow annihilation of your soul. And that mercy I hold out to you in recognition of your claim that the wise artisan chooses some other use for the untrustworthy tool."

Once more the sighing, and Cartright's face paled.

But still he held himself erect and met the flaming eyes.

"We come now to the last possibility—that on your journey upward you tread upon all three of my dainty little servants. In that case"—the voice chilled—"in that case, Cartright, you die. You die at the hands of Sanchal here by the cord. Not one death, Cartright. No, a thousand deaths. For slowly and with agony Sanchal's cord shall drag you to the threshold of the gates of death. Slowly and with agony he shall drag you back to life. Again and again—and again—and again—until at last your torn soul has strength to return no more and crawls whimpering over that threshold whose gates shall close upon it—forever! Such is my decree! So is my will! So shall it be!"

THE black horror had grinned evilly as he heard his name and had shaken with a ghastly gesture the cord of braided woman's hair. As for Cartright, at that dreadful sentence, the blood had drained from his face, the cigarette fallen from his fingers. He stood, all bravado gone. And Consardine, who all the while had been beside him, slipped back into the shadow, leaving him alone.

Satan pressed down a lever which stood like a slender rod between the two thrones. There was a faint whirring sound. The seven gleaming prints of a child's bare foot flashed as though fire had shot from them.

"The steps are prepared," called Satan. "Cartright, ascend!"

The white-robed men stirred; they unsling the loops of their ropes and held the nooses ready, as though to cast swiftly. The black horror thrust his head forward, mouth slavering, his talons caressing his cord.

The silence in the temple deepened—as though all within had ceased to breathe.

Now Cartright walked forward, moving slowly, studying the gleaming footprints. Satan leaned back in his throne, hands hidden beneath his robe, his huge head having disconcertingly the appearance of being bodyless, floating over the dais as the head in the stone floated above the three Norns.

And now Cartright had passed by the first print and had walked up the two intervening steps. He set without hesitation his foot upon the second gleaming mark.

Instantly a glittering duplicate of it shone out upon the white half of the moon globe. I knew that he had trodden upon one of the fortunate steps.

But Cartright, the globe hidden from him, forbidden to turn—Cartright could not know it!

He shot a swift look at Satan, seeking some sign either of triumph or chagrin. The marble face was expressionless, the eyes unchanged. Nor was there any sound from the black seats.

He walked rapidly up the next two steps and again unhesitatingly set his foot on the next print.

And again another glittered out upon the pale field of the globe. Two chances he had won! Gone from him now was the threat of the thousand deaths. At most he would have his choice of merciful extinction or that mysterious slavery I had heard Satan name.

And again he could not know!

Once more he studied the face of his tormentor for some betraying expression, some hint of how his score stood. Immobile as before, it stared at him; expressionless, too, was the face of the monstrosity with the cord.

Slowly Cartright ascended the next two steps. He hesitated before the next devilish print, for minutes—and hours they seemed to me. And now I saw that his mouth had become pinched and that little beads of sweat stood out upon his forehead.

Plainly as though he were speaking, I could follow his thoughts. Had the two prints upon which he had trodden been Satan's? And would the next condemn him to the torture of the cord? Had he trodden upon only one? Had he escaped as yet the traps that gave him over to Satan?

He could not know!

He passed that print and paced upward more slowly He stood looking down upon the fifth footprint. And then, slowly, his head began to turn!

IT WAS as though a strong hand were forcing it. The tormented brain, wrestling with the panic that urged it to look—to look behind—to see what the marks upon the noon-globe showed.

A groan came from his gray lips. He caught his head between his two hands, held it rigid and leaped upon the footprint before him.

And he stood there, gasping, like a man who has run a long race. His mouth hung open, drawing in sobbing breaths to the laboring lungs. His hair was wet, his face dripping. His haggard eyes searched Satan's—

The white field of the globe bore a third shining symbol!

Cartright had won—

And he could not know!

My own hands were shaking; my body drenched with sweat as though it were I myself who stood in his place. Words leaped to my lips—a cry to him that he need fear no more! That his torment was over. That Satan had lost. The gag stifled them.

Upon me burst full realization of all the hellish cruelty, the truly diabolic subtlety and ingenuity of this ordeal.

Cartright stood trembling. His despairing gaze ate into the impassive face now not far above him. Did I see a flicker of evil triumph pass over it, reflected on the black mask of his torturer? If so, it was gone like a swift ripple on a still pond.

Had Cartright seen it? So it must have been, for the despair upon his own face deepened and turned it into a thing of agony.

Once more his head began to turn backward with that slow and dreadful suggestion of unseen compulsion!

He swayed forward, fighting against it. He stumbled up the steps. I knew with what destroying effort he dragged his eyes down to the next shining print. He poised over it a shaking foot—

And slowly, slowly ever his head turned —back, back to the tell-tale globe!

He drew back the foot. He thrust it forward again—and again withdrew it. He sobbed. And I strained at my bonds, cursing and sobbing with him—

Now his head was half around, his face turned directly to me—

He recoiled from the print. His body swung about with the snap of a breaking spring.

He looked at the globe and saw—

The three prints upon the fortunate field!

A vast sighing went up from the black amphitheater.

"The tool again betrays its weakness!" It was Satan's voice. "Lo, deliverance was in your hands, Cartright. And like Lot's wife, you turned to look! And now you must descend—and all is to do again. But wait. Let us see if you may not have lost something far greater than deliverance. That footprint upon which you could not summon the courage to tread. What was it? I am curious to know!"

He spoke in some strange tongue to the guard at the right of the print. The man came forward and pressed his foot upon the mark.

Out upon the pale semi-disk of the globe flashed out another shimmering print!

Crown and scepter! Empire of Earth! Not only free from Satan—but his master!

All this Cartright might have won.

And he had turned to look—and lost.

A groan went up from the darkness, murmurings. They were stilled by that dreadful laughter that rolled from Satan's still lips.

"Lost! Lost!" he mocked. "Go back, Cartright. And climb again. And not twice will such luck as this come to you. Go back, traitor. And climb!" He pressed the lever and the hidden mechanism whirred and the seven prints flashed out.

CARTRIGHT tottered down the steps. He walked like a puppet whose legs are pulled by strings.

He stopped at the base of the steps. He turned, and again, like some marionette, began to climb, putting his foot automatically on each mark as he came to it. His eyes were fixed upon the scepter and the crown. His arms were stretched out to them. His mouth was drawn at the corners like a heart-broken child, and as he climbed he wept.

One—and a shining print sprang out on the black field of the globe.

Two—another.

Three—a print on the white side.

Four—a print on the black!

A roar of hellish laughter shook Satan. For an instant I seemed to see his black robe melt, become vaporous, and change into an enveloping shadow. A blacker shadow seemed to hover over him.

And still his laughter roared, and still Cartright climbed the steps, his eyes streaming, face contorted, gaze fixed upon the glittering baubles in the golden throne.

There was a swishing sound. The black horror had leaned forward and had cast his cord. It circled over Cartright's head, and tightened about his shoulders.

A tug, and he had fallen.

Then hand over hand, unresisting, the torturer pulled him up the steps and to him like a fish.

The light went out. It left a blackness made darker by the rolling, demoniac laughter.

The laughter ceased. I heard a thin, wailing cry.

The light came on.

The black throne was empty. Empty, too, was the dais. Empty of Satan, of the torturer, and of—Cartright!

Only the orb of the scepter and the crown glittered mockingly on the golden throne between the two lines of watching, white-robed men.

The bands around my arms and legs sprang back, veil and gag were lifted from me. I leaped from the chair. And again blackness fell.

The amber glow returned, slowly. I looked toward the back of the temple. Empty now was the amphitheater of all that hidden audience whose sighing and murmuring had come to me, I stared back at the steps.

Golden throne and its burden had vanished. Gone were all but two of the white-robes. These stood guarding the black throne.

The blue eyes of the stone Satan blazed out at me.

The seven shining prints of a child's foot sparkled.

I felt a touch upon my arm, sprang back and faced Consardine. On his face was a shadow of that horror I knew was on my own.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN FROM THE WALL

"THEY opened his way into Paradise, and he weakened, and they led him straight into Hell."

Consardine stared at the seven shining footsteps, and on his face was that avid look I had seen on faces bent over the *rouge-et-noir* tables at Monte Carlo; faces molded by the scorching fingers of the gambler's passion, which is a lust exceeding that for women; faces that glare hungrily at the wheel just before it begins to spin, and that see not the wheel, but the golden booty its spinning may draw for them from Fortune's heaped hands. Like them, Consardine was seeing not the gleaming prints, but that enchanted land to which they led, where all desire was fulfilled.

The web of Satan's lure had him!

Well, despite what I had just beheld, so had it me. I was conscious of an impatience, a straining desire to put my own luck to the test. But in it, stronger far than the desire to gain the treasures he had promised me, was the desire to make that mocking, cold, and merciless devil do *my* bidding as he had made me do his.

Consardine broke the spell that held him and turned to me.

"It's been rather an evening for you, Kirkham," he said. "Do you want to go to your room now or will you stop in my quarters and have a night-cap with me?"

I hesitated. I had a thousand questions to ask. And yet I felt even more the necessity of being by myself and digesting what I had heard and seen since I had been brought to this place. Besides—of my thousand questions how many would he answer? Reasoning from my recent experiences, few. He ended the uncertainty.

"You'd better go to bed," he said. "Satan desires you to think over what he has proposed to you. And after all, I am not permitted—" he caught himself hastily—"I mean I can add nothing to what he did say. He will want your answer tomorrow—or rather"—he glanced at his watch—"today, since it is nearly two o'clock."

"What time shall I see him?" I asked.

"Oh, not till afternoon, surely," he answered. "He"—a slight shudder passed over him—"he will be occupied for hours still. You may sleep till noon if you wish."

"Very well," I said. "I'll go to my room."

Without further comment he led me back toward the amphitheater and up to the rear wall. He pressed, and one of the inevitable panels slid away, revealing another of the little elevators. He looked back at the footprints before closing the panel. They glimmered alertly. The two white-robed guards stood at the sides of the black throne, their strange eyes intent upon us. Again he shivered, then sighed and closed the slide. We stepped out into a long, vaulted corridor sheathed with slabs of marble. It was doorless. He pressed upon one of the slabs and we entered a second lift. It stopped and I passed out of it into the chamber where I had changed into evening clothes.

Pyjamas had been laid out for me on the bed, slippers, and a bathrobe were on an easy chair. On a table were decanters of Scotch, rye, brandy, soda, a bowl of rice, some fruit and cakes—several boxes of my favorite cigarettes and my missing wallet!

I opened the latter. There were my cards and letters and my money all intact. Making no comment, I poured myself out a drink and invited Consardine to join me.

"To the fortunate steps," he raised the glass. "May you have the luck to pick them!"

"May you," I answered. His face twitched, a haggard shadow dimmed his eyes, he looked at me strangely.

"The toast is to you, not to me," he said at last, and drained his glass. He walked across the room. At the panel he paused.

"Kirkham," he spoke softly, "sleep without fear. But—keep away from these walls. If you should want anything, ring the bell there"—he pointed to a button on the table—"and Thomas will answer it. I repeat—do not try to open any of these panels. And if I were you I would go to sleep and do no more thinking until you awaken. Would you like, by the way, a sleeping draft? I am really a doctor, you know." He smiled.

"Thanks," I said, "I'll need nothing to make me sleep."

"Good night," he bade me, and the panel closed.

I poured myself another drink and began to undress. I was not sleepy—far from it. Despite Consardine's warning, I went over the walls both of bedchamber and bathroom, touching them cautiously here and there. They semed solid, of heavy wood, beautifully grained and polished. As I had thought, there was no windows or doors. My room was, in truth, a luxurious cell.

I switched off the electrics, one by one, and getting into the bed, turned off the last light upon the side table.

How long I had lain there in the darkness, thinking, before I sensed someone beside myself in the room, I do not know. Perhaps half an hour at most. I had heard not the slightest sound, but I knew with absolute certainty that I was no longer alone. I slipped out of the light covering, and twisted silently to the foot of the bed.

THERE I crouched upon one knee, ready to leap when my stealthy visitor had reached its side. To have turned on the light would have put me completely at his mercy. Whoever it was, he evidently thought me asleep, and his attack, if attack there was to be, would be made where he would naturally suppose my body to lie. Well, my body was in an entirely different place, and it was I who would provide the surprise.

Instead of an attack came a whisper:

"It's me, Cap'n Kirkham—'Arry Barker. For God's sake, sir, don't myke no noise!"

I seemed to know that voice. And then I remembered. Barker, the little cockney Tommy that I had run across, bled almost white, in a shell-torn thicket of the Marne. I had given first aid to the little man, and had managed to carry him to a field hospital.

I had happened to be for some days in the town where was the base hospital to which he had finally been taken, and had dropped in regularly to talk to him, bringing him cigarettes and other luxuries. His gratitude to me had been dog-like and touching; he was a sentimental little beg-

gar. Then I had seen him no more. How in the name of Heaven had he come to this place?

"You remember me, cap'n?" the whispering voice was anxious. "Wyte a bit. I'll show you—"

There was the flash of a small light held in a cupped hand so that it illuminated for a second only the speaker's face. But in that second I recognized it as Barker's—shrewd and narrow, sandy hair bristling, the short upper lip and buck teeth.

"Barker—well, I'll be damned!" I swore softly, but did not add that the sight of him was so welcome that had he been close enough I would have embraced him.

"S-sh!" he cautioned. "I'm fair sure there ain't nobody watchin'. You can't always tell in this Gord awful plyce, though. Tyke my 'and, sir. There's a chair over there just beside where I come through the wall. Sit in it an' light a cigar. If I 'ear anything I can slip right back—an' all you're doin' is sittin' up smokin'."

His hand caught mine. He seemed to be able to see in the dark, for he led me unerringly across the floor and pressed me into the cushioned seat.

"Light up, sir," he said.

I struck a match and lighted a cigar. The flare showed the room, but no Barker. I flicked it out, and after a moment I heard his whisper close to my ear.

"First thing I want to say, sir, is, don't let *'im* scare you with that bunk about bein' the devil. 'Ee's *a* devil, right enough—a bloody, blinkin' one—but 'e ain't *the* devil. 'E's pullin' your leg, sir. 'E's man just like me an' you. A knife in 'is black 'eart or a bullet through 'is guts, an' you'd see."

"How did you know I was here?" I whispered.

"Seen you in the chair," he answered. " 'Ere's my 'and. When you want to sye anything, squeeze it, an' I'll lean my ear close. It's syfer. Yes, seen you in the chair—out there. Fact is, sir, I'm the one that looks after that chair. Look after a lot of such damned things 'ere. That's why 'e lets me live. Satan, I mean."

He went back to his first theme bitterly.

"But 'e ain't *the* devil, sir. Always remember 'e ain't. I was brought up Gord-fearin'. Pentecosters, my people was; they taught me Satan was in 'ell, they did. An' won't *'e* just give this bloody swine particular 'ell for tykin' *'is* nyme in vyne when 'e gets *'is* in 'ell! Gosh, 'ow I'd like to see it! From houtside lookin' in," he added hastily.

I pressed his hand and felt his ear close to my lips.

"How did you get here, Harry?" I murmured. "And who is this Satan, and what's his real game?"

"I'll tell you the 'ole tale, cap'n," he answered. "It 'll tyke a little time, but Gord knows when I'll get the chance again. That's why I beat it to you quick as I could. The bloody beast is gloatin' over that poor devil Cartright. Watchin' 'im die! The rest is either sleepin' or drinkin' themselves blind. Still, as I said, we'll tyke no chances. You let me talk, an' ask your questions afterward."

"Go on," I said.

"I was an electrician before the war," came the whisper in the dark. "None better. Master at it. *'E* knows I am. It's why 'e let me live as I told you. Satan—augh-h-h!

"Things was different after the war. Jobs 'ard to get, an' livin' 'igh. Got lookin' at things different, too. Seen lots of muckers what hadn't done a thing in the war but live cushy and pile up loot. What right 'ad they to 'ave all they 'ad when them as 'ad fought an' their familes was cold an' 'ungry?

" 'Andy with my 'ands, I always was. An' light on my feet. Climb! Climb like a cat—climb like a bloody centipede. An' quiet. A spook in galoshes was a parade compared to me. I ain't praisin' myself, sir—I'm just tellin' you.

"Syes I to myself, ' 'Arry, it's all wrong. 'Arry, it's time to turn your talents to account. Time to settled down to real work. 'Arry.'

"I was good from the very start at the new trade. I kept goin' 'igher an' 'igher.

From villas to apartment 'ouses, apartment 'ouses to mansions. Never once caught. King Cat 'Arry, they called me. Swarm up a water pipe as easy as a porch pillar, up an apartment 'ouse wall as easy as a water pipe. Master at my new trade just like my old.

"Then I met Maggie. They only myke one like Maggie once, sir. Quick with 'er fingers! She made 'Oudini an' 'Errman look like slow movies. An' a lydy. Regular Clare Vere de Vere when she wanted to be!

"Lots of swell mobsmen wanted to myke Maggie. She'd 'ave none of them. All wrapped up in 'er work, she was. ' 'Ell,' she'd sye, just like a duchess, 'what do I want with a 'usband? 'Ell,' she'd sye, 'a 'usband is about as much use as a 'eadache!' Sort of discouragin', was Maggie.

"Cap'n, we was crazy habout each other right off. Married we was, quick. Took a nice 'ouse down in Maida Vale. Was I 'appy? Was she? Gord!

" 'Now, Maggie,' I syes after we come back from the 'oneymoon, 'there ain't no reason for you workin' no more. I'm a good provider. I'm a 'ard an' conscientious worker. All you 'ave to do is, enjoy yourself an' make our 'ome comfortable an' 'appy.'

"An' Maggie said, 'Righto, 'Arry!'

"I was wearin', I remember, a stickpin she'd give me for a weddin' present. Big ruby in it. An' a watch she'd give me, an' a nifty ring with pearls. Admired 'em, I 'ad, when I see 'em on a couple of toffs at the 'otel we stopped at. An' that night when we went to our room she 'anded 'em to me as a present! That was the kind of a worker Maggie was."

I SUPPRESSED a chuckle with difficulty. This whispered-in-the-dark romance of the conscientious soldier and able electrician turned into just as able and conscientious a burglar was the one touch needed to make the night complete. It washed away the film of horror in my mind and brought me back to normal.

"Ain't tirin' you, sir, am I?" he asked.

"Go on, Harry, go on," I whispered "Go as far as you like."

"Night or two lyter I was takin' a dye off an' we went to the theayter. ' 'Ow do you like that pin, 'Arry?" whispers Maggie, an' shoots a look at a sparkler in the toff's tie next me. 'Ain't it pretty?' syes I, 'eedlessly. ' 'Ere it is!' syes Maggie when we get 'ome.

" 'Now, Maggie,' I syes, 'I told you I didn't want you to work no more. Ain't I the good provider I promised? Can't I get all the pins I want myself? All I want, Maggie, is a snug, comfortable, 'appy 'ome when I come back from a 'ard night's work, an' my wife to welcome me. I won't 'ave you workin', Maggie.'

" 'Righto, 'Arry,' says she.'

"But, cap'n, it wasn't all right. It got so that when we went out together I didn't dare look at a man's tie or 'is watch or nothin'. I couldn't even stand an' admire things in shops. Sure's I did, there when we got 'ome or the next dye would be the things I'd admired. An' Maggie so proud like an' pleased she'd got 'em for me that I 'adn't the 'eart— Oh, it was love, all right, but—oh, 'ell!

"She'd be waitin' for me when I got 'ome. But if I'd wyke up from sleep before my time, she was out. An' when I'd wyke up after she got back, first thing I'd see was laces, or a fur coat, or a ring or two lyde out on the tyble. She'd been workin' again!

" 'Maggie,' I'd sye, 'it ain't right. It 'urts my pride. An' 'ow'll it be when kiddies come? With their daddy out workin' all night an' sleepin' while their mother's out workin' all dye an' sleepin' while their daddy's workin'—'ell, Maggie, they might as well be horphants!'

"But 'twas no good, cap'n. She loved 'er work more than she did me, or maybe she just couldn't tell us apart.

"An' at last I 'ad to leave 'er. Fair broke my 'eart, it did. I loved 'er an' my 'ome. But I just couldn't stand it. I come to America. Me, King Cat 'Arry, an exile because my wife couldn't stop workin'.

"Did well, too. But I wasn't 'appy. One dye I was out in the country, an' I ran

across a big wall. Fair built to tempt me, it was. After while I come to a pair of gates, iron, an' a guard 'ouse behind 'em. Gates not barred. Solid.

"'Goramighty!' syes I to myself. 'It must be the Duke of New York lives 'ere.' I reconnoitered. That wall must 'ave been five miles long. I 'id around, an' that night I climbed on top of it. Nothin' but trees an' far-off lights shinin' as though it was a big castle.

"First thing I look for is wires. There was a wire just at the inner edge of the wall. Careful I was not to touch it. Charged, I guessed it. I looked over an' took a chance at shootin' my flash. There was two more wires down at the base just where any one would land on 'em if they shinned down the wall. An' it was a twelve-foot drop.

"Anybody else would have been discouraged. But they didn't nyme me King Cat for nothin'. Took a leap, I did. Landed soft as a cat. Sneaked through the trees. Come up to the big 'ouse.

"Saw a 'ole lot of queer people goin' in an' around. After while most of the lights went out. Swarmed up a place I'd spotted an' found myself in a big room. An' the stuff in that room! It fair myde my 'ead swim. I picked up a few tysty bits, an' then I noticed something funny. There wasn't no doors to that room! 'Ow the 'ell do they get in?' I asked myself. An' then I looked around at the windows I'd come through.

"Goramighty, cap'n, I fair fell out of my shirt! There wasn't no windows! They'd disappeared. There wasn't nothin' but wall.

"AN' THEN a big light blazed up an' out of the walls come about a dozen men with ropes an' a big man after 'em. I shriveled when he turns them heyes of 'is on me. Scared! If I'd nearly fell out of my shirt before, now I was slippin' from my pants!

"Well, it was this bloody bloke Satan, y' understand. 'E just stood scorchin' me. Then 'e started to ask me questions.

"Cap'n, I told 'im everythin'. Just like 'e was Gord. 'E had me fair kippered. Told 'im all about bein' an electrician, an' my new work, an' about Maggie. Just as I been tellin' you, only more so. 'Strewth, sir, 'e 'ad my life from the time I was out of swaddles.

"'E laughed. That awful laugh. You've heard it. 'Ow 'e laughed! An' next thing I knows I'm standin' at 'is table an' tellin' it all over to Consardine.

"An' 'ere I've been ever since, Cap'n Kirkham. 'E put me under sentence of death, sir, an' sooner or later 'e'll do for me. Unless 'e's done for first. But 'e finds me very useful, 'e does, an' 'e won't do for me as long as I'm that to 'im. Also he syes I entertain 'im. Fair prize 'og for entertainment, 'e is! Gets me in there with Consardine an' others and mykes me tell 'em about my work an' ambitions an' my sacredest sentiments. All about Maggie, too. Everything about 'er, sir.

"Gord, 'ow I 'ate 'im! The muckin' bloody, blue-eyed son of a mangy shedog! But 'e's got me! 'E's *got* me! Like 'e's got *you!*"

The little man's voice had risen dangerously high. The shrill edge of hysteria was beginning to creep into it. All along I had sensed the tension under which he was laboring. But aside from the welcome diversion of his unintentionally droll story, I had realized the necessity of letting him run along and pour out his heart to me. Mine was perhaps the first sympathetic ear he had encountered since his imprisonment in this place.

Certainly I was the only old friend, and it must have seemed to him that I had dropped down from heaven. I was deeply touched by the swiftness with which he had flown to me as soon as he had recognized me. That he had run grave risks to do this seemed sure.

"Quiet, Harry! Quiet!" I whispered, patting his hand. "You're not alone now. Between the two of us we ought to find some way to get you free."

"No!" I could almost see the despairing shake of his head. "You don't know

'im, sir. There wouldn't 'e a bit of use in my gettin' away. 'E'd 'ave me in no time. No, I can't get away from 'ere while 'e's alive."

"How did you know where I was? How did you find me?" I asked.

"Come through the walls," he said. "There ain't an honest stairs or door in this 'ole place. Nothin' but passages in the walls, an' panels that slide, an' lifts all over thick as the seeds in a pumpkin. Satan, 'e's the only one that knows the 'ole combination. Consardine, 'e's 'is right-'and man 'ere, an' knows some of 'em.

"But I know more than Consardine. I ought to. Been 'ere nigh on two years now, I 'ave. Never once been out. *'E's* warned me. If I go outside, *'e* does for me. Been creepin', creepin', creepin' round like a rat in the walls whenever I got the chance. A lot of wires to look after, too, an' that learned me. I don't know all—but I know a 'ell of a lot. I was close behind you and Consardine all the time."

"What is Satan?" I asked. "I mean where does he come from—admitting it's not from hell?"

"I think he's part Rooshian an' part Chink. 'Ee's got Chink in 'im, I'm sure. Where 'e was before 'e come 'ere, I don't know. I don't dare ask questions. But I found out 'e took this plyce about ten years ago. An' the people who tore it apart inside an' fixed up the panels an' passages were all Chinks."

"But you can't look after a place like this all by yourself, Harry." I considered. "And I can't see Satan giving many the chance to learn the combination."

"'E lets me use the *kehft* slyves," he answered astonishingly.

"That's twice tonight I've heard their name," I said, "What are they?"

"Them?" There was loathing and horror in his voice. "They fair give you the creeps. 'E feeds 'em with the *kehft.* Opium, coke, 'asheesh—they're mother's milk compared to it. Gives each one of 'em 'is or 'er particular paradise—till they wake up. Murder's the least of what they'll do to get another shot.

"THEM fellows in the white nightgowns that stood on the steps with their ropes was some of 'em. You've 'eard of the Old Man of the Mountains who used to send out the assassins. Feller told me about 'em in the war. Satan's gyme's the syme. One drink of it, an' they can't do without it. Then he gets 'em believin' if they get killed for 'im 'e can stick their souls where they get forever the 'appiness the *kehft* gives 'em 'ere only occasionally. Them! They'll do anything for Satan! Anything!"

I broached the question I had long been wanting to ask.

"Do you know a girl named Eve? Big brown eyes and—"

"Eve Demerest," he answered. "Poor kid! 'E's got *'er,* all right. Gord, what a shyme! 'E'll drag her down to 'ell, an' she's an angel—a— Careful! Smoke up!"

His hand jerked from mine. I heard a faint sound from the opposite wall. I drew upon my cigar, and stretched and sighed. Again the sound, the veriest ghost of one.

"Who's there?" I called sharply.

A light flashed up, and by the wall, beside an opened panel, stood Thomas, the valet.

"Did you call, sir?" he asked.

His eyes glanced swiftly around the room, then came to rest on mine; there was suspicion in them.

"No," I said indifferently.

"I am sure the bell rang, sir. I was half asleep—" He hesitated.

"Then you were dreaming," I told him.

"I'll just fix your bed for you, sir, while I'm here."

"Do," I said. "When I've finished my cigar I'll turn in."

He made it up, and drew a handkerchief from his pocket. A coin dropped upon the floor at his feet. As he stooped to pick it up it slipped from his fingers and rolled beneath the bed. He got down upon his knees and felt about. It was very neatly done. I had been wondering whether he would boldly look under the bed or devise some such polite stratagem.

"Will you have a drink, Thomas?" I

asked him cordially as he stood up, once more searching the room with his eyes.

"Thank you, sir, I will." He poured himself a rather stiff one. "If you don't mind, I'll get some plain water."

"Go ahead," I bade him. He walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. I continued to smoke serenely. He emerged satisfied, apparently, that there was no one there. He took his drink and went to the panel.

"I hope you will sleep, sir."

"I shall," I answered cheerfully. "Turn out the light as you go."

He vanished, but I was certain that he was still behind the wall, listening. And after a little while I yawned loudly, arose, walked over to the bed and, making what noise I could naturally, turned in.

For a little while I lay awake, turning over the situation in the light of what Barker had told me. A castle with no stairs or "honest doors." A labyrinth of secret passages and sliding panels. And the little thief creeping, creeping through the walls, denied the open, patiently marking down one by one their secrets. Well, there was a rare ally, indeed, if I should need one.

And Satan! Dealing out paradise by retail to these mysterious slaves of his potent drug. Promising paradise to those others by his seven shining footsteps. What was his aim? What did he get out of it?

Well, I would probably know more this afternoon after I had obeyed his second summons.

And Eve? Damn that prying Thomas for interrupting just as I was finding out something about her.

Well, I would play Satan's game—with a few reservations.

I went to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

BREAKFAST WITH SATAN

WHEN I woke up Thomas was at the closet selecting a suit. I heard the taps running in the bath. How long he had been in the room I could not tell. No doubt he had made a thorough search of it. Lazily I wondered what it had been that had aroused his suspicions. I looked at my watch. It had stopped.

"Hello, Thomas," I hailed him. "What's the time?"

He popped out of the wardrobe like a startled rabbit.

"It's one o'clock. I wouldn't have disturbed you, sir, but the Master is expecting you to breakfast with him at two."

"Good!" I made for the bath. As I splashed around, the half-formed plan upon which I had gone to sleep suddenly crystallized. I would try my luck at the footprints at once. But—I would not go the distance. Not this time. I would step upon two of them and no more. There was much I wanted to know before running the risk of delivering myself over to Satan body and soul.

What I hoped was that only one of the two would be his. At the worst I would incur a year's bondage. Well, I did not mind that so much, either.

I had, in fact, determined to match my wits against Satan rather than my luck.

I did not want to escape him. My keenest desire was to be incorporated among his entourage, infernal or not. Barker gave me a unique advantage. Out of it might well come the opportunity to tumble this slanting blue-eyed devil off his black throne, break his power, and—well, why mince words—loot him.

Or, to put it more politely, recover from him a thousandfold what he had so casually stripped me of.

That had been twenty thousand dollars. To wipe off the debt at that rate I must strip Satan of twenty millions—

That would be a good game, indeed. I laughed.

"You seem quite gay, sir," said Thomas.

"The birds, Thomas," I said, "are singing everywhere. Everywhere Thomas. Even here."

"Yes, sir," he answered, looking at me dubiously.

It was quarter of two when I had finished. The valet walked me into the wall and out again, stopping the lift this time

at a much higher level. Again I emerged into a small antechamber, whose one door was guarded by two tall slaves.

Passing through it, I was dazzled by a flood of sunshine. Then the sunshine seemed to gather itself and center upon the girl, who had half risen from her seat at the table as I entered. It was Eve, but a far different Eve from her who had so ably aided in my kidnaping the night before. Then I had thought her extraordinarily pretty; now I realized how inadequate was the adjective.

The girl was beautiful. Her clear brown eyes regarded me gravely, studying me with a curious intentness. Her proud little head had the poise of a princess, and the sunlight playing in her hair traced a ruddy golden coronet within it; her mouth was sweeter even than I had—found it. And as I looked at the lips I had kissed so ruthlessly a quick rose tinted her face.

"Eve—this is Mr. Kirkham," it was Consardine's voice, faintly amused. "Miss Demerest and you have met, I think."

"I think," I answered slowly, "that I am seeing Miss Demerest for the first time. I am hoping that she—will consider it so."

It was as near to an apology as I could come. Would she take the proffered olive branch? Her eyes widened as though with reproachful surprise.

"To think," mused Eve mournfully, "that a man could so soon forget having kissed me! It seems hardly a compliment, does it, Dr. Consardine?"

"It seems," said Consardine, "impossible."

"Ah, no," sighed Eve. "No, Mr. Kirkham. I can't think it is our first meeting. You have, you know, such a forceful way of impressing one with your personality. And a woman cannot forget kisses so easily."

I flushed. That Eve was a consummate little actress she had given me plenty of convincing proof. But what did this bit of by-play mean? I could not believe that she was so bitterly offended by my actions in the subway; she was too intelligent for that. Yet if she distrusted me, disliked me, how could I help her?

"My remark," I said, "was prompted wholly by politeness. The truth is, Miss Demerest, that I consider those kisses generous payment for any inconvenience of my interesting journey here."

"Well, then," she said coldly, "you have made your trade, and the slate is clean. And do not trouble to be polite with me, Mr. Kirkham. Just be yourself. You are much more amusing."

I choked back an angry retort and bowed.

"Quite right," I returned as coldly as she. "After all, there seems to be no reason why I *should* be polite to you."

"None at all," she answered indifferently. "And frankly, the less I come into contact with even your natural self, Mr. Kirkham, the better it will be for both of us."

THAT was an oddly turned phrase, it flashed upon me. And there was an enigmatic something deep in the brown eyes. What did she mean? Was she trying to convey to me some message that Consardine would not suspect? I heard a chuckle and turned to face—Satan.

I could not know how long he had been listening. As his gaze rested on the girl I saw a momentary flashing of the brilliant eyes, and a flicker passed over his face. It was as though the hidden devil within him had licked its lips.

"Quarreling? Oh, fie!" he said unctuously.

"Quarreling? Not at all," Eve answered coolly. "It happens that I dislike Mr. Kirkham. I am sorry—but it is so. It seemed to me better to tell him, that we may avoid each other in the future, except, of course, when you find it necessary for us to be together, Satan."

It was disconcerting, to say the least. I made no effort to hide my chagrin. Satan looked at me and chuckled again. I had a curious conviction that he was pleased.

"Well," he purred, "even I have no power over personal prejudices. All that I can do is to make use of them. In the meantime—I am hungry."

He seated himself at the table's head;

Eve at his right hand, I at his left, and Consardine beside me. The Manchu butler and another Chinese served us.

We were in a tower room, clearly. The windows were set high above the floor, and through them I could see only the blue sky. The walls were covered with Fragonard and Boucher panels, and I had no doubt that they had been acquired by the "eloquence" of Satan's messengers. The rest of the chamber was in keeping; furnished with that same amazing selectiveness and perception of the beautiful that I had noted in the great hall and in the room where I had first met the blue-eyed devil.

Eve, having defined my place—or lack of place—in her regard, was coolly aloof to me, but courteous, and sparkling and witty with Satan and Consardine. The drama of the temple and Cartright's punishment seemed to be forgotten by the three of them.

Satan was in the best of humors, but in his diabolic benignity—it is the only way I can describe it—was, to me, the sinister suggestion of a wild beast playful because its appetite has been appeased, an addict of cruelty mellowed by the ultimate anguish to which he has subjected a sacrifice. I had a vivid and unpleasant picture of him wallowing like a tiger upon the torn carcass of the man whom he had sent out of life a few hours before through the gateways of hell.

Yet the sunlight stripped him of much of his vague terror. And if he was, as Barker had put it, "an 'og for entertainment," he was himself a masterly entertainer. Something had shifted the conversation toward Genghis Khan, and for half an hour Satan told us stories of that Ruler of the Golden Horde and his black palace in his lost city of Khara-Khoto in the Cobi that wiped all the present out of my mind and set me back, seeing and hearing, into a world ten centuries gone; stories tragic and comic, Rabelaisian and tender—and all as though he had himself been a witness to what he described. Indeed, listening, it seemed to me that he could have been nothing else. Devil or not, the man had magic.

And at the end he signaled the two servants to go, and when they had gone he said to me, abruptly:

"Well, James Kirkham, is it yes or no?"

I feigned to hesitate. I leaned my head upon my hand, and under its cover shot a glance at Eve. She was patting her mouth with her slim fingers, suppressing a yawn—but there was a pallor upon her face that had not been there a moment before. I felt Satan's will beating down upon me, tangibly.

"Yes—or no?" he repeated.

"Yes," I said, "if, Satan, you will answer one question."

"It is always permitted to ask," he replied.

"Well then," I said, "I want to know what kind of an—employer you are before I make a play that may mean life service to me. A man is his aims plus the way he works to attain them. As to your methods, I have had at least an illuminative inkling. But what are your aims?

"IN THE olden days, Satan, the question would have been unnecessary. Everybody who dealt with you knew that what you were after were souls to keep your furnaces busy. But Hell, I understand, has been modernized with its master. Furnaces are out of date, and fuel therefore nothing like so valuable. Yet still, as of old, you take your prospective customers up a high mountain and offer them the kingdoms of earth. Very well, the question. What, Satan, do you get out of it *now?*"

"There you have one reason for my aversion to Mr. Kirkham," murmured Eve. "He admits nothing that cannot be balanced in a set of books. He has the shopkeeper outlook."

I ignored this thrust. But once more Satan chuckled from still lips.

"A proper question, Eve," he told her. "You forget that even I always keep my accounts balanced—and present them when the time comes for payment."

He spoke the last words slowly, contemplatively, staring at her—and again I saw

the devil's gloating flicker over his face. And she saw it, too, for she caught her lip between her teeth to check its trembling.

"Then answer," I spoke abruptly, to draw his attention from her back to me. He studied me as though picking the words to reply.

"Call it," he said at last," amusement. "It is for amusement that I exist. It is for that alone that I remain upon a world in which, when all is said and done, amusement in some form or guise is the one great aim of all, the only thing that makes life upon it tolerable. My aim is, therefore, you perceive, a simple one. But what is it that amuses me?

"Three things. I am a great playwright, the greatest that has ever lived, since my plays are real. I set the scenes for my little single acts, my farces and comedies, dramas and tragedies, my epics. I direct the actors. I am the sole audience that can see every action, hear every line, of my plays, from beginning to end.

"Sometimes what began as a farce turns into high tragedy, tragedies become farces, a one-act diversion develops into an epic, governments fall, the mighty topple from their pedestals, the lowly are exalted. Some people live their lives for chess. I play my chess with living chessmen, and I play a score of games at once in all corners of the world.

"All this amuses me. Furthermore, in my character as Prince of Darkness, which I perceive, James Kirkham, that you do not wholly admit, my art puts me on a par with that other super-dramatist, my ancient and Celestial adversary known according to the dominant local creed as Jehovah. Nay, it places me higher—since I re-write his script. This also amuses me."

Under the suave, sardonic mockery, I read truth. To this cold, monstrous, intellect, men and women were only puppets moving over a world-wide stage. Suffering, sorrow, anguish of mind and body were to it nothing but entertaining reactions to situations which it had conceived. Like the dark Power whose name Satan had taken, souls were his playthings. Their antics amused him. In that he found sufficient reward for labor.

"That," he said, "is one of the three. The second? I am a lover of beauty. It is, indeed, the one thing that can arouse in me what may be called—emotion. It happens now and then that man with his mind and eyes and heart and hands makes visible and manifest some thing which bears that stamp of creative perfection, the monopoly of which tradition ascribes to the same Celestial adversary I have named.

"It may be a painting, a statue, a carved bit of wood, a crystal, a vase, a fabric, and one of ten thousand things. But in it is that essence of beauty humanity calls divine and for which, in its blundering way, it is always seeking—as it is amusement. The best of these things I make from time to time my own. But—I will not have them come to me except by my own way. Here enters the third element—the gamble, the game.

"For example. I decided, after mature reflection, that the Mona Lisa of Da Vinci, in the Louvre, had the quality I desired. It could not, of course, be bought; nor did I desire to buy it. Yet it is here. In this house. I allowed France to recover an excellent duplicate in which my experts reproduced perfectly even the microscopic cracks in the paint. Only now have they begun to suspect. They can never be sure —and that amuses me more than if they knew.

"JAMES KIRKHAM, men risk their lives over the globe in search of treasure. I tell you that never, never since mankind began, was there ever such a treasure trove as this house of mine. The fortunes of the ten richest men in all the world could not buy it. It is more precious than all the gold in the Bank of England.

"Its value in dollars and pounds is nothing to me. But to possess this pure essence of beauty, to dwell with it, that is—much! And to know that the best of my ancient adversary's choicest inspirations are mine, Satan's—that *is* amusing! Ho! Ho!" he roared.

"Third and last," he checked his laughter, "is the game. Collector of souls and beauty I am. Gambler am I, too, and as supreme in that as in my collecting. It is the unknown quantity, the risk that sharpens the edge of my enjoyment of my plays. It is what gives the final zest to my—acquirements. And I am a generous opponent. The stakes those who play with me may win are immeasurably higher than any I could win from them. But play with me they must!"

For a moment he stared at me.

"As for the rest," he said, "I have, as you surmised, no further interest in stoking my traditional furnaces. What happens to any man after he leaves this earth concerns me no longer. I have given up my ancient domain for this where I am amused so well. But, James Kirkham"—his blue eyes blazed out at me—"those who cross me find that I have lost none of my old skill as a hell-maker. Now are you answered?"

"Fully, sir," I bowed. "I will gamble with you. And, win or lose, you shall have no occasion to find fault with me. But, by your leave, one more question. You have said that he who mounts the four fortunate steps can have anything that he desires. Very well, if I do so can I have"—I pointed to Eve—"her?"

I heard a gasp from Eve, watched Satan bend toward me, scrutinizing me with eyes in which a menacing coldness had appeared. Consardine spoke:

"Oh, come now, Kirkham, be reasonable. Eve's been honest with you. She's made it pretty plain you're not an acceptable candidate for bridegroom."

I sensed a certain anxiety in his voice; a desire to placate. Placate whom—me or Satan? It interested me hugely. Perhaps Consardine—

"Marry—*you?* Not for anything in this world, not to save my life, not to save myself torture!"

Eve's voice was shrill with anger. She had sprung to her feet and stood, eyes flashing wrath, red danger signals on her cheeks. I met Satan's gaze squarely.

"Have I mentioned—marriage?" I asked him blandly.

He took, as I had thought he would, the worst interpretation out of that. I saw the menace and suspicion fade away as swiftly as it had come. Yes, he took the worst interpretation, but—so did Eve.

"Satan," she stamped her foot and thrust her chair from her with such force that it went careening over on its side. "Satan, I have a question, too. If I take the steps, will you give me this man to do with as it pleases me?"

Satan looked from one to the other of us. Very evidently the situation gave him much gratification. The blue eyes sparkled and there was a benignant purr in his voice when he spoke.

"To both of you I must answer—no. No, to you, Eve, because James Kirkham has accepted my challenge to the gamble of the steps. That being so, I could not withdraw if I would. He must have his chance. Also, if he should lose to me for one undertaking or enter my service for a year, I am bound to protect him. I am bound also to give him his other chances, should he claim them. But, Eve—if he should decide to gamble no more—why, then, ask me again."

He paused and stared at me. I had no doubt as to his meaning.

"And no to you, James Kirkham," he said, "because all that I have said to Eve as to your position applies equally to hers. She, too, has her right to her chances. But"—his voice lost its benignity and grew heavy—"there is another reason. I have decreed for Eve a high destiny. Should she fulfill it—she will be far above the reach of any man. Should she shirk it—"

He did not finish the sentence, only brooded upon her with unwinking, blazing eyes. I watched the blood slowly drain from her cheeks, saw her own eyes falter and drop. There was a sharp snap and a tinkle of glass. Consardine's hand had been playing with a heavy goblet of thick crystal and now, tightening around it, had crushed it as though it had been made of paper. He thrust the hand into his pocket,

but not before I had seen blood upon it. Satan's eyes dwelt upon him inscrutably.

"Strength like yours, Consardine," he said, "is often dangerous—to its owner."

"Faith, Satan," Consardine answered ruefully, "I was dreaming, and thought it a neck I held in my hand."

"A warning, I should say," said Satan grimly, "to leave that particular neck alone."

"I've no choice," laughed Consardine, "since the throat I had in mind was of an old enemy these ten years dead."

For another moment or two Satan studied him, but made no further comment. He turned to me.

"You have decided," he said. "When will you mount the steps?"

"Anytime," I answered. "The sooner the better. Now, if it's possible. I'm feeling lucky."

"Carsardine," he said, "have the temple prepared. Bid those who are here to assemble in half an hour, Eve."

He watched them go, the girl through a panel with never a look at me, Consardine by way of the door that led into a tiny anteroom. For long minutes, Satan sat silent, regarding me. I smoked calmly, waiting for him to speak.

"James Kirkham," he said at last, "I have told you before that you please me. Everything I have seen of you since then pleases me even more. But I must warn you of one thing. Do not let whatever chagrin or feeling of dislike that you have toward Eve Demerest be the cause of the slightest harm coming to her. You are not one that I have to threaten, but—heed this warning."

"I put her out of my mind, Satan," I answered. "Yet I confess I'm a bit curious about that high destiny you've promised her."

"The highest destiny," again there was the fateful heaviness in his voice. "The highest honor that could come to any woman. I will tell you, James Kirkham, so you may know how urgent is my warning. Sooner or later I shall be compelled to visit other of my worlds. When that time comes I shall turn this one over to my son and heir, and his mother shall be—Eve!"

CHAPTER IX

I TAKE THE STEPS

I CONSIDER it one of my few enough major victories that I took the shock of that infernal communication with perfect outward composure. Of course, in a way, I had been prepared. In spite of the rage and hatred that seethed up in me, I managed to raise my glass with a steady hand and my voice held nothing but the proper surprise and interest.

"That is an honor, sir, indeed," I said. "You will pardon me if I express a certain wonder as to your choice. For you, I would have thought, some empress, at least one of royal blood—"

"No, no," he interrupted me, but I knew that he swallowed with relish my flattery. "You do not know the girl. You let your prejudice blind you. Eve is as perfect as any of the masterpieces I have gathered around me. To her beauty she adds brains. She has daring and spirit. Whatever—to me—otherwise desirable qualities may be lacking in her to pass on to my son, I can supply. He will be—*my* son. His training will be in *my* hands. He will be what *I* make him."

"The son of Satan!" I said.

"Satan's own son!" a flame leaped from his eyes. "My true son, James Kirkham.

"You will understand," he went on "that there is in this nothing of what is called—love. Something of emotion, yes—but only that emotion which any truly beautiful thing calls up in me. It is intrinsically solely a matter of selective breeding. I have had the same idea before, but—I was not fortunate in my selections."

"You mean—"

"They were girl children," he said somberly. "They were disappointments. Therefore they ceased to be."

And now behind the imperturbable, heavy mask of his face I glimpsed the Chinese. Perceptibly the slant of the eyes

had accentuated, the high cheek bones become more prominent. I nodded, thoughtfully.

"But if again you are"—I had meant to add "disappointed."

He caught me up with a touch of that demoniac fury he had shown at the ordeal of Cartright.

"Do not dare say it! Do not dare think it! Her first born shall be a son! A son, I say!"

WHAT I might have answered, what have done, I do not know. His sudden deadliness, his arrogance, had set my smoldering wrath ablaze again. Consardine saved me. I heard the door open and the menacing gaze turned from me for a moment. It gave me my chance to recover myself.

"All is prepared, Satan," Consardine announced. I arose eagerly, nor was that eagerness feigned. I was conscious of the beginning of a curious excitement, a heady exaltation.

"It is your moment, James Kirkham," Satan's voice was again expressionless, his face marble, his eyes sparkling. "But a few minutes—and *I* may be your servant! The world your plaything! Who knows! Who knows!"

He stepped to the farther wall and opened one of the panels.

"Dr. Consardine," he said, "you will escort the neophyte to the temple."

He brooded upon me, almost caressingly —I saw the hidden devil lick its lips.

"Master of the world!" he repeated. "And Satan your loyal slave! Who knows!"

He was gone. Consardine drew a deep breath. He spoke, in carefully matter-of-fact fashion.

"Want a drink before you try it, Kirkham?"

I shook my head, the tingling excitement increasing.

"You know the rules," he said briskly. "You step on any four of the seven footprints. You can stop at any one of them you choose, and abide by the consequences. One of Satan's gives you to him for one—service; two gives you to him for a year; three—and you are his forever. No more chances for you then, Kirkham. Hit the four fortunate ones and you sit on the top of the world, just as he promised you. Look back while you're on the climb and you have to begin all over again. All clear?"

"Let's go," I said somewhat huskily.

He led me to the wall and through it into one of the marble-lined corridors. From that we passed into a lift. It dropped. A panel slid aside. Consardine leading, I stepped out into the webbed temple.

I was close to the base of the steps, just within the half-circle of brilliant light that masked the amphitheater. From it came a faint rustle and murmuring. Foolishly, I hoped that Eve had picked out a good seat. I realized that I was trembling. Cursing myself silently I mastered the tremor, praying that it had been too slight to be noticed.

I looked up at the black throne, met Satan's mocking eyes and my nerves steadied, my control clicked into place. He sat there in his black robe, just as I had seen him the night before. The blue jeweled eyes of his stone counterpart glittered behind him. Instead of the fourteen white-robed, pallid-faced men with the noosed ropes there were but two, midway up the steps. And something else was missing. The black-visaged fiend of an executioner!

What did that mean? Was it Satan's way of telling me that even if I trod upon his three prints he would not have me killed? Or at least that I need not fear death until I had finished the work for which he had picked me.

Or was it a trap?

That was the more likely. Somehow, I could not conceive Satan thus solicitously though subtly reassuring me of a suspended sentence. Was it not, rather, that by cutting down his guards and eliminating his torturer he had schemed to plant that very thought? Lure me on to make the full gamble and go the limit of the four steps in the belief that if I lost I was sure of a reprieve that might give me time to escape him?

Or, admitting that his present purpose was benevolent, if I did lose, might it not suddenly occur to him that he would derive greater amusement from evoking his hellish familiar with the cord of women's hair and giving me to him—like Cartright.

As Cartright had, I studied his face. It was inscrutable, nothing in it to guide me. And now, far more vividly than when I had watched that despairing wretch being hauled in to his torment, did I realize the infernal ingenuity of his game. For now it was I who had to play it.

I DROPPED my eyes from Satan's. They fell upon the seven shining footprints and followed them up to the golden throne. Crown and scepter glittered upon me. Their gem fires beckoned and called to me. Again the excitement seized me, tingling along every nerve.

If I could win them! Win them and what they stood for!

Satan pressed down the lever between the two thrones. I heard the whirring of the controlling mechanism and saw the seven marks of the childish foot shine with intenser light.

"The steps are ready," he intoned and thrust his hands beneath his black robe. "They await their conqueror, the chosen one of fortune! Are you he? Ascend—and learn!"

I walked to the steps, mounted and set my foot unhesitatingly upon the first of the prints. Behind me, I knew, its symbol glimmered on the tell-tale of the luminous globe—

On Satan's side—or mine?

Again I ascended, more slowly, and paused at the next print. But it was not to weigh its probabilities of good or evil that I halted. The truth is that the gambler's fever was rising high within me, crazily high, undermining my determination to limit this first game of mine with Satan to only two of the footsteps.

Common sense bade me go slow and get back my grip upon my judgment. Common sense, fighting for time, moved me past that mark and slowly on to the next.

I trod upon it. There was another symbol on the tell-tale—

Mine—or Satan's?

Now the fever had me wholly. My eyes were bright with it as Satan's own. My heart was thumping like a drum, my fingers cold, a dry electric heat beating about my head. The little feet of fire seemed to quiver and dance with eagerness to lead me on.

"Take me!" beckoned one.

"Take me!" signaled another.

The jeweled crown and scepter summoned. On the golden throne I saw a phantom—myself, triumphant, with crown upon my head, scepter in my hand, Satan at my beck and the world at my knees!

It may be true that thoughts have form, and that intense emotion or desire leave behind something of themselves that persists, lives on in the place where it was called forth, and wakes, ravening, when someone moved by the same impulses that created it appears in that place. At any rate, it was as though the ghosts of desire of all those who had ascended those steps before me had rushed to me and hungering for fulfillment, were clamoring to me to go on.

But their will was also my will. I needed no urging. I wanted to go on. After all, the two prints upon which I had trodden might well be fortunate ones. At the worst, by all the laws of chance, I should have broken even. And if so then there would be no more risk in making one more throw than I had already resolved to incur.

What *did* the tell-tale globe show?

Ah, if I could but know!

And suddenly a chill went through me, as though the ghosts of despair of all those who had mounted before me and lost had pressed back the hungry wraiths of desire.

Glitter of crown and scepter tarnished and grew sinister.

For an instant I saw the seven shining prints not as those of a child's foot but as of a cloven hoof!

I drew back and looked up at Satan. He sat head bent forward, glaring at me, and with distinct shock I realized that with full force of his will he was commanding me to proceed. Instantly after that apperception came another. It was as though a hand touched my shoulder, drawing me still farther back and clearly as though lips were close to my ear I heard a counter-command, imperative—

"Stop! Stop now!"

The voice of—Eve!

For another minute I stood, shaken by the two contending impulses. Then abruptly a shadow lifted from my mind, the fever fled, the spell of the shining prints and lure of crown and orb broke. I turned my face, reeking with sweat, once more to Satan.

"I've had enough—for this—time!" I panted.

He stared at me silently. I thought that behind the cold sparkle of his gaze I read anger, thwarted purpose, a certain evil puzzlement. If so, it was fleeting. He spoke:

"You have claimed the player's right. It was yours to stop when you willed. Look behind you."

I swung around and sought the tell-tale globe.

Both of the prints upon which I had trodden had been—

Satan's!

I was his bond servant for a year, bound to do whatsoever he commanded me.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The Goal of the Timberlost

THE Nazis have kept pretty busy this year in their own quiet way, and so it is surprising to learn that they've found time to collect sawdust. But it's true; for months now the Germans have been saving sawdust at a great rate. They are going to build houses out of it.

You see, Germany badly lacks timber. Consequently, the plan is to produce synthetic lumber, to press sawdust and shavings into boards. This process is by no means a new one, but it has never been attempted on the scale which the Germans contemplate.

They figure that something like a quarter million tons of sawdust is lying around, and that compressed it will increase the supply of building material by twenty per-cent. Ground-wood boards can be treated with chemicals to be made water-proof and germ-proof, and the German government calls the synthetic product "better than wood." The whole thing is a nice example of German efficiency; and yet one cannot help wondering whether an empire constructed on sawdust and shavings shall never crumble.

—*Eric Sharpe*

Four hundred yards . . . and a man's brain was so near to the small white pebble

The Rifle of Feroz Khan

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

Author of "The Cup of Satin," "The Magic Monkeys," etc.

All you who have aimed at an enemy's breast to kill, read this story of a Hindu Nimrod who aimed at his friend's head to save his life

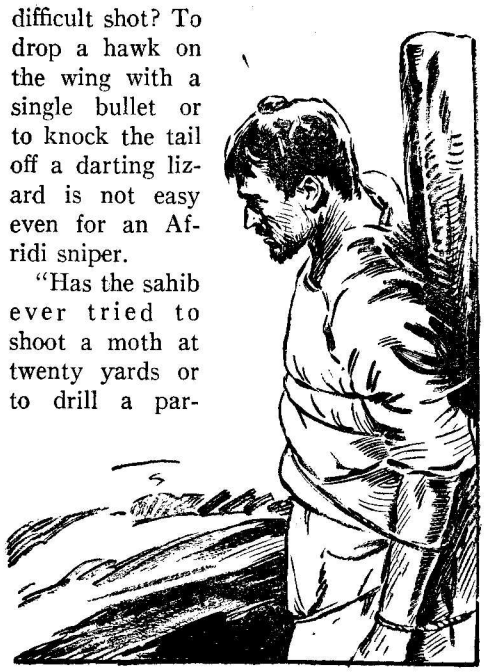
"IT'S all right, sahib. No need to hurry ourselves since the gazelle is dead. When we have reached the body you will find that my bullet has entered its skull at a point two fingers below the left ear and one finger to the right.

"How am I so certain? I am certain because I am Feroz Khan, the greatest marksman in the world. Feroz Khan on whom Allah has bestowed eyes keener than a hawk's, hands steadier than the hills, and a judgment of the tricks of wind and light such as no other man possesses.

"Is it not said of me in the Furious Gomal that when my bullets miss stones will fall upwards to the sky? And have I not just given proof of my skill by dropping a running gazelle at four hundred yards in a poor light? Not that I call that a difficult shot! Even a soldier should have killed that gazelle.

"The sahib asks what I *would* call a difficult shot? To drop a hawk on the wing with a single bullet or to knock the tail off a darting lizard is not easy even for an Afridi sniper.

"Has the sahib ever tried to shoot a moth at twenty yards or to drill a par-



ticular blade of corn in the center of a field when the wind is blowing? One day I will do those tricks for the sahib's pleasure. Not this day because I have a sore eye and my hands are shaking by reason of the fever I had last night, and were I to fail the sahib would laugh at me and say I was a boaster. Some day when I am feeling well I will do them; and the sahib will see for himself that I am no liar.

"The best shot I have ever made? It puzzles me to answer that question. When all are perfect, how can one make a choice?

"Thinking back I remember one occasion. . . . I will tell you about it, sahib, while we make a detour to the gazelle's body. . . .

"Usually a shot is fired to slay an enemy, is it not? But in the case of the shot of which I am thinking that was not the case I had to fire to save life and not to kill. My skill was the test of the innocence of a man wrongfully accused. . . ."

HE WAS my friend, my bhai-band (blood brother). Abdul Hakim was his name; we were of the same age and we lived in the same village. I speak of some years back when my skill with a rifle was not as great as it is now.

Even then I wasted fewer bullets than any other Afridi in the Gomal, and as the sahib is aware bullets to us are more precious than rubies. I had a Government rifle, a Lee Enfield of the latest pattern which I had chanced to find lying on the plain where a British regiment had camped. Yes, sahib, *found* was the word I said. I picked it up from the sand where some soldier had dropped it and I kept it for my own use.

Second only to Abdul Hakim, my blood-brother, I loved that rifle. Day and night it never left my hand; did I put it down for a moment I felt as if I were naked. It became as it were part of my own body. To lift it to my shoulder and take aim was as easy as crooking my finger.

I passed hours in polishing it and cleaning it and handling it. I had found a large quantity of ammunition at the same spot as I had found the rifle, and I used it without stint for practice. Always at targets that other men vowed it was impossible to hit. Wher I missed I tried again and again until the bullet found its mark. That is the way to learn to shoot.

Then it chanced there was a theft in the village. It was an old woman who was robbed. A pot of money was taken from her hut while she slept and she made complaint to Nur Din who was then the chief. In our Afridi villages theft is a graver matter than it is under the law of the British Raj. It is held to be a worse offense than killing and the penalty is death by strangulation.

Nur Din was a wise man and just. He sent every man, woman and child outside the village, only himself and a few of the leading men remaining, and they made a search. Suspicion had already fallen upon my blood-brother, and his was one of the first huts they visited. The earth beneath his bed had been recently disturbed, so they dug there and they found the pot with a little of the money still remaining.

Black evidence against Abdul Hakim, was it not, sahib? Too black, for had he really been the thief he would never have left the money where it could so easily be found. Besides, I knew for a certainty that he was innocent. On the night and at the time the money had been taken he had been with me in the hills shooting leopard, but I was the only man who could prove he had been there.

To me and to Abdul Hakim himself the matter was clear. He had an enemy, a lying dog called Shere Makmud. There had been a quarrel about a woman. Both Shere Makmud and my blood-brother had desired her. She had favored Abdul Hakim, and this trick was Shere Makmud's revenge.

Aye, he was a son of evil, that Shere Makmud! Pock-marked and ill-favoured as a camel, a coward in a fight and a disgrace to the Afridi clan, yet he had great cunning and a tongue that could babble

like a stream when the snows are melting. Even I, who knew that he was speaking lies, could hardly disbelieve him when he swore he had seen Abdul Hakim stealing away from the hut that night.

HE BROUGHT witnesses too. His relations and other base ones whom he had bribed to support his perjury. One had seen Abdul enter the hut; another had watched him dig the hole and hide the money; another had heard him boasting of the theft when his tongue had been loosened by wine. . . .

Thus did they swear in the *durbar* before Nur Din and the elders. They vomited their lies like poisoned jackals. As I listened I thought I could see the death-cord being twisted around the throat of my blood-brother.

Nur Din looked as if he believed their words. But just before he passed sentence he called for anyone who would testify to Abdul's innocence. And I was the only one who could come forward for I was the only one who knew for a certainty where Abdul had been that night.

It was my word against that of a dozen. And I had no golden tongue such as Shere Makmud possessed; it was bullets I was fluent with, not words. I gave my evidence, lying on the ground at Nur Din's feet and sobbing as I spoke. I was but a boy and my heart was bleeding at the thought of the injustice.

But Nur Din mocked me. He thought I was lying to save my blood-brother and did not question me with easy words as he had done Shere Makmud and his friends. Instead he spoke slightingly of my shooting. He asked me had I done such and such, and when I answered truthfully I had, he laughed aloud and called me a boaster and a liar.

He looked at Shere Makmud and his friends and they also laughed, seeking to curry favor with the chief. They were like jackals fawning round a lion. Then Nur Din turned to me and said:

"The feats you claim to have performed with your rifle are impossible; therefore you are condemned out of your own mouth as a liar. How then are we to believe what you tell us concerning Abdul Hakim? If your tongue lies about such a little matter as your skill at shooting, how much more must it lie when the life of your blood-brother is at stake!"

The words angered me. I answered hotly that I spoke the truth about both my skill at shooting and Abdul's innocence, and Shere Khan and his friends stood around and mocked.

Nur Din didn't laugh. He bent and he lifted a pebble from the ground. It was round and white and not quite so large as a hen's egg.

He held it up so that all could see it, and he asked if any man would undertake to hit that stone with a single bullet firing at a range of four hundred yards?

THERE was laughter at the question. At four hundred yards the stone would appear but a minute white speck even to a man with the eyesight of a hawk. If he hit it with a single bullet it could only be by accident.

I alone did not laugh. Nur Din turned to me and spoke tauntingly:

"What has Feroz Khan who claims to be the greatest shot in the Gomal to say about the matter?" he asked. "Surely Feroz Khan with his magic skill and his magic rifle can hit this great rock at such a short distance!"

Sahib, I was young and foolish and my blood was on fire by reason of the way they had mocked me. Although in my secret heart I felt no certainty about the matter, I answered boldly that I could hit the stone with ease.

My words were greeted with the laughter they deserved. Those were Afridis who heard me, fighting men who had carried firearms since they could walk, and they knew that my claim was but an empty boast. And they shouted to the chief that he should put me to the test.

Nur Din raised his hand to command silence. He answered in a loud voice so that all could hear:

"Against the evidence of a dozen men Feroz Khan has sworn that Abdul Hakim is innocent of the theft. Also, he has claimed that he can do the impossible with his rifle, and it is in my heart therefore to expose him as the liar he assuredly is.

"I will give him a chance to fulfil his boast. Tomorrow Abdul Hakim will be tied to a post so that he cannot move, and this stone will be placed upon his head. If Feroz Khan can knock the stone off with a single bullet without grazing the skin, I will take it as a sign from Allah that his blood-brother was innocent of the theft.

"If he misses the stone by aiming high or wide Abdul Hakim will die with the strangling-cord round his neck according to the custom, and if the bullet flies low and kills Abdul Hakim we will know that he was guilty and that Allah Himself has dealt justice.

"Feroz Khan, you have heard my words. Do you agree to make the test?"

Sahib, what could I do save agree? Had I refused my blood-brother would have lost even that poor chance of his life being saved.

So I agreed. Outwardly my face was bold, but there was no confidence in my heart. It was such a little pebble. And how could I under such a load of anxiety shoot my best? A man must have an easy mind if he would shoot straight.

I PASSED the night cleaning my rifle and offering prayers to Allah that he would defend the innocent. When the sun was fully risen they took me to the place where the test was to be made. Abdul Hakim had been bound to a post so that he could not move a finger and Nur Din himself placed the white stone upon his head.

At four hundred yards distance I lay down and sighted my rifle at the stone. Behind me stood Nur Din and the elders of the village and with them was Shere Makmud and the other men who had given witness. And these false ones grinned and whispered to one another as they watched.

I had planned to fire quickly. But my heart was beating so that my hands shook. The pebble danced about the foresight like a tiny white midge. Perspiration ran down my forehead and blinded my eyes. At last I lowered the rifle in despair without having touched the trigger.

Sahib, you should have heard how Shere Makmud and the dogs that were his friends yelped their glee! They thought I was afraid to fire. And by Allah, they were right, but that wasn't for *them* to know!

It was as if a devil came into my heart when I heard their laughter. I turned to Nur Din and I asked him if he would grant a favor.

He asked me what I wished. I answered, "Nur Din, it is in my heart to shame these fools. In their ignorance they think it is impossible to hit the stone at this range. Shall we move back another hundred yards that I can show them the marksmanship of Feroz Khan?"

And Nur Din answered, "It is your choice. Since you think the test is too easy we will increase the range."

So we moved back another hundred yards to the foot of a hill that stood beside the plain. And again I lay down and took my aim.

Now I could no longer see the pebble save as the faintest blur of white upon the darkness of Abdul Hakim's hair. A little wind had sprung up and there was sand moving about the plain.

IT CAME into my mind to aim low, thus saving my blood-brother from death by strangulation. But the beating of my heart made the rifle waver like a branch in the wind. And I was lying on soft sand that gave no firm rest for my elbow.

At last I lowered the rifle a second time and Shere Makmud and his friends yelled like jackals chasing a fox, asking me why I did not fire and if I thought the range was still too short.

Sahib, it was as if my blood turned to fire when I heard their taunts. You know how it is when the pride of an Afridi is affronted? Not even to save Abdul Hakim

would I submit myself to their mockery. Turning to the chief I asked if I might go up to the top of the hill, than which no longer range was possible, and prove my marksmanship by hitting the stone from there?

If you should call my request madness, sahib, you would be right. For it was the madness of great pride—and to Nur Din, the chief, it was rich comedy.

Laughing, he gave permission. It was a small hill, but the sides were steep. I climbed up alone and when I got to the top I lay down and took aim for the third time.

It was my last chance. Sahib, I swear that neither before or since has a man aimed a rifle with greater care.

I made my body as it were part of the rock on which I lay. I cleaved to it with my chest, my knees, the insides of my thighs and my feet. I held my breath and it was as if a thread of light proceeded from my eyes and lay level along the sights.

I thought of the sun and the wind and the distortion of the glare beating up from the sand. While I made the calculations I prayed to Allah, and my forefinger tightened on the trigger as slowly as the tendril of a plant curling round a twig.

I held my breath; I think even my heart stopped beating: And then—gently, lingeringly as if I were kissing the lips of a *houri*—I dispatched the bullet. But before it had left the barrel I knew that it would never hit the pebble.

I had aimed short and a little to the left. Very short, if the truth be told. Instead of winging its way above the plain to where Abdul stood, my bullet struck the sand close to the foot of the hill. . . . Ay, but before it struck that sand it had passed through Shere Makmud's head.

Before Shere Makmud's body touched the ground his brother somersaulted in the air with my second bullet through his spine. I was firing faster than a man could wink. My third bullet brought down his father, my fourth and fifth sent yet two more of the lying dogs to howl at the gates of Paradise.

Ho, ho, Sahib! I would you had been present to see! There was no cover where they could hide; had I wished I could have killed them all with ease. When I shouted to know if they were satisfied with the test, they answered on their knees with their hands raised in the air.

With one voice they cried that Abdul Hakim was innocent, and they besought me not to fire again lest once more I should miss the pebble!

In truth, sahib, they made a fine sight —those fellows cringing down there below me, in terror of the deadliness of my beloved gun.

Sahib, behold the body of the gazelle. Shot through the neck instead of where I said. Blame the fever, Sahib—the fever that made my hand shake.

And around the fantan tables ran frightened whispers of dishonor . . . and sudden death

The Last Pigtail

Where the dragon slithers unchecked through the night only the very foolish or the very brave seek him out. The story of an Oriental St. George who dared the monster's flaming breath . . . and lived

By WALTER C. BROWN
Author of "Steal No Man's Shadow"

CHINATOWN has more than its share of odd characters—there is moon-faced Mark Sin, high priest of fantan—Lum Kai the apothecary, whose steel-rim spectacles are without glass—Soy Han the blind wood-carver—Yang Hop, onetime public executioner of Canton—and my friend Gow Yat, who used to pack the bones of dead Chinese into Silver-plated caskets, after having boiled off the flesh in a big iron pot which may still be seen for a price in a certain cellar of Long Sword Alley.

And then there is Wu Lung—

This Wu Lung is something of a landmark in the Yellow Quarter. He is always pointed out to the look-see people from the rubberneck bus, for he is the proud owner of the last pigtail in Chinatown.

The name Wu Lung means "Black Dragon," which was Number One bad guess on the part of his honorable parents, for while Wu Lung is quite black of hair and eye, he is mild of manner and soft of speech, and so thin that he was speedily rejected when there was a vacancy for the

Number Five legs of the silk dragon which prances through the crooked streets on the Feast of the New Year.

In fact, Wu Lung's exceeding leanness was a favorite subject for the slant-eyed jokesters of Chinatown.

"Is that a pigtail, O Man of Narrow Shadow," a shaven-headed wit would ask, "or is it thy younger brother standing at thy shoulder?"

And Wu Lung would reply with patient good-humor, "Is it not written that the man who fattens his paunch devours his own fortune?"

Another would exclaim, "Behold Wu Lung and his pigtail—the two Nimble Boys!" making word-play on the nickname for a pair of chopsticks, and this would call forth much cackling laughter.

"Thou wouldst do excellently well in battle," Sam Sing the barber snickered. "Did the supply of bullets fail, thou couldst serve as Long Sword in the General's hand."

"The courage of the Dragon dwells within the blood," Wu Lung replied, "not in meat and bones. Was ever fat man a hero in battle?"

Thus it went to and fro in gibe and jest, no one dreaming that in the Hour of Trial and Testing this frail Wu Lung, and he alone, would have courage to face without flinching the Black Frown of Yo Fei—Bringer of Death and Disaster.

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Thus runs the Chinese proverb, and its truth is revealed in this curious tale of Wu Lung and his old-fashioned queue.

THE single step in this strange history was a little incident I myself chanced to witness one high noon in the heart of Chinatown where, at a tea-house wall, slant-eyed crowds pause to study the war bulletins, pasted on long scrolls of "broken stick" writing.

A shining blue limousine drew up at the curb and a venerable Chinaman got out, a genuine "ancient of years," moustaches thin and drooping and cheeks wrinkled, but with the bright, sardonic eyes of a parrot. This was old Lee Shu, patriach of silk merchants. His skull-cap flaunted the milk-white button of a topflight mandarin.

As if by magic a path opened through the crowd, and at the other end of this living lane stood lathlike Wu Lung in his plain blue coolie-smock, his famous pigtail hanging down like a limp snake from his round black hat.

The old mandarin advanced through this silent lane until he came face to face with Wu Lung, then he bowed three times with the real Number One kowtow. Wu Lung bowed politely in return and touched the old man's wrinkled hand to his forehead as a token of respect.

Not a single word was spoken, not even a *"Hai!"* or a *"Wah!"* The old Chinaman simply turned around and hobbled back to his car, the limousine drove off, and Wu Lung's figure was swallowed up by the closing crowd.

A trivial incident, yes, but one highly significant if you are wise in the mysterious ways of Chinatown, a topsy-turvy place where the yellow man buys his coffin while he is in perfect health, and spreads a twelve- or sixteen-course banquet for his friends when he feels his days are numbered.

"When a white-button mandarin makes a three-time kowtow to a nobody like Wu Lung," I said to myself, "you can bet there's a story behind it. Ten to one Sergeant O'Hara can give me the clue."

"Has Wu Lung been up to anything recently?" I asked the red-haired sergeant.

"Murder, that's all!" O'Hara snapped. "He knocked off Quong Lee!"

"Murder!" I echoed. "Why, I just passed Wu Lung on the street."

"Yeah—I had to turn him loose." O'Hara's face turned as red as his hair. "I couldn't make out a jury case—no murder weapon. I'm still burned up about it. Not that Quong Lee wasn't good riddance, but there's the law!"

"Any time a China boy makes a monkey out of the famous Sergeant O'Hara," I said with a grin, "he must have plenty of

stuff on the ball. Tell me about it, Sarge."

"I'll do better," O'Hara offered. "I'll show you the scene of the crime. It's around the corner—Paradise Court."

NOW Paradise Court is a huddle of houses between Mulberry Lane and Pagoda Street. Anything can happen in Paradise Court, and frequently does, especially on the shady side of midnight.

We stopped at Number 14, where one of O'Hara's men was still on guard. The front door had a lining of half inch sheet-iron. "The back door is nailed shut," O'Hara said. "All the windows are nailed down, with bars on 'em. This is the only way in—or out."

"Quong Lee was expecting trouble?" I asked.

O'Hara nodded. "He lived in constant fear of his life, and small wonder, some of the tales I've dug up about him. He kept four bodyguards in the house, and didn't go out on the streets once in a month. . . . Come on upstairs, and I'll show you the room where we found his body."

The room was filled with magnificent wreckage—of silk hangings, lacquer panels, devil-screens, furniture of carved teak. All the floorboards had been pried up, and half the walls torn down in O'Hara's search for the fatal weapon. There were smells—of incense, opium, and something stronger, perhaps the ghosts of Quong Lee's sins.

O'Hara pointed to a massive chair. "Quong Lee was sitting there."

"I don't see any bloodstains."

"No—he didn't bleed much. Small wound."

"A bullet?" I asked.

O'Hara rubbed his chin. "Now you've got me! There was a little round hole in his chest—right about here. Took him clean through the heart and came out at the back. The kind of a hole a .22 caliber might make, but we can't find the gun—nor the bullet!"

"Maybe he was stabbed," I suggested. "What kind of a knife would go in at the front and come out at the back?" O'Hara reminded. "Anyway, what became of it?"

"Well, what makes you think Wu Lung did this job?"

"When we broke in here," O'Hara explained, "we found Wu Lung barricaded in the next room, and Quong Lee's four bodyguards trying to break down the door. Look—in here—"

This was a bare little room, containing nothing but a sleeping *k'ang*, a bamboo chest, a strip of rice-straw matting, and a gaudy *feng-shui* chart hanging on the wall. O'Hara's wrecking crew had been busy in that room, too.

"Wu Lung didn't kick up a fuss," O'Hara said. "I put the cuffs on him and he came along like a little lamb."

"Well, it seems you've got plenty of circumstantial evidence against Wu Lung—enough to hang him, I'd say."

"Wait! We're coming now to the queerest part of the whole business. It's bad enough that we can't find the weapon—but Wu Lung's got four witnesses who swear he was unarmed when he entered this room!"

"Who are the witnesses?"

"They're Quong Lee's own guards. Can you tie that one? Like I said before, Quong was in some kind of trouble with the Tongs, and he figured they'd try to bump him off. Before anybody could get in to see him face to face, he'd have these guards search 'em—a real search, too, taking away all their clothes and giving 'em a guest-robe to wear while they were talking to Quong."

"And they put Wu Lung through that?"

"They did, and they found nothing. Certainly he had no weapons when I hauled him out of that room, because I had him searched myself. That's why we practically tore this place apart—"

"Maybe one of his own guards killed Quong?" I suggested.

O'Hara shook his head. "The wound in his chest couldn't have been made by the knives they carried. I hammered questions at them by the hour, and got nowhere. I'm convinced they're just as much in the

dark as I am about what happened in this room."

"Well, what was Wu Lung's version of it?"

"Wu Lung no speakee In-gleesh!" O'Hara mimicked in high falsetto. "And when a Chinee decides to play dumb, he could teach tricks to an oyster. Ten days in clink, and the only time Wu Lung opened his mouth was to ask for some lichee nuts."

"Did he get them?"

"No!" O'Hara exploded. "At one o'clock in the morning? I was off duty, pounding the hay, when the precinct phoned that Wu Lung wanted to see me. I get dressed like a fireman and arrive on the gallop—and that's what he asks me! Lichee nuts! If I could've been sure he was pullin' my leg I'd have slugged him one right then."

"That's something you'll never know, Sarge," I smiled.

"Well, I know this much," O'Hara snapped. "If Quong Lee wasn't knocked off by that skinny Chinaman, I'll eat the stripes off my uniform, and my badge and buttons for dessert!"

Thus the Voice of the West, speaking in the person of Sergeant Dennis O'Hara, red-haired *tuchun* of the Blue Devils with the Hard Sticks. But for the Voice of the East, I sought out my Chinese friend Gow Yat. Gow was busy showing his gruesome iron pot to some tourists and trying to sell them eight-sided Chinese dice which he declared were carved from human knuckle-bones.

"Wu Lung is a true Son of the Dragon-Blood," Gow Yat said when we were alone. "One worthy to be robed in yellow silk and fed by the hands of slaves until he is plump of flesh as the Belly God. *Wah!* Is it not written that a Deed of Justice is more fragrant to Kwan-Yim the All-Knowing than the smoke of a thousand scented candles?"

Here, then, I will impart to you the true story of the pigtailed Wu Lung, of the War Chest of the Five Tongs, and of the strange death of Quong Lee, as it is not known even to Sergeant O'Hara—

THE trouble began one night at the crowded fantan tables of Mark Sin the gambler. Moon-faced Mark himself had just finished counting off the little pile of shining black beans in fours with his ivory rake, and number "three" had won.

"Hoi! Hoi! Hola!" the winner chortled, clinking a handful of coins. "Harken to the silver music of Liu Hai, God of Money! It is a sweeter sound than the tinkling of wind-chimes or the sky-music of Shanghai's fluted pigeons!"

A pockmarked Chinese had pulled a five-dollar bill from his leather pouch and asked for its value in "hard money," when suddenly a yellow hand darted from the ring of players and snatched up the bill with a cry of "Thief! Thief!"

"Thou liest! By Tao, the money is mine!" the pockmarked man shouted, and tried to recapture the bill, but the loud-voiced claimant pinned it to the table with a swift knife-blade.

"Touch it at thy peril!" he hissed, and drew a second two-edged blade from his girdle. The fantan players scattered like dry leaves before the dragon-wind, and Mark Sin's massive bulk heaved up from the banker's stool.

"Wherefore this bawling and brawling?" he demanded of the knife-man. "My ears await thy words, Toy Yip."

"Hear me!" Toy Yip replied. "Three days past I did place this very piece of money into the hands of Wing Chu for the War Chest of the Five Tongs, to help our fighting brothers over the far blue sea. How comes it now into the hand of this coolie?"

"Hold!" Mark Sin said. "It is true that a father may recognize his own son at a single glance, but one piece of printed money is like unto another, even as the sands of the sea."

"Not so, Mark Sin," Toy Yip returned. "Cast thine eyes upon it more closely, and declare in a loud voice whether there is not a stain of purple ink upon the corner of this money?"

"There is indeed such a mark," the

gambler affirmed, and turned to the pock-marked man. "What say you to that, O Man of Pitted Face?"

"I know naught of this," the pock-marked man replied. "I am a clerk in the house of the honorable Wing Chu, merchant of silks and teas. Today, at the going down of the sun, this piece of money was given me for wage from my master's own hand."

At these words the room was suddenly filled with the sound of hissing breaths caught and held, for Wing Chu the merchant was known to all as the Keeper of the War Chest. Mark Sin thrust his hands into his sleeves while he pondered the case.

"Here is something of a significance too deeply hidden for one whose years of wisdom have not yet gathered a beard," he said. "If the words of this clerk are truth, then Wing Chu must be summoned before the Elder Council of the Five tongs to explain why this piece of money was not locked away inside the sacred War Chest."

"Thy words are pearls of wisdom," Toy Yip replied.

NOW Wu Lung of the Pigtail was the "Slipper" of this Elder Council—the official messenger—and he quickly put on the padded footgear with the two-inch soles and brocaded tops which was the insignia of his office, and summoned the five and twenty members of the Elder Council.

In great secrecy and behind guarded doors the Council met, sipping rice-wine and smoking long bamboo pipes while the Grand Clerk cast the prayer-blocks and made intricate calculations from their fall.

"The Lords of the Upper Realm give gracious assent to our labors," the Grand Clerk announced. Then the Council examined the marked bill, still pinioned to the table top by the shining knife. They listened to the evidence of Toy Yip the accuser, to that of Mark Sin, and Wing Chu's clerk.

Finally Wing Chu the merchant was summoned, and on hearing the charge, the old man fell into such a shaking and trembling that his words of defence could scarce be made out.

There were two among those present who were most strict and pitiless in their questioning—the Grand Clerk of the Council, and Quong Lee, who was a member from the Tsin Tien Tong.

And indeed, this was a question of weight and substance, for there was not a yellow man in the whole of Chinatown, from the humblest coolie to the mandarin Lee Shu, who had not pledged himself to pay a certain sum each Moon into the War Chest fund, which was destined to help their distant kinsmen fight the Brown Monkeys of Yedo who were laying waste the homeland with devil-guns and sky-wagons which rained down iron eggs.

"Whosoever would reach his thieving hand into the War Chest," the Grand Clerk said sternly, 'is such a man as would not scruple to steal the sacred jade bowl from the very shrine of Kwan-ti. The sum in question is not large, but a single straw may serve to mark the course of the strongest wind."

"Touching this matter of the printed piece of money," Wing Chu stammered, "amazement has robbed me of all store of words, but the book of my life is written in large letters on pages white as rice, where all men may read. Did I ever steal so much as one brass *cash* from any man, may I never look upon the faces of my honorable ancestors in the Shadow-world!"

"One glance with the eye outweighs a thousand words," the Grand Clerk replied. "Tomorrow, Wing Chu, you will return here at the hour of noon, bringing with you the War Chest, which is now lodged in the Plum Blossom Joss House. We will then have a counting of money and a casting of accounts, to determine if aught is amiss with our sacred funds."

"To hear is to obey," Wing Chu replied. "I shall pray to my household joss meanwhile for sharpness of eye and swiftness of brain to deal with this stain upon the honorable House of Wing."

The old man drew off a large jade ring which he wore upon his index finger and put it upon the altar. "It is not fitting that one whose truth has been called in question, however unjustly, should wear the ring of the Great Seal until his hands have been declared worthy."

Wing Chu made a deep bow, and the five and twenty members of the Elder Council rose and bowed in return as the old man departed with faltering steps.

Whereupon Quong Lee and the Grand Clerk glanced sidewise at each other and shook hands with themselves in high glee.

"Toy Yip has played his part well," the Grand Clerk snickered. "It falls out exactly as we have planned."

"Wing Chu's pride will not endure the disgrace we have put upon him," Quong Lee said. "Which will he choose—the Hard Way or the Soft?"

"The Hard," answered the Grand Clerk. "Steel is quick and almost without pain."

"I will wager thee ten silver pieces he will choose the Soft Way," Quong Lee replied.

AND Quong Lee won his wager, for old Wing Chu did not choose the knife. He went home, burned a quantity of red paper prayers before his ancestral tablets and quietly strangled himself with a length of red silk cord—the Soft Way.

Like the whisper of leaves in the night wind the news ran through Chinatown, and Wu Lung once more put on his brocaded slippers and knocked at this door, and at that, rousing the Elder Council. They met before dawn, five and twenty grave and silent men, staring at the ring of the Great Seal which still lay upon the altar.

"We must choose at once a new Keeper of the War Chest," the Grand Clerk announced. "May Tao lend us of his wisdom to choose one more worthy than our last."

Wu Lung passed out bamboo splints and inkpots, so that each councillor might mark his choice, then he collected the wooden ballots in a square of yellow silk and brought them to the Grand Clerk.

The Grand Clerk counted the ballots, broke them in two, and wrapped the pieces in the silk. "You have chosen the honorable Quong Lee for Keeper of the War Chest!" he called out, and quickly put the ring of the Great Seal upon Quong's finger.

Quong Lee bowed three times to the altar, three times to the council, and once to the Grand Clerk.

"Honorable Elders, the spirit of this unworthy person is humbled to the dust before thy gracious gift of trust. Tao helping, this insignificant mortal will strive to merit the shining honor. With the Grand Clerk by my side for witness, I shall repair at once to the Plum Blossom Joss House and make report on the true condition of the War Chest."

Now it was part of Wu Lung's official duties to take the used ballots and burn them in a fire, and he was in the midst of this routine task when he found the newly elected Keeper behind his shoulder.

"Make haste! Make haste!" Quong Lee snapped angrily. "Art thou brother to the snail, or is it thy hope to peep and pry into matters which concern thee not?"

So Wu Lung hastened his fingers, astonished at the harsh and haughty tones which had succeeded Quong Lee's honeyed manner while before the Elders, and even more astonished to see the hilt of a dagger protruding from Quong's clenched hand.

LATER Wu Lung sought out several of the Councillors who were his friends.

"My spirit is greatly troubled," he confided, "with a thought persistent as an aching tooth, and yet I fear to loosen my tongue—"

"Unburden thy mind, Wu Lung," they urged. "Here are none but thy friends."

"It is thus," Wu Lung said slowly. "The Grand Clerk did declare Quong Lee as chosen for Keeper of the War Chest, yet as I cast the broken ballots into the fire, not one did I see bearing his name, but many marked for Lee Shu the mandarin."

"I myself did marvel that Quong Lee should be chosen," an elder replied, "for

he is a man of violence and wrath whose way of life is by no means as spotless as freshly carved ivory nor as fragrant as jasmine buds."

"This is indeed a strange matter, Wu Lung," another remarked. "But how can it now be revealed to the eyes of men, since the bamboo sticks are reduced to dust and ash?"

"Let us watch and wait," Wu Lung said. "Time holds the key to every lock."

Presently Quong Lee made report that a certain large sum was lacking between the amount stored away in the War Chest and the accounts written down during Wing Chu's term as Keeper—a fact also attested by the Grand Clerk.

"These words of Quong Lee strike upon my ears like blows," Wu Lung whispered to his friends. "I would not cry thief! at the honorable Wing Chu unless his own voice proclaimed his guilt."

"Wing Chu cannot speak to us from the Shadow-world," his friends reminded him. "It is a thing forbidden by the Lords of the Ghost-land."

"Then I have more faith in the silence of the dead than in the voice of the living!" Wu Lung declared firmly. "Let us go ourselves to the Joss House and demand to be shown the War Chest, that we may take our own accounting of the sums."

But the yellow-robed *bonze* at the Plum Blossom Joss House would not permit them even to set eyes upon the War Chest. "It is locked away within a hidden room," he informed them. "No one may enter there save he who wears the ring of the Great Seal. So I have sworn, by order of the Elder Council, and on the Triple Oath of Milo Fo."

"There remains but one path to reach our goal," Wu Lung said. "We will demand that Quong Lee himself open this locked door."

At these words the Councillors hesitated and exchanged uneasy looks, so that Wu Lung cried out, "If Quong Lee wears the Great Seal because of plotting and planning with the ballots, think you he will stop with that? There is a great and growing treasure in the War Chest—a thief might dip his hands into our money to the wrists, aye, to the very elbows!"

"But who," they asked, "who will have the courage to carry this demand to Quong Lee, a man of dragon-temper and over-hasty with blows?"

The silence was like a heavy stone until one proposed, "Wu Lung himself should be our messenger, for is he not the Slipper of our revered Council?"

"True," Wu Lung replied, "but Quong Lee may take anger that one of lowly station should be sent to deal with him on a matter of such weight. This humble person must decline the honor. Let us decide by lot who is to be the voice of our discontent."

So they agreed to a drawing of straws, and the short straw fell to one named Gan-yo, who seemed not overly pleased at being thus favored by the Lords of Chance.

IT WAS a dark night of drifting fog when the little group set out for Number 14 Paradise Court, where Quong Lee lodged. On the way Gan-yo kept mumbling over the phrases of the prepared speech, fruit of their united thoughts.

"There is a light in Quong Lee's upper window," Wu Lung pointed out. "Tao guard thee, Gan-yo. Do not suffer this Quong Lee to shout thee down. Keep a stiffness of knee and a firmness of voice. And should he forsake the path of reason and offer violence, a single shout will bring us speedily to thy rescue."

Within five paces Gan-yo's figure was swallowed up by the pearly mist, and presently they heard the sound of a door closing. They waited, silent and attentive, a huddle of gray shadows under a misty lamp that shone like the yellow eye of a surly giant.

The minutes moved onward with the plodding pace of a camel caravan, but Gan-yo did not return. The ragged fog turned into a chilling drizzle of rain, at which Wu Lung coiled his precious pigtail on the top of his skull, under his dripping black hat.

"It is a vexation of spirit to stand so long under a leaking sky," one grumbled.

"Have patience!" Wu Lung counseled. "Wouldst change thy part in this for Gan-yo's?"

Suddenly the light in Quong Lee's window was gone out like a blown candle, and they looked at each other with the same mute question.

"There is no help for it," Wu Lung said. "Since Gan-yo does not come to us, we must go to him!"

With cautious and reluctant feet they crossed the misty Court and approached the dark door of the darker house, and Wu Lung beat upon the panels.

Presently a bolt was drawn and the door yawned open, revealing Quong Lee with a lamp in his hand. "What seek ye at this unseemly hour?" he demanded.

"We seek news of our friend Gan-yo, who is within thy house," Wu Lung replied, finding himself unexpectedly left in the forefront by his companions.

"Not so," Quong Lee made answer. "Gan-yo departed long since."

"But how may this be?" Wu Lung stammered. "We did wait for him in the street yonder, by the iron lamp."

"Mayhap he went by unseen, for it is a night of blinding fog. But if the word of Quong Lee does not content you, choose one to come within and make search for your missing friend."

Quong Lee smiled craftily and stood aside with a low bow, so that the two crooked knives he wore in his girdle stuck out plainly in curved humps. His visitors marked these sinister bulges, and the hallway, black as a dragon's throat, and shuffled their feet uneasily.

"Thy word is sufficient," one answered hurriedly. "We will seek Gan-yo at his lodging."

"Tao guide thy search!" Quong Lee mocked, and slammed the door in their faces.

In silence they marched through the wet streets and pounded on Gan-yo's door, all knowing in their hearts there would be no response.

"Perhaps Gan-yo has stopped by the way to visit friends," some one suggested in a weak tone.

"Gan-yo has been sent to visit his ancestors!" Wu Lung said sharply. "Let us not hide our pitiful lack of courage under two-faced words."

"Quong Lee's door was held open to you, as to us," came the angry retort. "Why did one who bears the name of Black Dragon hold back?"

"I am a man of peaceful habits," Wu Lung replied, "and entirely without skill in the use of pointed steel. But I will not lack the courage to face Quong Lee in full Council, and speak my doubts concerning that which we have witnessed this night."

BUT when the Elder Council assembled, Wu Lung's plans were forestalled by the crafty Quong Lee. No sooner had the prayer papers been burned than Quong Lee stood forth, settling the ring of the Great Seal upon his yellow finger.

"Honorable Elders of the Five Tongs, last night one named Gan-yo did visit my humble dwelling, making talk of this and that, and when he had taken his departure I did miss also a certain leather purse containing a sum of money recently collected for our War Chest. Wishing to question Gan-yo concerning this, I now learn that he is not to be found at his lodging."

Quong Lee stilled the rising murmur with lifted hand. "Have no fear of loss, Honorable Councillors—for my trustful carelessness it is only just that I replace the stolen sum from my private moneys, but I hereby make offer of twenty silver pieces to any man who shall reveal the hiding-place of the Gan-yo the Thief!"

Hearing this, Wu Lung and his friends sucked their breaths in amazement, stricken speechless by the brazen skill with which Quong Lee had stripped all the meat from their bones of contention.

But Wu Lung had a certain wiliness of his own, and after some hours of a thoughtful twisting of the braided end of his pig-

tail, he betook himself to old Lee Shu and talked long and earnestly to the mandarin.

In due course, and under the mandarin's urging, the Elder Council passed a new resolve that on the First Day of each Moon a designated member of the Council should accompany the Keeper and the Grand Clerk for an inspection of the War Chest.

"It is an act of superior wisdom," Quong Lee commented, but Wu Lung, marking his bland smile, feared trouble. "This plan will somehow come to naught," he predicted. "Quong Lee has a devil-brain which arrives at an answer before the question is fully spoken."

An Inspector was duly chosen, and on the appointed day set out with Quong Lee and the Grand Clerk for the Joss House. Within a short time Quong Lee returned in haste to the Council chamber.

"A most unhappy event has befallen," he said. "As we went up the temple stairs, which are dark and steep, the Inspector stumbled and fell. The apothecary has been sent for with all haste, for he lies moaning and groaning like one who is yielding up his last breath. Choose, then, another to act in his place."

A second Inspector was hurriedly chosen, and accompanied Quong Lee. The Council waited through the waning day and the twilight, growing uneasy over the long delay. Then came Quong Lee again—and alone.

"We are plagued by devils!" he cried. "My spirit droops under a fresh burden of sorrow. The second Inspector was bending over the War Chest when the iron lid fell down by some mischance, and we fear it hath broken his neck. We had just finished a counting of the money, finding all in perfect order—and if any doubt still remains touching this matter, choose yet another to go with me."

But by now there was a certain kind of creeping fear abroad in the Council chamber, as if a cold wind blew from some secret cranny, so that the Elders glanced away from the haughty eye of Quong Lee, who stood there waiting with his crooked smile and his crooked knife.

"It is plain that the Lords of the Upper Realm frown upon this plan," one said. "Let the matter be set aside at least until the next moon. Mayhap Tao will lend us of his wisdom in the time of waiting."

Thus did the Elder Council meekly surrender its powers, and the treasure of the War Chest lay at the sole mercy of Quong Lee. With one Inspector lying prone with a broken leg, and another stretched upon his *k'ang* like unto a living dead man—with remembrance of the fate of Wing Chu and of Gan-yo—not one could be found who dared accompany Quong Lee into the locked room of the Joss House.

AND Quong Lee, still smiling his crooked smile, dropped his hand heavily on Wu Lung's shoulder. "Mend thy ways, Honorable Slipper," he said with a fierce softness of tone. "Thou art slow of foot, but swift of tongue. Change this about, I counsel thee, lest thy days be shortened!"

The collection of War Chest money went on, week after week, but no one knew how much of it actually found its way into the iron chest. Presently dark tales began to be whispered, tales of nightly feasting and gaming and all manner of high revelry taking place behind the close-barred shutters of Number 14 Paradise Court.

Wu Lung's group of discontented gained new members as these rumors spread. "Thy words of warning have been made truth," they said to Wu Lung. "We have opened our doors to a hungry tiger who will drive us all from the house while he devours our hard-won substance."

"He must be driven forth," Wu Lung said.

"But how? Quong Lee will not yield up his office, which hath ten full Moons yet to run. It is death to brave his anger."

"If we could but snatch the ring of the Great Seal from his finger," Wu Lung replied, "we might take the War Chest from the Joss House and give it into the keeping of the mandarin Lee Shu."

"Hola!" one cried out in reply. "Why then do we not plan together and hire a notable knife-man who will set upon Quong Lee in a dark street and pull the ring from his finger?"

"Thy thought shines like a candle in a dark room!" Wu Lung exclaimed. "But I fear one man alone cannot master Quong Lee, who has the strength of a tiger and carries death in both hands. There must be at least two."

"The Brothers Wei!" another cried. "They are prowlers of the night and strangers to fear, and for a price would twist the Dragon's tail into a knot!"

"Wah!" came a quick chorus of assent.

So it came about that on a certain moonless night as Quong Lee passed through a dark street two figures rose up and leaped upon him, and in the morning one of Sergeant O'Hara's men found the Brothers Wei lying together near a bloodstained wall, cold and stiff and glassy of eye.

"Couple of Chinks fought it out with knives last night, Sergeant," the Blue Coat reported. "Both dead—cut each other to ribbons."

"And no witnesses to be found, I suppose?" O'Hara asked.

"No witnesses," the policeman replied. "This is Chinatown, Sarge."

Wu Lung said nothing, unhappily twisting and untwisting the end of his pigtail, for the Oriental grapevine hung heavy with bitter fruit. The whispers told how Quong Lee had hired four bodyguards, and how the doors of the house in Paradise Court had been thickened with iron plates, and the windows webbed with iron bars.

Furthermore, Quong Lee ventured but rarely into the streets, and visited the Joss House at secret hours which no man could predict.

"It is plain Quong Lee has read our warning," Wu Lung said to his friends. "Our difficulties are doubled thrice over. I greatly fear the ring of the Great Seal has passed beyond our reaching."

"Then Quong Lee must die!" came the answer. "Shall we stand by and do nothing while he destroys our sacred fund in riotous living? Shall we lose face before our distant brothers who cry to us for help? Let us make up a sum and send to the Tongs of a distant city for their most skilful Stealer-of-shadows."

"Hai! Death to Quong Lee!" was the general shout.

"Think well before this step!" Wu Lung counseled. "The taking of life is a deed that cannot be undone. Let each one sit alone in meditation from sun to sun, taking no food and burning prayers to Tao. Then we will gather and mark wood, as it is done in full Council."

WU LUNG'S advice was followed, but the bamboo ballots were a sentence of death upon Quong Lee without one dissenting vote. In due course the Stealer-of-shadows arrived, secretly and at night—a tall man of Manchu blood, with quick hands and eyes that glinted like jet black buttons.

"Welcome!" Wu Lung greeted. "There is one named Quong Lee whose shadow wearies us, for it is heavy as a millstone, and we would be free of it. Thou art skilful at work of this delicate nature?"

"Behold!" the Manchu replied, flicking a knife from his sleeve and driving it into the mid-panel of a distant door so deeply that Wu Lung had to brace himself with his knee in order to tug it forth from the wood.

"A throw of excellence, swift and true," Wu Lung remarked, "but we have little faith in the knife, having tried before and failed."

"Behold!" the Manchu cried again and whipped out a pistol, firing with the self-same motion and so skilfully that the bowl of a councillor's bamboo pipe, being no larger than a thimble, was blown away into a hundred pieces.

"Choose thou between the cold steel and the hot," the Manchu invited. "I have equal skill with both."

"Then take both on thy errand," Wu Lung advised, "and use one or the other as circumstances dictate. We will pay thee and pay thee well, and ask only for the

jade ring which is now upon the finger of Quong Lee."

"It is already thine," the Manchu boasted, "as certain as tomorrow's sun."

When the three-day guest rites had been fulfilled, the Manchu set out for Paradise Court to steal Lee's shadow, bearing a false letter with which to gain admittance to his presence.

Wu Lung and his friends waited with bated breath, but the Manchu did not return to claim his reward. The hours of night gave way to a dawn as brightly blue as the roof-tiles of the Temple of Heaven in the Forbidden City, and a Blue Coat, passing the Tsin Tien Tong House, saw one who sat upon the white stone steps, his chin sunk upon his chest.

"Wake up, yellow boy!" the Blue Coat called. "You can't be sleepin' in a public street. Get along with ye now!" But when he stirred the lounging figure with his nightstick the Manchu rolled over and slid to the pavement with the limpness of a rag doll.

"Holy Joe—a stiff!" the Blue Coat exclaimed, and his whistle shrilled above the crooked street, so that another Blue Coat came running.

"Dead he is—and stone cold!" the first Blue Coat said. "I can't find a mark on him!" Nor did they find the cause of the Manchu's death until they stripped off his clothing in the Morgue.

"It's got me beat, Sarge," the Blue Coat reported to O'Hara. "Here's this Chink with half a dozen .38 slugs in him, and not even a pin hole in his outside clothes!"

The strange death of the Manchu became a mystery that was much discussed by white men and yellow, and ten thousand questions brought ten thousand answers, but the sum of knowledge resulting was meagre as a beggar's breakfast.

Sergeant O'Hara, the chief man of the Blue Coats, urged those who served him to feverish activity—and it was useless as the play of children.

But Wu Lung understood what had happened, and his friends understood, and when they drifted one by one into the deepest and darkest cellar of Chinatown for a secret meeting, they spoke in such terrified whispers that they could scarce hear each other's voices from an elbow's length.

"There is nothing more to be done," they wailed. "Quong Lee is proof against our utmost efforts. We are cast down and utterly vanquished. Perhaps even now we are marked for the same fate."

Their fear was so great that they made not the least effort to conceal it now. They cringed like men already chosen by Yo Fei, Bringer of Death; and their brains had lost all the wisdom of their years.

Wu Lung sat huddled in a corner, twisting on his pigtail, his forehead creased like the furrows of a rice *padi*.

"Hearken to me, Friends of the Cause," he said, rising slowly to his feet. "I have taken thought and schemed a scheme, and I will face this Quong Lee in his lair and Tao willing, I shall bring back the ring of the Great Seal!"

But they endeavored to dissuade him, saying: "This is a madness—a wanton digging of thine own grave. What canst thou do, with thy little strength, where the most notable Shadow-stealer has failed? Quong Lee has the magic arts of a *shaman*—how else could he cause bullets to strike without a piercing of the outer cloth?"

"I have thought deeply about this matter of the bullets," Quong Lee replied. "The death of the Manchu is as plain to me as large letters painted upon rice paper."

"And what weapon wilt thou carry?" they asked.

"I shall go with empty hands," Wu Lung replied, and smiled oddly, nor would he explain his meaning further. So he put on his Number One robe of peacock blue with the good-luck *choy* embroidered on the right shoulder, and his padded slippers with the brocaded tops, and went to knock upon the door of Number 14 Paradise Court.

"And what followed upon this is already well known to thee, Tajen," Gow

at said in conclusion of his tale. "How uong Lee lost his shadow and how Wu ung was found in the house, having put ie ring of the Great Seal upon his fin-er, a fact which luckily escaped the eyes the Blue Coats—"

"But how did he manage to kill Quong ee?" I demanded. "That is the point of e whole tale."

"Of that point I may not speak, Tajen. is a matter not safe in the telling, en with a small voice and behind a raised nd. The Law of this Rice-Face Land is rd as the stones of the Great Wall, and so blind as a *foo* dog. If proof is needed, it not true that the Rice-Face artists cture your Honorable Lady of Justice th blindfolded eyes?"

That was a point that struck me as rticularly convincing at the time, though certainly could not admit it to Gow at. I was determined to pin him down mehow.

"But murder is murder, anywhere in e world," I argued. "There are laws gainst murder, even in China."

"True, Tajen, but our venerable Judges eigh not only the deed of blood but so the cause and the effect. The Law of e Rice-Face is like a tailor who cuts s cloth all to one measure, so that the be is too large for a small man, and too nall for a big one."

In the end I had to fall back on more otent arguments, but Gow Yat's secrecy as proof against spiced rice-wine and even the white Chinese whiskey, but he relented a little over a stone bottle of samshu, which flows almost as lazily as molasses, and has the sullen glow of vintage Chartreuse.

"If curiosity plague thee like a pebble inside the shoe," Gow Yat whispered, "wait patiently for the span of nine days, then seek enlightenment at the golden shrine of Kwan-ti, which is on the upper floor of the Plum Blossom Joss House."

He would not speak further of Quong Lee's death, not even when the stone bottle had been drained. So I could do nothing but wait, though impatiently, for the nine days to pass.

And it was at the shrine of Kwan-ti that I fathomed the mystery of Wu Lung's baffling feat, for there I found a pigtail hanging on the wall.

"It is the pigtail of Wu Lung, Honorable Slipper of the Five Tongs," the *bonze* told me. "He left it here as a thanks offering before departing for his native land, having been chosen to deliver the War Chest funds to our brethren across the Far Water."

And the *bonze* having stepped aside for a moment, I happened to touch the pigtail and found it strangely firm and stiff as a scabbard. In fact, *it was a scabbard,* for hidden in its length I found a long, thin rapier of steel, without handle or hilt —the same slender blade which had ended Quong Lee's reign as Keeper of the War Chest!

Between the two men McLaughlin's agonized body slumped

The Man From Madrid

By WALTER RIPPERGER

ROBBED of a fortune in gold entrusted to him in Spain by the Loyalists, Don Graham, bitter and vengeful, comes to America to recover it and to make the four American highbinders pay for the tortures inflicted upon him in their attempt to get the money. With him is José, the little Spanish cobbler, even more determined on revenge than Graham.

Coldly Don Graham tells each of the four —Zimmerman, Meechling, McLaughlin, and Gabriel what he intends to do: kill them one by one until the survivors agree to return the gold. Diana Lee, Gabriel's niece, tries to dissuade him; while Meechling's wife Hilda is interested to see how far he will get and warns him that the four are dangerous enemies.

Zimmerman attempts to trick Graham by pretending that the loot was only the spoils of war and that the syndicate wants it to purchase arms for the Rebels. Graham sees through this and warns them that he will no be trifled with. Gabriel and Meechling, thor oughly frightened, beg Zimmerman to return what is left of the treasure, which is stored in a safety vault to which only Zimmerman and Meechling have keys. Zimmerman pressed for money, refuses. Meechling en trusts his key to his wife. "If anything hap pens to me, take this key to Zimmerman right away," he babbles. "I'm not nearly so afraid of Graham as I am of—" He doesn't finish the sentence, but Hilda suspects tha Zimmerman's is the name he was about to speak.

THAT night Meechling is killed. Vera Higgins, Zimmerman's devoted secretary is puzzled by the fact that she had glimpsed the body swinging from the loft-hook, while in the morning, it is discovered in one of the fake-munition cases. An attempt has been made to frame Don Graham, but Sergeant C. O. Ponder realizes that Don is innocent At the hearing, Don is defended by the city's smartest lawyer, Garber. On his release Don

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learns that Garber had been engaged by one Brother Nibbs, who runs a synthetic mission-house on the Bowery.

Nibbs offers to aid Don recover the treasure in return for twenty percent of the loot. When Don asks him how he expects to get the treasure back, Nibbs coldly introduces him to his "converts"—six of the toughest gangsters and murderers Don has ever seen.

When Don refuses such assistance, the greedy Brother Nibbs is not dismayed. As the first step of his campaign to get the gold for himself, Nibbs invades McLaughlin's home, dismisses the servants and holds McLaughlin captive. When McLaughlin attempts to escape, Nibbs suggests that McLaughlin might be wise to go to bed and get a little rest. McLaughlin is led to his bedroom; lying on the bed are the "pyjamas" Nibbs has picked out—a straitjacket. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

MURDER IN MIND

IT WAS around eleven o'clock the next day when Zimmerman instructed Vera Higgins to call up McLaughlin's house to find out why he hadn't put in an appearance all the previous day.

It had happened before. McLaughlin went on periodical binges, and ordinarily Zimmerman would have thought nothing of it. But now Don Graham was in town and strange things had happened of late. He hadn't, for instance, been able to erase from his mind the picture of Vera Higgins standing in front of the mirror, like someone in a state of coma, 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 . . ." Then she had burst into tears.

What was the significance of that? Had she had dealings with Graham? Had she betrayed him?

Vera came back to report that McLaughlin wasn't in; she'd called his house without getting an answer and had elicited from the telephone company the information that McLaughlin was going to be out of town indefinitely and had ordered his telephone discontinued.

"What do you mean," he rumbled, "McLaughlin's gone out of town? Why would he do a thing like that without telling me? Are you sure you got that straight?"

Vera nodded. She hesitated a moment, then:

"Now that Meechling . . . I mean there's nothing more to worry about . . . Everything is all right?" Her sentence was disjointed, and her tone anxious.

Zimmerman understood her. "I'm never worried," he said. "You ought to know that by this time. Sometimes I get annoyed, but I don't worry. It's the little things that upset me. If I get my hands on whoever took that box off my desk, there's going to be hell to pay. Of all the silly things—" But he didn't finish.

A boy came in with an envelope addressed to Zimmerman. The boy went out and Zimmerman opened the envelope. It contained a brief message. It read:

Dear Fritz,

I am going out of town for a while. This guy Graham has got me scared. I haven't decided just where I am going, but I will let you know.

Pat

Zimmerman scowled. There was no doubt that it was Pat McLaughlin's handwriting, but the writing was shaky, and Zimmerman concluded that McLaughlin must have been on a terrific bender. A fine time to get drunk!

He showed the note to Vera. She read it and passed it back to him. For a brief instant Vera looked apprehensive.

"Perhaps you'd better go away too, Fritz," she said earnestly. "Why can't we both go away for a while? You need a vacation and I need one. I want to get away, Fritz." There was a faintly hysterical note in her voice now.

"A vacation wouldn't hurt *you* any, I think," Zimmerman said. "I can't go, not right now of all times."

Vera came closer and looked down at him. "It's the Meechling woman!" she exclaimed. "Now that she's free, you want to be here, to be near her."

ZIMMERMAN threw back his head and laughed. Indolently he pulled Vera close to him. He rubbed his enor-

mous head against her, then pushed her away and laughed again. She was jealous and he wasn't even flattered.

The boy who had brought the message from McLaughlin, came in again. "There's a policeman to see you, Mr. Zimmerman. He says his name is Sergeant Ponder."

Zimmerman stiffened. He couldn't explain why that dumb cop got under his skin more than any one else. He said: "Show him in," and motioned Vera out of the room.

Presently Sergeant Ponder, his old derby perched on the back of his head, the never-absent cigar butt clamped in the corner of his mouth, ambled in. The sergeant had a package done up in brown paper under his arm. Without being invited to do so, he drew up a chair beside Zimmerman's desk, removed his derby and deposited it on the floor at his feet as though it were a valuable urn.

"A couple of days ago," C. O. Ponder said, "when I was in here and you were out, I walked away with something that belongs to you. Just absent-minded, that's all. I guess I'm getting old." He took the paper off the package he had brought and Zimmerman found himself staring at that chrome-plated box that held his peanut brittle. "Think of walking off absent-mindedly with a thing as big as that!" Sergeant Ponder ruminated with an absolutely straight face.

The lines in Zimmerman's face remained genial, but his eyes grew alert. "It is strange," he said.

"Tch, tch," C. O. Ponder said, "everything around here is strange." His round, opaque eyes were fixed on the chrome-plated box. "What a swell thing to leave one's fingerprints on!" he added.

"Isn't it?" said Zimmerman. "Did you find any fingerprints on it? I mean anyone else's besides mine?"

"I wasn't interested in anyone else's except yours," C. O. Ponder said guilelessly.

Zimmerman who had been leaning back in his swivel chair, now straightened up. With an effort he brought that merry twinkle back into his eyes and managed a credible grin. He said nothing, just waited.

"Fingerprints are very interesting," C. O. Ponder said affably. "You take that passport belonging to this lad, Graham. No fingerprints on it at all. At least Graham's fingerprints should have been on it. That means something. I explained what it meant in court the other day.

"Then take that bayonet. Graham's prints were on that, but nobody else's. Now that could mean two things. It could mean that Graham had stuck that bayonet in Meechling's chest, but then why would he do that and incriminate himself when Meechling was already dead before the bayonet was stuck into him? Do you see what I mean?" C. O. Ponder looked at Zimmerman with a pleased expression on his face, as though he had hit upon some great truth.

Zimmerman, still grinning, said: "No, I don't see what you mean."

"I'm just a dumb cop," C. O. Ponder said, "and not very articulate. What I am trying to say is that it doesn't look as though this Graham had stuck the bayonet into Meechling. It looks as though somebody else had done it, the same person who had handled Graham's passport, and who had figured that his fingerprints were on the passport and had cleaned it up. Having cleaned the passport, this person realized he had to be careful and when he picked up the bayonet he either put on gloves or held it in a handkerchief. Doesn't that sound reasonable?"

Zimmerman shook his head, not in contradiction, but in amazement at the childish simplicity of this policeman.

"All right," he said, "that sounds very plausible. Very smart of you to think of it, Sergeant."

"Thank you," C. O. Ponder said gravely. "I don't know how these things come to me. I got to thinking that whoever handled Graham's passport might have handled something else of his. I got to thinking, for instance, that Graham was out of his office some of the time and when he was,

he generally left his coat behind, hanging over the back of a chair.

"Now if somebody went through his pockets, say somebody who not only took his passport but went through Graham's wallet to see if there was anything worth taking in that, that man might have left some fingerprints on the wallet, never thinking about fingerprints at all . . . at the time."

ZIMMERMAN ran his tongue across his thick lips. "You just said that there were no fingerprints on the passport, that somebody had wiped them off; so whoever took it, must have thought about fingerprints."

"I know," said Sergeant Ponder looking owlish. "You see my idea is that whoever took the passport wasn't bothered about fingerprints until the opportunity occurred to plant the passport in that box in which Meechling's body was found. Then he either forgot about the fingerprints he might have left on Graham's wallet or didn't have a chance to go back and clean those off.

"He probably wouldn't bother to go back even if he'd had a chance, to clean up the wallet. Who would think that a dumb cop like me would go over a man's wallet to see if there was somebody else's fingerprints on it?"

"Who would?" Zimmerman muttered softly.

"Well, I did find some fingerprints on Graham's wallet that weren't his," C. O. Ponder said.

He wasn't looking at Zimmerman now. He was studying his dead cigar butt. In his leisurely way he fished a wooden match from his pocket, nicked the head and relit the cigar. Then he leaned back and drummed with his fingers on the chrome-plated box on the desk beside him. After a few minutes that seemed like hours, Zimmerman said:

"Whose fingerprints did you find?"

"Yours," C. O. Ponder said.

Not a line in Zimmerman's big face changed. His expression was as genial as it always was, particularly when he felt himself cornered. He had expected that answer, had known it would come the minute the sergeant had mentioned Graham's wallet, and he had been thinking—thinking fast. One thing that occurred to him almost instantly was that C. O. Ponder was far from the stupid oaf he appeared to be; that made him a dangerous character.

Zimmerman felt himself suddenly crowded, hurried.

He swiveled around in his chair so that his back was to the sergeant and he was looking out of the window facing the East River where that little tramp steamer that belonged to Zimmerman, Meechling & McLaughlin, lay tied to a pier.

He experienced a great longing to have them all on that little tramp steamer—Don Graham, José, Hilda Meechling, Vera, this policeman here, and if McLaughlin and Gabriel were with them it wouldn't hurt his feelings either. And then if the ship went down with all hands on board, it would be swell. Then he, Zimmerman, would have some peace, could straighten out his affairs . . .

He roused himself from his reverie with an effort. What was the matter with him? He had taken a lot in the last few years, but he could take more, much more. He swung around in his chair and the grin on his face widened. It was almost malicious. He laughed, great roars of laughter.

"Sergeant, I've got to hand it to you." Again he laughed and slapped his knee.

C. O. Ponder was studying the tips of his square-toed boots, then he looked up eying Zimmerman lugubriously. "Maybe you wouldn't mind letting me in on the joke."

"Excuse me," Zimmerman said. "I couldn't help laughing to think of your having gone to all that trouble to find out something that I would have told you if you had only asked me. Sure my fingerprints are on Graham's wallet. A couple of days ago I went into his office, knocked over the chair on which his coat hung, and the wallet fell out of his inside pocket.

"Naturally I straightened up the chair and put the wallet back. Just the same, you *are* good. You find out any more clues like that and put them all together the same way you've been doing and you'll have me in the chair for killing Meechling."

C. O. Ponder stooped, picked up his derby and placed it on the back of his head. Then he rose. He gazed at Zimmerman with something akin to sadness in his great lackluster eyes.

"Tch, tch," he declared mournfully. "I don't seem to be getting anywhere."

With that he drifted out.

That good-natured mask dropped from Zimmerman's face and he scowled. He wondered if the sergeant was having him watched, having him tailed. That would make it difficult for Zimmerman to leave town. To be sure, C. O. Ponder had nothing on him—Zimmerman was certain of that—but Sergeant Ponder could always have him held as a material witness. That would be bad. Still, it didn't change matters materially in one respect. That stuff that was in the vault—what was left of it—would take some time to sell. It was the least saleable of all the loot. And it would have to be sold before Zimmerman could leave for parts where there were no extradition laws, where there was no McLaughlin, no Gabriel and no Don Graham.

If he could only fix it so that they'd kill each other off. If Don Graham and his Spaniard, for instance, would only murder McLaughlin and Gabriel and be caught in the act . . .

Zimmerman smacked his thick lips. What a magnificent solution!

CHAPTER XVII

VISIT BY NIGHT

ZIMMERMAN spent the next two days perfecting his plans. It troubled him that McLaughlin had disappeared. Zimmerman had gone to McLaughlin's house to make certain that the latter had gone. He found the house closed, the shutters nailed up and no response to his ring. That McLaughlin should run away was about the last thing that Zimmerman had expected. Still perhaps that could be utilized. After all it wasn't essential that McLaughlin should *die*. It was only vital that he should be out of the way for a short time.

If McLaughlin stayed out of town, that would be enough. If he came back, it might be possible to make things so difficut for McLaughlin that he'd have his hands full without bothering about Zimmerman. Funny that Don Graham and José hadn't put in an appearance since that day in court; very likely Graham was doing just what he, Zimmerman was doing: working out some new scheme. Zimmerman was sure Graham hadn't given up.

Zimmerman sent word to the captain of the *Astra*—the little tramp steamer the firm owned—to be ready to sail at a moment's notice, ostensibly for Havre, France. The captain was to get his clearance papers immediately. Zimmerman had the munitions that were stored in the upper lofts transferred to the *Astra*. He was going to have an explanation for everything. If the story of the theft of the treasure got out—and it might—his explanation would be that he had taken it on behalf of the Rebels.

What of Hilda Meechling? She had a key to the vault. Zimmerman saw no great immediate risk in that. Until Meechling's estate was settled he doubted whether the bank would give Hilda access to the vault, and even if it did, she would see the treasure was there, would have no way offhand of estimating its worth. A million dollars or five million dollars—it would look all the same to her. No real risk there, and that reminded him.

He'd have to go to the vault, not with the intention of removing the treasure right now, but the vault held one little thing . . . one little thing that would prove very useful. In fact, it was an item that played an essential part in Zimmerman's plans.

Zimmerman put on his hat and coat

and gloves and started out on his way to the bank. In front of the door that led to McLaughlin's office, he stopped. There were a couple of things in there that he wanted to do. Perhaps it was really providential that McLauglin was out of town. He had a notion that McLaughlin wouldn't get off as easily as Don Graham had, after he'd been accused of the murder of Meechling. It wouldn't be surprising if the police concluded that McLaughlin had something to do with Meechling's murder too.

LATE the next day, José was alone in the shabby room that he and Graham occupied. Three days had gone by and Graham had done nothing. José looked haggard. He had been driven to the point of desperation. Those three days of inactivity had seemed to him like months. It had required all of his will power, his reserve, not to bring up the subject of the treasure again. A kind of hurt pride helped him, and the feeling that he had no right to urge Graham to take any further risks in that direction if Graham didn't want to.

Graham had gone out a good deal, walking the streets and thinking, and the time that he had spent with José, they had devoted to studying the reports about Spain. Graham had feverishly plunged into the strategy of the war, the war which was almost finished as far as the Loyalists were concerned. Hour after hour he and José had pored over a map of Spain, discussing what would happen if Madrid fell. Graham too had studiously avoided mentioning the matter of the treasure.

And now once again Graham had gone for a walk, leaving José sitting at the rickety table, his chin cupped in his hands, thinking of millions of people fighting with their backs to the wall, with not enough food, not enough guns, not enough planes, and millions of dollars right here in New York belonging to them. Suddenly José sprang to his feet. He would try—he would try all by himself. A lightning stroke. He would kill McLaughlin or Gabriel! Perhaps then Zimmerman would change his mind and offer to give the treasure back. With Meechling and one of the others dead, Zimmerman could afford to give back half, that would be Meechling's and McLaughlin's or Gabriel's share. It would be better than getting killed himself. Somehow José would bring that home to him. Yes, that was it! José took out his knife and sharpened it on the sole of his shoe. He eyed it lovingly, his eyes burned as he tested the edge with his thumb.

Someone pounded on the door. José spun around facing it. That wouldn't be Graham. Graham wouldn't knock. It might be one of the others. Perhaps this was his chance now. He stuck the hand holding the knife inside his blouse, went to the door and yanked it open.

A boy stood there, a boy in uniform—a messenger. The messenger held out an envelope.

"Graham?" the messenger asked.

José nodded and took the envelope. Laboriously he signed the slip that the messenger held out to him. When the door had closed behind the boy, José stood there contemplating the message. Graham's name was on the envelope, not written but printed in bold letters. José took a glass from the washstand, put it on the table and propped the message against it where Don Graham would see it. He had to go out, he had work to do, work that should be done now. He started for the door, then stopped and turned around, eying the message. Perhaps there was something in it that he should know. Perhaps it was from Zimmerman or McLaughlin or Gabriel, something that would affect his, José's plans. He was going to go out to kill somebody if the suitable opportunity arose. Perhaps he ought to be sure that there was nothing in that envelope that would make such a hazardous undertaking necessary. And yet he hadn't any business opening it when it was plainly marked for Don Graham. For minutes José stood there torn by conflicting emotions. There was no telling when Don Graham would get back. Sometimes he stayed out for hours, and besides he didn't

want to wait for Don Graham to return. The latter might stop him from doing what he had in mind, might quench the fire that was burning high within him at this moment.

José hesitated for another moment, then took two quick steps, seized the envelope, slit it open and took out the slip of paper that it contained. It was the back of an old envelope that held a message.

If you want that stuff back, you've got to help me. I can't do anything against McLaughlin and Gabriel. They're loading the stuff on board tonight. Come down to the office. Bring the Spaniard with you. Between the three of us maybe we can do something. I am helping you and I expect a share. Hurry.

Zimmerman

It wasn't in ink and it wasn't in anybody's handwriting. It had been printed with a lead pencil. José read it over twice slowly, sucking in his breath sharply. That was like Zimmerman. Zimmerman had become frightened because of the death of Meechling. José had often wondered who had killed Meechling. Sometimes he thought that it must have been Zimmerman, but obviously it wasn't.

And now Zimmerman wanted to make a deal. All right, he could have a share as long as the major portion of the treasure went back to Spain. José would see to that. Zimmerman might need help. There were some pretty tough workmen down there at that warehouse and possibly McLaughlin, who was no weakling himself, and Gabriel, had them on their side and the odds were too great against Zimmerman.

There were a hundred possible explanations, and one in particular that occurred to José too. This might be nothing but a trap, a device to lure him and Don Graham down to that warehouse. But then there was no sense to that. He and Don Graham had been down there before and nobody had endeavored to hurt them. Besides Zimmerman must have known that he had only to ask them to come down for any reason whatsoever and they would have come.

BUT even if it was a trap, here was a chance to escape it. José would go down there alone, leaving the note for Graham. When Graham got back he would see it. He would read its meaning correctly, and if José didn't come back he'd know that something was wrong. Yes, that was the thing to do.

And it was safe—quite safe. Zimmerman wouldn't dare do anything to him without having Graham in his grip too.

José stuck the note back into the envelope and tossed it onto the table. He snatched up his cap and worn coat and dashed out of the door.

It was some two hours after José had gone that Don Graham returned. He had walked and walked the streets until he was too tired to go on, trying to smother that restlessness inside of him—a restlessness that was driving him to distraction. What was there for him to do now? In abandoning the mission that had brought him here, his immediate objective had disappeared; and with it had gone the thing he had been doing for the past two years—fighting for Loyalist Spain.

To be sure, a new objective had crept a well-regulated life of peace, a life of simple happiness and Diana. But she, as well as that new life, were beyond his reach. He had no money, no connections, no way of earning a livelihood. He had been an engineer before joining the Loyalists. But engineers, he surmised, were a drug on the market in the United States, and even if he could get started, it would take a long time before he could count on a reasonable income.

It was selfish of him, he reflected, to think only of himself. What about poor José? He'd have to do something about José. He'd have to see that José, by himself, did not attempt something reckless. He knew José and he knew the things of which José was capable.

He threw his hat and trenchcoat into a chair, hung his cane on the back of the rocker and wondered uneasily where José was now. Then he sat down and rolled himself a cigarette.

He never glanced at the table on which José had thrown the note that Zimmerman had sent. He got to thinking and frowned. His thoughts always were the same, always went around in circles. Was there any possible chance of forcing Zimmerman to disgorge at least some of that treasure, enough to satisfy José? Had Diana meant it when she said she was fond of him, and that that meant more than he realized? Who had killed Meechling and why? And wasn't it all right for him to have given up the idea of forcing Zimmerman and his gang to give up what they had stolen?

Of course it was right. It wasn't his fault that Zimmerman had gotten his hands on that treasure. José couldn't blame him, José hadn't blamed him. The whole idea had been crazy to begin with.

A soft knock on the door broke in on Don Graham's thoughts. He half turned, took the cane off the back of his chair. He hadn't bolted the door so he just called, "Come in," his thoughtful eyes alert, his cane between his knees, his hands resting on the crook.

THE door opened and the last person in the world that Don Graham expected to see, came in—Hilda Meechling. She was wearing the same attire she had worn when he had first met her—a green tweed suit with a cardigan jacket and a felt hat. She came in with long, easy strides, walking in her provocative, lazy way. A faint smile curved her lips.

Don Graham got to his feet. It was strange how her mere presence provoked a sort of tension in him, something akin to antagonism.

"You don't mind my coming here, do you, Don Graham?" she said.

Don Graham ungraciously said: "What did you come here for?"

"To talk to you," Hilda said simply. "You see, now that my husband is dead, I am a partner in Zimmerman, McLaughlin and Meechling. Whatever grievance you have against the firm concerns me too."

"I've got no grievance," Don Graham said, at least I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm through."

She gazed at him a little astonished and curiously enough a little disappointed, Don Graham thought.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" she asked after a brief pause.

Don Graham shrugged and pointed out a chair.

"I wish you'd tell me," she said, "what really happened. I mean back there in Spain."

"What difference does it make?" Don Graham said wearily. "It's over and done with."

"Just the same I wish you'd tell me," she persisted, "then perhaps I can tell you something that will interest you." She sat down without ever taking her eyes off Don Graham.

He wanted to tell her to go away, to leave him alone. He wanted to tell her that he didn't give a damn about the whole thing any more, not about the treasure, not about the Loyalists, not about Spain. Her being here was somehow unreal, but then everything that had happened since his arrival had an air of unreality. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, he found himself telling her just what had happened to him and José, telling her in a voice alive with passion and bitterness. He never for a moment thought that she would believe him. No doubt Meechling, or perhaps Zimmerman had already told her all about it, a colored version that made them out as heroes, and he and José as just a couple of cheap adventurers, a couple of Communists or Reds, and angrily he finished with:

"You don't have to believe me. It doesn't make the least bit of difference."

In a tone that was amazingly level and convincing, she said:

"I do believe you. I can see how it must have been that way. That's why they were all afraid of you. And what are you going to do now?"

He stared at her. "Nothing," he said. "I'm through. There's nothing I can do. I didn't understand myself when I came

here. I thought coming over here butchering people was just like being in the trenches, like working a machine gun, but it's not the same."

An enigmatic smile came to Hilda's full, rich lips. "Who helped you find that out?"

Don Graham felt the blood rush to his head. That was a dig at Diana. This woman had no scruples, no morals. She was magnificent to look at, her reserve and composure were astonishing. But she wasn't—she wasn't decent. She had no sense of right or wrong.

"And now you're going to give up," she said. There was scorn in her tone.

"What would you like me to do?" he demanded angrily.

"The same thing that they did to you," she declared. That cool detachment was gone; she looked terribly alive now. Her words came to Don Graham with the impact of a physical shock. "I'd work on Gabriel first and then on McLaughlin," she continued. "I'd make them suffer until they cracked, until they gave in. Gabriel's a lawyer. He could show you how to get that treasure back. He could work it so that you would have some legal claim to it, so that you could threaten to go to the police if Zimmerman refused to give it up."

Don Graham could only stare at her. The woman was merciless, had no compunctions of any kind. Here she was, urging him on to do the things to Gabriel and McLaughlin, her friends presumably, that they had done to himself and to little José.

"You don't understand me, do you?" she said. "You don't understand me because you don't understand yourself—not any more. You're not the man you were, Don Graham, not the man I saw that first day in Zimmerman's office. You were strong then; you were a man, with a strong man's impulses. And now—" She broke off with a note of sadness.

Don Graham banged the floor with the tip of his cane. "What is it to you?" he shouted.

She ignored that. "Perhaps it isn't worth it," she resumed with her unshatterable calm. "I imagine there's only a little of the treasure left."

Don Graham started. "What makes you say that?"

"Because Eddie, my husband, was afraid of Zimmerman, almost more afraid of him than he was of you. He was afraid because he knew that Zimmerman had taken most of that treasure for himself. Probably Eddie got a little of it too. Zimmerman and Eddie were the only ones who had keys to the vault. It wouldn't surprise me if Zimmerman had killed Eddie because he was afraid that Eddie might break down and tell you, and that you might tell Gabriel and McLaughlin."

"So that's it!" Don Graham said through his teeth. "You figure that Zimmerman killed Eddie and you want to get even. You want to use me to get even."

She shook her head slowly. "No, that isn't it." She held herself proudly. "I just want to help you."

"Why would Zimmerman care if your husband or I told McLaughlin and Gabriel? Zimmerman isn't the kind to be afraid of McLaughlin and Gabriel."

"I think you're wrong about that," she said. "I imagine McLaughlin wouldn't be easy to handle if he found out that Zimmerman had stolen the treasure. And I told you that Gabriel is a lawyer. He might be able to make things unpleasant for Zimmerman."

Don Graham couldn't understand it. She was a puzzle to him.

"You've got a key to the vault now—your husband's key," he said. "Why don't you tell McLaughlin and Gabriel?"

Again she smiled.

"As long as I don't tell them," her cheeks colored faintly, "you're safe," she said. "You can carry on and Zimmerman won't dare touch you. I warned him that if anything happened to you, I was going to check up on that treasure with the others."

Don Graham felt himself gaping at her idiotically, and he couldn't do anything

about it. She was incredible, beyond his understanding, just as incomprehensible as that feeling her mere presence gave him, a feeling that left him baffled, irritated. Apparently she really wanted to help him. She actually seemed to care whether or not anything happened to him. He shook his head as though to clear his mind. He started to ask her something. There was the sound of heavy feet outside in the hall, then a pounding on the door.

A raucous voice said: "Open up. Open up. It's the police!"

At the same time the doorknob turned. The door was flung open and a uniformed policeman came in. The policeman was followed into the room by Sergeant Ponder, looking more gloomy than ever, and most incredible of all, there was a third person—Diana Lee.

The sergeant shut the door carefully. His great, round opaque eyes took in Hilda and then Don Graham.

"Awful inconvenient you not having a telephone," he said.

"Why?" Don Graham said, like one in a trance.

What was Diana doing here accompanied by a policeman and a detective?

"It makes it impossible to call you up and tell you things," C. O. Ponder explained laconically.

For some inexplicable reason Don Graham had a sudden feeling of apprehension.

"What did you want to tell me?" he asked, scarcely moving his lips.

C. O. Ponder hesitated a moment, then in a flat voice:

"Your little friend, the Spaniard . . . is dead."

CHAPTER XVIII

TAKE MCLAUGHLIN

FOR moments a tense stillness gripped them all. Don Graham kept his eyes on C. O. Ponder, then his glance traveled to the others. It was as if he couldn't believe what he had heard, as if he expected Diana or the policeman or someone to tell him that he hadn't heard aright.

C. O. Ponder ambled over to the rocker and sat down. He gazed quizzically at Hilda and Don Graham. After a while, in a matter of fact way, he said: "Gabriel's dead too."

Hilda gave a little gasp. Unconsciously she moved over until she stood next to Don Graham. The latter's hold tightened on the crook of his cane as he stood there, all of his attention now fixed on the sergeant.

"How did it happen?" Don Graham said. His voice sounded distant.

"It wasn't nice," C. O. Ponder said. "I mean the way Gabriel looked when we found him. His throat was cut. The knife that did it was still in the little Spaniard's hand—a shoemaker's knife. The Spaniard had been shot twice in the back."

Don Graham tried to ask another question. The words caught in his throat.

C. O. Ponder appeared to anticipate the question.

"It happened down at Zimmerman's place, down at that warehouse on South Street, where Meechling was killed," the sergeant explained. "It doesn't seem like a very healthy place."

"Zimmerman? Was he there?" Don Graham asked.

C. O. Ponder shook his head. "We tried to get him on the phone at his house. He wasn't home." The sergeant's dull eyes now rested fully on Don Graham. "It looks as if your friend went down there to murder Gabriel and that while he was doing it or maybe afterwards, somebody shot him. You've been holding out on me, Mr. Graham. There's something back of this whole business that might give me a lead. How about opening up?"

Don Graham shook his head. He felt himself incapable of any coherent thought. Everything was cold inside him, dead. Poor José had taken matters into his own hands and somebody had shot him—shot him in the back. If he hadn't let José down, hadn't rendered him desperate by

deserting him, it never would have happened.

C. O. Ponder, his voice for once unfriendly, said: "Where have you been all evening?"

"Walking most of the time," said Don Graham. "I got back here about half past seven."

"It happened at seven o'clock," C. O. Ponder said. "We know that for two reasons. One is that somebody called up Headquarters at about seven, somebody who said that he was standing in front of the warehouse and heard two shots inside. He tried to get in but couldn't. Then he went to a telephone to notify us.

"I suppose while he was doing that, whoever had fired the shots got out and away. I don't say you had anything to do with it, but there is just a chance that you might have been there, Mr. Graham. You could have gotten up here in a half hour, that is if you were really here at half past seven."

Hilda, her voice defiant, said: "He was here at half past seven. I was here with him."

Don Graham said: "Why would I want to shoot José?"

C. O. Ponder shrugged.

"I'm not making any charges," he said, "but look at it this way. Gabriel said you killed Meechling. He seemed to think that you'd kill him too, if you got a chance. You might have gone down there with this José. You might have cut Gabriel's throat, shot José, put the knife in his hand and then beat it. Or you might have let José cut Gabriel's throat and then shot José. Or any one of a dozen things. Mind you—"

"Am I going to be arrested again?" Don Graham's voice was harsh and tight.

C. O. PONDER, a little uncomfortable, said: "I'm only telling you what could have happened. You don't seem to want to tell me anything, so I've got to make guesses."

With quick steps Diana came over and stood in front of Don Graham.

"If you were down there, Don," she said, "tell them. I think I know what happened. You followed José. You tried to stop him from murdering my uncle. That was fine of you but you were too late. Naturally you went away afraid that the police would implicate you."

Don Graham looked at her with flat eyes. "You mean," he said incredulously, "that you think I shot José?"

"Why shouldn't you?" Diana said with surprising vehemence. "He's nothing but a murderer. I can see it all clearly. He was going ahead against your wishes because you had promised me . . . and you did the only thing you could do."

"José isn't a murderer," Don Graham said in a stunned way. "Even if José killed Gabriel, that wouldn't make him a murderer. Your uncle had it coming to him, and more."

Don Graham was utterly bewildered. He suddenly saw Diana in a totally different light. She was self-righteous, with a puny, feeble code of her own. And what poor José had said, now came back to him—"Thees woman, she is not for you, comrade. She is soft. She has no power. She is without strength. To her everything in life must be nice. . . ." And now here she was, thinking that he would kill his little comrade because he, Don Graham had promised her . . . What had he promised her . . .?"

Don Graham laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh. An overpowering rage had seized him. Diana didn't appear offended. She didn't understand. Don Graham turned away from her. His eyes fell on Hilda. Hilda wasn't saying anything. There was that strange, intimate look in her eyes, the look he had first noted in the courtroom.

C. O. Ponder was rocking gently to and fro, puffing at his cigar.

"Maybe, Mr. Graham, if you told me the whole thing I could help you," C. O. Ponder said.

"I don't need any help," Don Graham said, "not now." His voice was more harsh than before. "I'll fight my own battles."

C. O. Ponder sighed. The young were so difficult, so sure of themselves. They invariably caused him a lot of trouble.

Again a heavy silence fell over them all—a stillness only faintly disturbed at first by the creaking of the rocker. But then a new sound came to their ears, a soft, almost undetectable noise. C. O. Ponder heard it and the uniformed policeman heard it. Their eyes went to the door. They saw the doorknob turning gently, slowly and then suddenly the door was flung open.

Zimmerman, looking mountainous, stood there.

He started in, then stopped, plainly startled by the gathering that confronted him.

"Tch, tch," C. O. Ponder said. "Come in, Mr. Zimmerman, come in."

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN hesitated for the fraction of a second, then came in slamming the door behind him. "What is this," he rumbled genially, "a party?"

In the depths of C. O. Ponder's beach-plum eyes, something like a light gleamed.

"Do you always come into a man's place like that?" he asked, "I mean without knocking or trying to make a sound?"

Zimmerman looked embarrassed, then he threw back his head and laughed.

"I don't mind being frank. I'm a little scared of this place. The last time I was here a little Spaniard went at me with a knife. He—" Zimmerman paused and looked around. "Where is he?"

"Down at your place," C. O. Ponder said bluntly. "He's dead with two bullets in his back."

Zimmerman let out a long whistle.

"You don't say? Well, what do you know about that! Who did it?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Where were you a half hour or so ago?" C. O. Ponder said bluntly. "We tried to get you on the phone but there was no answer."

"What time was that?" Zimmerman said.

"A little after seven."

"Down at my club," Zimmerman said. "Just got in a little before seven, started to make up a bridge game when one of the boys who was going to play looked at his watch and said he wouldn't have time for even one rubber. He said that he was going to catch the seven-thirty train and that it was already seven o'clock."

"That let's you out," C. O. Ponder said. "This José and Gabriel were killed at seven o'clock. Maybe a couple of minutes before or a couple of minutes after."

"Gabriel?" Zimmerman bellowed.

C. O. Ponder nodded gloomily.

"The Spaniard cut his throat . . . I guess. Then somebody killed the Spaniard. It all don't make sense."

He rose, started wandering about the room, followed by Zimmerman's questions. He came to a pause in front of the table. His eyes fell on the note that José had left there for Don Graham. Idly he picked it up. Perhaps the fact that Don Graham's name and address were printed instead of being written on the envelope aroused his interest. He stuck a stubby thumb and forefinger inside and unabashed pulled out the note. As he read it, his eyes grew blank. He walked over to Don Graham and held it out to him.

"When did this come?"

Don Graham shook his head. "I never saw it. It must have come while I was out and José must have opened it."

Sergeant Ponder stepped over to Zimmerman. "When did you send this?"

Zimmerman made no move to take the note. He just stared at it, reading it while it was in the sergeant's hand.

"I never sent that, never saw it before."

"It's got your name signed to it."

"Not signed," Zimmerman said, "printed."

"Take it and look at it just to make sure," C. O. Ponder said.

"Not me, Sergeant. I wouldn't touch that for anything. My fingerprints would be on it. You've got a complex on fingerprints. You get all worked up over finger-

prints. I tell you I never saw it before. It doesn't make any sense."

"It makes some sense," C. O. Ponder said dispassionately. "Whoever sent it wanted to get Mr. Graham and José down to your place. Maybe they just wanted them down there so they could shoot them."

"SOUNDS very reasonable," Zimmerman agreed, "only if I had had any such an idea as that, you don't think I'd have been sucker enough to sign my own name to it. I'd sign Gabriel's or McLaughlin's. You ought to be in a book, Sergeant."

"I guess so," C. O. Ponder said heavily. "Come on, Clancy, back to police Headquarters."

Taking the note with him, he drifted out.

For seconds there was an awkward pause. Then Zimmerman chuckled.

"One thing about that cop," he rumbled, "is that he doesn't ask many questions. He doesn't seem very interested in murders."

Don Graham roused himself. The morose, brooding look in his eyes vanished, to be replaced by a hot, tense expression.

"Perhaps he isn't interested in murders, but I am, Zimmerman. You or McLaughlin killed José and that's going to be too bad for one or both of you."

Diana gasped.

"The fact that my uncle was murdered," she said, "is of no great consequence. And I had such faith in you, I trusted you so! Even if you had nothing to do with my uncle's death, you ought to at least condemn this murderous Spanish friend of yours. Instead of that you seem to think that you ought to defend him. Is that what you call honorable? Is that the sort of a man you really are?"

Don Graham swung around on his heels until he faced her squarely. "Yes, that's the sort of man I am. It's a good thing for both of us that you found it out in time."

Diana turned her back on him. With her head high, her mouth disdainful, she left.

"I'd like to be alone," Don Graham said, looking at Zimmerman.

"Sure, why not?" Zimmerman said good naturedly. "Boy, things have certainly been happening since you got back. Coming Hilda?"

"In a few minutes," Hilda said.

Zimmerman grinned and ponderously made his way out.

Hilda waited for Don Graham to say something. He remained mute, his eyes once more moody, filled with bitterness.

"Goodbye," she said, "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry for me."

"I'm not sorry for you," Hilda said. "I'm sorry because of José and I'm sorry that he didn't have time to get McLaughlin and Zimmerman too. After what you've told me I understand how José must have felt. If I had known, and had by chance seen José just before he set out to get Gabriel, I'd have wished him luck." She stopped and smiled. "That's the kind of a girl I am."

Don Graham stared at her. "They're beasts," she said vehemently, "nothing is too awful for them."

For a second Don Graham's eyes drifted beyond her. "I'm still here," he said, "to finish the job that José started." His mouth went into a crooked line. He thought of José and his heart filled with savage hate and a great feeling of loneliness.

Hilda held out her hand. He took it abstractedly. It was only when he felt the firmness of her clasp that his attention went back to her.

And when she said, "If you need any help . . ." he knew she meant it.

AFTER she had gone he waited a few minutes, then he picked up his hat, coat and cane and started out. At Weldon's Rock of Ages Mission one of the three meetings held each night had just been concluded. People were leaving just as Don Graham arrived. There was no sign

of Mr. Nibbs nor any of his lieutenants, except one. Bugs Bindler was seated at the organ. Apparently he had conducted the meeting.

Don Graham made his way up onto the platform. "I'd like to talk to Mr. Nibbs," he said in a dead voice.

"He's not here," Bugs Bindler explained. "He might be in later. Do you want to wait?"

Don Graham nodded and Bugs Bindler led him into Mr. Nibbs' office. Bugs Bindler left him alone and Don Graham sat down. The musty little room fitted in with his mood. It was like his heart—gloomy, dusty and grim.

Some twenty minutes later Mr. Nibbs arrived. He had Lucifer, the Manx cat, under his arm. Mr. Nibbs put down the cat and for seconds let that malign optic that he viewed as his good eye rest on Don Graham.

"It's Brother Graham," Mr. Nibbs said. He managed to make his strident voice almost purring.

"The last time I saw you," Don Graham said with bleak harshness, "you got the impression that I was too squeamish, hadn't enough ferocity in my nature to beat Zimmerman. You were right then, but I'm different now. I've changed."

"And what has brought about this change, Brother Graham?"

"They killed my friend, José, the Spaniard I told you about," Don Graham said in that same stony voice. "They tricked him, they got him down to Zimmerman's place tonight. Maybe he killed Gabriel and maybe he didn't, but it wasn't Gabriel who shot him. That would have been fair enough in a way, if Gabriel had been defending himself. Somebody else did it. Somebody shot José in the back. It was Zimmerman or McLaughlin."

THE Manx cat made a leap and landed in Don Graham's lap. Don Graham let it stay there. An odd thought came to him. The three of them—the one-eyed Nibbs, the one-eyed Manx cat, and he—were as one with a single objective—to get Zimmerman and McLaughlin. It gave him a sense of satisfaction, that idea did, almost a feeling of comfort.

Mr. Nibbs screwed his mouth into that funny snarling line that passed for a smile. "I haven't been inactive, Brother Graham, since I last saw you."

Don Graham said, "I just want to make it clear to you that I am ready for anything. Zimmerman or McLaughlin, perhaps both killed José . . . they killed me . . . I am not human any more . . . There's nothing you can think of that's too cruel, that I wouldn't enjoy . . ."

Mr. Nibbs rubbed his thin hands together.

"That's fine," he said shrilly, "that's fine. I came here to get Bugs Bindler. I wanted Bugs Bindler to take McLaughlin to see Zimmerman. It would be quite a job for Bugs Bindler alone. But with you to help it will be easier. Bugs Bindler doesn't care what happens to him and you don't either . . . now."

Mystified, Don Graham only stared at Mr. Nibbs.

"You said Gabriel's dead," Mr. Nibbs continued, "and Meechling's dead. That leaves only Zimmerman and McLaughlin. I think McLaughlin will be able to convince Zimmerman that he'd better return the treasure. It was a lucky day for you, Brother Graham, when you wandered in here."

The treasure? Don Graham had forgotten about that. It seemed so unimportant now, and then too, Hilda had said that there was only a little of it left. He wondered if he ought to tell Mr. Nibbs about that, and decided not to just then. He didn't care much about the treasure any more. All he wanted was to get Zimmerman and McLaughlin. Still perhaps he ought to do what he could to recover what remained of the treasure if only for José's sake.

"You want me to *take* McLaughlin to see Zimmerman? Why? Why can't he go by himself?"

"Yes, I want you to take him, but don't get caught if you can help it. I mean don't

get into the hands of the police or let Zimmerman get you. I may still need you. I mean," Mr. Nibbs added hastily, "you want to arrange for your share of the money to go back to Spain, don't you?"

"But why should I take McLaughlin, why should this Bugs Bindler and I have to *take* him to Zimmerman?"

"You'll see, you'll see," Mr. Nibbs said with unholy glee. "Come, we'll do it right now—tonight." To himself he said: "Five million dollars! And all for me—all for me."

CHAPTER XIX

THE FRIGHTENED MAN

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN lived in a pretentious brownstone house on 89th Street east of Riverside Drive. His staff consisted of a cook, a maid and Lester, his man who combined the functions of valet, butler and chauffeur.

That night, shortly before ten o'clock, Mr. Nibbs' dilapidated sedan drew up in front of Fritz Zimmerman's house. Pudgy Myers was driving. He climbed from behind the wheel, opened the door, and Don Graham stepped out, followed by Bugs Bindler. There was a third man on the back seat, limp, his head almost on his knees—McLaughlin. There was tape across his mouth. Myers took a quick glance up and down the street and saw it was deserted. Quickly he stepped onto the runningboard, reached inside and put both his hands under McLaughlin's arms and dragged him out. He draped one of McLaughlin's arms around Bugs Bindler's shoulders and the other around Graham's.

"That's the house," Myers said. "Remember, the orders is, you're to take him inside, then beat it. I'll be waiting up the block. If anyone tries to stop you don't forget your story, Bugs. You found this guy in the street. You was just gonna get the police when this gentleman, Mr. Graham, happened along and recognized the guy and told you where to take him."

Bindler coughed and nodded. Jobs of this sort were always left to him because Mr. Nibbs counted on him to do exactly as he was told, and if anything went wrong, to keep his mouth shut. Bugs Bindler hadn't long to live and he didn't care what happened to him. Mr. Nibbs had always taken care of Bugs Bindler's mother and his little sister and Bugs was confident that Mr. Nibbs would continue to take care of them after he was dead.

He and Don Graham started up the stone steps. Bugs Bindler staggered a little under the weight of their burden. Don Graham, despite the fact that he limped, was strong and bore most of McLaughlin's weight. At the top, he pushed the bell. Roughly Don Graham tore the tape from McLaughlin's mouth. He let out a moan. Presently the door opened and Zimmerman's man, Lester, stood there.

He looked doubtfully at the strange trio, then he squinted at the figure in the center and opened the door wider so that the light from the hall would fall full on his face.

"Why it's—it's Mr. McLaughlin," Lester said.

And now he saw nothing strange in what he beheld. McLaughlin, on two or three occasions, had come here blind, staggering, drunk. Obviously he was in a worse condition this time than on previous occasions.

"Bring him in," Lester said, standing to one side.

Don Graham, a strange light in his sombre eyes, with the assistance of Bugs Bindler took McLaughlin inside through a door that Lester indicated. The door gave onto a large living room. They dumped McLaughlin into an armchair.

McLaughlin sat there, still limp and cowering. He made chattering noises with his teeth and sounds that had no meaning.

Lester looked doubtfully at Don Graham and Bugs Bindler. He had seen neither of them before. They didn't look like very prosperous characters. Perhaps they felt they should be rewarded in some way. Probably McLaughlin had found them in some dive and had told them where to take him before he had passed out.

Lester peered into McLaughlin's face. It was covered with bruises and welts. McLaughlin must have gotten into a fight. That didn't surprise Lester. He knew something of McLaughlin's character, especially when drunk. But why did he look so scared? That wasn't like McLaughlin.

"If you wait here, gentlemen," Lester said, "I'll ask Mr. Zimmerman to come down. He might like to have a few words with you."

LESTER went out. Bugs Bindler looked at Don Graham. The latter waited until Lester's steps had died out upstairs. Then he made a motion with his head and started for the door, walking softly. Bugs Bindler followed and a few seconds later they were gone.

Zimmerman followed by Lester, came in. He wasn't genial; he was scowling. The timing of his whole scheme was going wrong. Either McLaughlin should have been there in the warehouse with Gabriel or he should have stayed out of town. His visit to Don Graham earlier in the evening, that too, hadn't come out the way it should have.

Zimmerman had never dreamt that anybody would be with Graham. The incredible, risky, ruthless undertaking that Zimmerman had set himself all depended on things going right, not wrong. All these thoughts shot through Zimmerman's mind as he stood there with his fists on his hips, glaring down at McLaughlin.

McLaughlin looked up at him piteously without a sign of recognition in his eyes.

"Where have you been?" Zimmerman roared. "You picked a fine time to get soused."

McLaughlin cringed. His teeth started chattering again.

Zimmerman frowned. It wasn't like McLaughlin to act that way. He was more pugnacious when drunk than at any other time. Zimmerman swung around.

"Where are the two men that brought him?"

"I left them here, sir," Lester said. "They must have gone."

"It doesn't matter," Zimmerman said. "You can go."

Alone with McLaughlin, Zimmerman considered whether he should bring him to or leave him the way he was. He went and tried to straighten McLaughlin up in his chair and McLaughlin let out a shriek of pain.

It was funny the way his left arm hung down, inert, as though it were attached to his shoulder by a string and filled with sawdust instead of bone and muscle. Maybe he had broken it.

"Sit up and pull yourself together," Zimmerman snapped.

McLaughlin only looked at him idiotically.

Zimmerman tried to take McLaughlin's coat off to get a look at the arm. Stark terror came into McLaughlin's face and he managed to utter some intelligible words.

"Don't—don't—don't," he pleaded hoarsely.

Zimmerman stepped back, looking puzzled. It was strange, there was no odor of liquor about McLaughlin, and weirdest of all was the expression in McLaughlin's eyes—a vacant, insane look.

"Nobody's going to hurt you," Zimmerman said. "It's me, Pat, your friend Fritz Zimmerman."

The words apparently meant nothing to McLaughlin. He still sat there half doubled up, that same idiotic look in his eyes, a look of madness coupled with dread.

Zimmerman tried again, his voice gentle.

"It's me, Pat, it's me, Fritz Zimmerman. Where've you been? What's happened?"

McLaughlin blinked, obviously trying to make an effort to understand. When Zimmerman stepped toward him, he cringed back in his chair; but he couldn't straighten up.

Zimmerman scratched his close-cropped head. He wondered what he ought to do, and as he wondered, McLaughlin let out a ghastly shriek. His battered face was distorted with indescribable fear, his whole body trembled, save for that limp left arm. He wasn't looking at Zimmerman. He was staring past him at the floor.

ZIMMERMAN spun around wondering what was frightening McLaughlin; then couldn't believe his eyes. It was nothing but a cat, a little cat that belonged to the cook. Lester had left the door partly open and the little beast had crept in.

"No—no—no," McLaughlin screamed in a hoarse, agonized voice.

Then he said something else Zimmerman couldn't make out at first because McLaughlin's teeth chattered so. But when McLaughlin repeated it, Zimmerman got it.

"The man—with the cat! The man—with—the cat— Don't let him—don't let him touch me." Great drops of perspiration were forming on McLaughlin's forehead. He struggled vainly to get out of the chair.

Zimmerman stooped down, scooped up the cat and threw it out of the door, shutting the door after it.

McLaughlin let out a sigh.

Zimmerman shook his head. He went close to McLaughlin. No, definitely McLaughlin hadn't been drinking. And now for the first time Zimmerman noticed something else—a tag dangling from the buttonhole of McLaughlin's coat. He reached for it. McLaughlin drew back in mortal terror at Zimmerman's proximity. Zimmerman took hold of the tag. One side was blank and on the other he read:

You're next
The Man From Madrid

Zimmerman let go of the tag. He recoiled as though he'd been struck by a snake. For a time he stood there staring with his mouth agape, then he went to the door, yanked it open and roared for Lester.

Lester came in. Zimmerman said: "The two men who brought him—what did they look like?"

"One of them was a small man," Lester explained. "He coughed a good deal, sir. The other was tall, youngish. He limped, and walked with a cane. I only got a brief look at his face, sir," Lester continued. He frowned as he tried to recollect his impression of the man with the cane. "It was a determined sort of a face, sir, I should say, and a little sorrowful too, perhaps."

"He limped and he walked with a cane? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, sir."

Zimmerman motioned Lester out of the room with his head.

"Don Graham," he whispered.

Don Graham wasn't alone! There were others helping him. That was obvious enough. A little man who had coughed a lot had come with him, and there *were* others—that was certain. Don Graham alone couldn't have done this to McLaughlin. He thought of Meechling and shivered.

It was all clear to him now. Don Graham or one of those who were helping him must have murdered Eddie Meechling. Eddie had gotten off lightly. McLaughlin was crippled. He couldn't straighten out. There was something wrong with his back, his arm, and . . . his mind. They had tortured him until he had gone mad. That must have taken days—days.

A cold shiver went up and down Fritz Zimmerman's spine when he thought of that. Who could have done it? How had they managed it? And who was the man with the cat?

Zimmerman went over to a side table and poured himself a stiff drink of brandy from a carafe, conscious that McLaughlin's frightened eyes followed him wherever he went. He tossed off the brandy while he stood there contemplating McLaughlin. Rather abstractedly he reached into his pocket, took out a piece of peanut brittle and started to eat it.

Slowly the expression in McLaughlin's eyes changed. It was as though he were recovering his memory, it was as though that picture of Zimmerman standing there eating peanut brittle had awakened something in the far recesses of his mind.

"Fritz," he said through his chattering teeth, "Fritz."

Zimmerman came over quickly.

"Sure, sure old fellow," he boomed. "It's ne. Tell me what happened. Tell me what hey did to you."

But the look of comprehension went out f McLaughlin's eyes. That moment of ucidity vanished on the instant.

"No," he whimpered piteously, "no—o—no."

For the first time in his life, Zimmerman xperienced fear.

CHAPTER XX

TWO WOMEN

HILDA MEECHLING arrived at the office the next morning ahead of Zimmerman. The bodies of Gabriel and José had been taken away, but there were still a couple of policemen about and she encountered Sergeant Ponder on her way to Meechling's office.

C. O. Ponder stopped her.

"This gets more complicated all the time, Mrs. Meechling," he complained, "and nobody seems to want to tell me anything. Excuse me," he said, hastily taking off his derby. "Sometimes I get so interested in my work I forget my manners."

Hilda smiled.

"There isn't anything you could tell me, is there, ma'am?" C. O. Ponder went on hopefully.

She shook her head. "If I find out anything I'll let you know."

"Thanks," C. O. Ponder said, and ambled off.

He went into McLaughlin's office where his two men were busy looking for fingerprints or anything else that might be of help. C. O. Ponder sat down at McLaughlin's desk and made a cursory inspection of McLaughlin's papers. He came to a pile of bills held down by a paperweight. He discovered an envelope addressed to McLaughlin. It was only part of an envelope, to be exact—the front part; the back gone.

"Tch, tch," C. O. Ponder said to no one in particular.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the note that he had found in Don Graham's room the night before. That had been written on the back of an envelope. Carefully, C. O. Ponder took off the tissue paper in which he had wrapped the note. There was no doubt about it. It was the other half of the envelope he had just found on McLaughlin's desk.

"Tch, tch," C. O. Ponder said again, "and right on top, too, where it couldn't be missed. People around here think I'm even dumber than I am."

One of the detectives looked up and said:

"What's that, Sarge?"

"Nothing," Sergeant Ponder said, "I was just thinking out loud that people have gotten on to me. They've found out that I'm stupid."

"You do all right," the detective said, "you've got a pretty good record."

"Thanks," C. O. Ponder said dryly.

He wrapped up both halves of the envelope and stuck them into his pocket.

HILDA spent only a few minutes in Eddie's office, then she went into Zimmerman's. Not finding him in, she walked into Vera Higgins' office.

"Mr. Zimmerman not in yet?" she asked pleasantly.

"No," Vera said. Her dark eyes snapped as they took in Hilda.

There followed a moment's pause, then:

"Why do you come here? Why can't you let him alone?" Vera's voice was unsteady, her flat sexless body quivered with emotion.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" Hilda said, her tone level.

"Yes. I mind everything you do."

"Why do you dislike me?" Hilda asked.

She had a sudden feeling that this girl had experienced some shock, that she was keyed up beyond herself, and obviously she was jealous, intensely jealous of anyone who came near Fritz Zimmerman. With a woman's intuition, Hilda had sensed that much, long ago. She was only amazed at the extent of Vera's outburst.

"Do you really want to know?" Vera

said, "do you want to know why I dislike you? Because you're the sort that preys on men, anybody's man, and it's easy for you. You've got an interest in this firm now so I suppose you could arrange to have me fired. I suppose you think Fritz —Mr. Zimmerman—would do anything you asked him to. Well he won't. He won't when he knows—"

Hilda considered the girl's mounting passion. "When he knows what?" she asked.

"When he knows the sort of a woman you are," Vera burst out.

That wasn't what she had intended saying originally and Hilda knew it. Evidently Vera considered that she had some hold over Zimmerman. That wasn't unlikely. A private secretary was in a position to discover things. Hilda wondered what Vera's secret was. It might be something—she found her heart beating a little faster—it might be something that would help Don Graham. If only she could get it out of Vera. She heard a noise in the adjoining room. Zimmerman must have come in. She left Vera and went back into Zimmerman's office.

Zimmerman said, "Hello."

For once he didn't greet her with enthusiasm. Zimmerman had spent a sleepless night.

There were dark circles under his china blue eyes. Lines ran diagonally down his cheeks. Twice during the night he had gone into the room where he and Lester had put McLaughlin in the hope that McLaughlin had to some extent recovered sufficiently to tell him, Zimmerman, what had happened. Zimmerman had to know; he had to.

He had found McLaughlin sleeping fitfully, moaning, now and then crying out in abject terror, and this morning McLaughlin had been no better. Over and over Zimmerman had tried to make McLaughlin understand that it was Fritz Zimmerman who was talking to him, but without success. Finally, Zimmerman had departed for the office.

And then something had happened that had upset him even further. As he wa coming down the steps, a shabby-lookin individual had walked up to him. Zim merman had taken him for a beggar, bu he had been wrong.

"The man from Madrid wants his gol back," the shabby-looking individual sai "When's he gonna get it?" And then with out waiting for an answer, the man ha walked on swiftly.

AND just now, right in front of th building, two other men had stoppe Zimmerman. One was a little fellow wh had coughed a great deal. The man wh had helped bring McLaughlin to the hous the night before, no doubt. In unison th two men had muttered:

"The man from Madrid wants his gol back. When is he gonna get it?"

Zimmerman reached out for the littl man as they were about to make off, the drew back his hand. There was a suspiciou bulge in the small man's coat pocket.

"I'd just as lief shoot you as not," th little man had said between coughs. "Yo see I ain't got long to live and I don' care what happens to me."

Then they were gone.

Zimmerman instinctively looked up an down the street for a policeman befor he realized that he wouldn't want a police man, not this minute anyway.

And now he threw himself heavily int his chair and looked at Hilda.

"Anything special?" he mumbled in a distrait way.

Hilda came and perched herself on hi desk directly in front of him, swinging on of her long, sheer-stockinged legs. She was smiling.

"Nothing, darling, nothing."

Her voice, her attitude shook Zimmer man out of his troubles.

Before this she had always repulsed his advances laughingly, tantalizingly, but now she was different. He wondered why, whether it was because Eddie was dead. Of course that was it. For the moment, Zimmerman forgot his difficulties, his danger. He had always thought of her as

the most desirable woman he had ever met, and now he felt the blood rushing to his head, he found his temples throbbing and when he spoke his voice was thicker.

He stood up, rested a hand tentatively on her shoulder. She made no move to shake it off. Zimmerman said:

"Listen, Hilda. I'm thinking of going away on a long cruise. You and I control this business now. We can do as we like."

"What about McLaughlin?" Hilda said.

"McLaughlin? Don't bother about McLaughlin. McLaughlin doesn't count. How about it?"

"How about what?" she said. She leaned her face a little nearer to his. She was still smiling, provocatively, challengingly.

"How about going away with me?" Zimmerman's voice shook. His arm crept further around her shoulder.

"Would you like that?" she asked softly.

For an answer, Zimmerman threw both his arms around her. He made as if to kiss her. She managed to avoid him for a few seconds. Her hand was groping, groping for the buzzer that was beside her on the desk, the buzzer that would summon Vera. She found it and pressed down hard, then she let Zimmerman kiss her. She shut her eyes so that he might not see the expression in them. She heard the door open and for seconds made no attempt to free herself.

Then came Vera's voice, brittle, metallic. "Did you ring for me, Mr. Zimmerman?"

Zimmerman released Hilda. "Of course I didn't," he said angrily.

Hilda got off the desk. She was a picture of lovely confusion.

"I think it's my fault, darling," she said. "I think I sat on the buzzer. I'm sorry." She glanced at Vera.

Vera's face was white. Her lips moved but no words came.

"I've got to go now, dear," Hilda said to Fritz. "If we're—if I am going away I've got a lot of shopping to do. Women never go away without buying a lot of clothes. Perhaps—perhaps you might lend me your secretary this afternoon or tomorrow to help me?"

Zimmerman for a time said nothing. He was studying her. Had she brought about this situation deliberately for some reason that he didn't understand? His vanity wouldn't permit him to accept that explanation. He looked at Vera and grinned.

"I imagine she'd be tickled to death to help you," he said sardonically.

Hilda blew him a kiss and walked out. She had seen C. O. Ponder disappear in McLaughlin's office and went in there. C. O. Ponder was just about to leave with his men.

"You might," Hilda said, "talk to that secretary of Zimmerman's. It wouldn't surprise me if she knew something."

C. O. Ponder took her in with those round, unreadable eyes of his.

"Thanks, ma'm," he said, "thanks."'

FRITZ ZIMMERMAN sat there glowering at Vera. With Hilda gone, the difficulties of his position came back to him. Zimmerman wasn't unlike Mr. Nibbs in his point of view. He was just as ruthless, just as callous and just as indifferent to the consequences of what he did insofar as it affected others, as Mr. Nibbs. There was however this difference. Mr. Nibbs was circuitous, conniving, and carried on with Machiavellian intrigue. If something went wrong with one of Mr. Nibbs' schemes, he had a dozen ways of covering his tracks and reforming his lines. He was constantly aware of the fact that the best arrangements might go awry.

Not so Zimmerman, whose approach was far more direct.

Experience had taught Zimmerman that he had no gift for being subtle or ingenious beyond a certain point. Not that he couldn't hit on various devious devices to accomplish his ends, but they were of a simpler sort and of overwhelming brutality.

The death of Gabriel and José should have been followed by the death of Don Graham. That would have cleaned up everything very nicely and it all would have been blamed on McLaughlin. There was the back of the envelope on which the note had been written and that had come

from McLaughlin's desk. McLaughlin's fingerprints were on it unquestionably.

Then there was the gun from which the bullets in José's back had come. And another bullet from that same gun would have done away with Don Graham, if he had been alone last night when Zimmerman called on him. The gun would have been found in Don Graham's room and undoubtedly it would have had McLaughlin's fingerprints on it. It was McLaughlin's gun.

But Don Graham hadn't been alone, and that little killing had to be postponed. Yet it couldn't be delayed too long for several reasons, not the least of which was the fact that Don Graham could tell the police something that would destroy Zimmerman's alibi. To be sure, Hilda had warned Zimmerman that if anything happened to Don Graham, she would have the vault opened and disclose the fact that the bulk of the treasure was gone, but that hadn't worried Zimmerman because, with Meechling, McLaughlin and Gabriel dead, to whom could Hilda go?

But something seemed to have gone wrong at every turn. Here was McLaughlin back and if McLaughlin recovered he might be in a position to prove that he couldn't possibly have killed José.

And here was Don Graham, not alone by any means. There was a man—a man with a cat, and others, people who kept stopping Zimmerman in the street, wanting Don Graham's gold back. The whole business was frightfully complicated, unexpectedly and of a sudden. All this shot through Zimmerman's mind as he sat there glowering at Vera. Was she going to be difficult too? That question was answered for Zimmerman right then and there.

Vera, her dark eyes burning, her voice flat, said:

"So you're throwing me over? You're going away—going away with her."

"Can I help it," Zimmerman shouted, "if a dame makes a pass at me?"

Vera shook her head in cold disbelief and in that same monotone, said:

"I saw enough and I didn't see you fight her off."

Zimmerman's face purpled. His huge body shook with fury. As if he didn't have enough to worry about already without having to consider this pallid girl.

"All right," he bellowed. "Now you tell me something. The other day I saw you standing in front of your mirror talking to yourself. You were 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 . . .'" Zimmerman got to his feet and seized Vera's wrists, twisting them until she almost sank to her knees. "You sold me out, didn't you, you sold me out to Graham!"

With a supreme effort, Vera managed to wrench herself free. Not a vestige of color remained in her face. Tears welled up in her eyes. Her slight, flat body trembled.

Zimmerman started for her, then stopped.

If she had denied it he could have understood it. Then he would have known she was lying, that she had sold him out; but somehow now he didn't think so. She wasn't confused, hadn't been frightened by his accusation. There was just a look of pain and sorrow in her face.

When she turned and walked out, he made no move to follow. He simply dropped back into his chair.

The telephone rang. Zimmerman picked it up. The operator told him there was someone on the phone who wouldn't give his name, who said it was a personal call. Zimmerman said:

"All right, put him on."

The next minute a voice came to him—a high, strident, cackling voice that Zimmerman had never heard before.

"The man from Madrid wants his gold back."

There was a click that told Zimmerman that them at the other end had hung up. Slowly Zimmerman put the instrument back on its cradle.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

By
CHARLES
TENNEY JACKSON
Author of "Swamp Man,"
"Palmetto Gold," etc.

The old Wolf peered down at them, cursing and threatening with his gun

The Island That Died

It didn't sound very reasonable to Mase McKay—this expedition in search of a stone fish; so he took it in his stride when he found himself mixed up in the last ferocious echo of a long-gone rum-runner's war . . .

MASE McKAY sat in the dim lobby of the ancient hotel in old Nassau watching the palm fronds move in the first stir of the trade wind. Beyond the garden Bay Street, from Blackbeard's Tower to Fort Charlotte, dozed in midsummer heat. Young Mr. McKay gaped sleepily as he waited for the mysterious telephone call.

Back on Jigger Key, in the Florida swamps, his old man had warned him. "What kinda job that feller offer you on his yacht? Now they're some three thousand islands, rocks and reefs all the way from Bimini seven-hundred mile to the Turks, and yore old-time gunrunnin', wreckin' ancestors, them McKays, knew 'em all. But you don't. I c'd shut my eyes and jab a finger down on this yere map an' whatever land I hit it'd be Trouble Island when you got there. This Baltimore millionaire feller wants you to dig up a stone fish, hey?"

Young McKay had looked oddly wise. "Dunno. He says a college asked him. The durn fish is a mililon years old, he says. A fossil."

"Don't make sense. I bet you git in jail agin. You wait."

. . . Now Mase was waiting. The mys-

terious yachtsman, Joe Neal, had instructed him to come to Nassau and wait for a telephone call as to where he would join the schooner, *Wind Song,* of Baltimore. But Mase was a wary bird. He'd reached the Bahama capital by a sponge boat whose skipper he knew; not by the regular one from Miami.

"There ain't no use in a pilgrim arrivin' in a strange land by the front door when he c'd git in the back door, so them customs fellers never laid eyes on me. A stone fish ain't somehow right."

He hadn't told his old man all this Mr. Neal had written.

In Mase's hind pants-pocket a thin, rusty tin box sweated his leg. That document box had been the sole possession found upon his uncle, Dave McKay, when the coast guard picked up the rum-running skipper seven years ago in the Gulf Stream. Dave had died in the Key West hospital while federal agents listened to his ravings, hoping to learn more of old Scotch John Neal's doings in the last big hijackers' war. Dave McKay died with one strange repeated word.

"Strangler," Mase thought now. "Man, them were the days! Uncle Dave jest mutters: 'Strangler! *Strangler* got it!' Got what?"

The federals had turned over Uncle Dave's worn body and his knife and this box to the McKay clan, and they had pawed over the sea-stained ship's papers and some penciled dirty charts that meant nothing; and then they had buried their black sheep in a white shell grave on Jigger Key and forgot him.

But not young Mase. And now some man named Neal had asked him to fetch those papers to Nassau. The colony capital was a dead burg now in midsummer heat. The hell-roarin' days of the rum trade, and two centuries back, the buccaneers, had given way to tourist hotels and pants fer wimmen.

Young McKay hooked a hard finger into his collar and listened to the old clerk scratching his pen behind the desk, and then jumped, nervous as a cat.

A police bugle shrilled from the nearby barracks, and across the hotel gardens Mase saw the guard detail marching to Government House. Solemn black men in white tunics piped with red, white helmets and gloves, with a white inspector leading them. That dead seaman's box seemed to burn Mase's hip.

"Minute I hit town they turn out the British army. I ain't done nothin' yet!"

Then the telephone rang.

Mase started for the booth—and never reached it.

HE STOOD open-mouthed as the stuffy old clerk turned. "Call for a Mr. McKay? Mr. McKay? Oh, indeed—quite! Second booth, sir."

For a strange man had come swiftly past the desk from behind the shrubs, and nodded to the clerk. He entered the booth. Mase slipped to its side muttering. "Ought to toss this guy out. Takin' my name this way ain't right."

He heard the other man speaking: "Yeah, I get you. But I tailed that sap around in Key West till I learned what I wanted and then took the Pan American plane here. And he wasn't on the overnight boat from Miami so we can forget him. South Bay, eh? Take a taxi to Bamboo Town? Okay, the name aboard the boat is McKay—see?"

The man came out and started briskly for the side porch. Youngish, well built, hard face. When he was on the curving garden path Mase followed, silently as a Seminole, rounded the date-palm clumps and reached the small gate as the stranger was peering through.

The British Army was marching by the blank hot walls, and the stranger stepped back quickly. He also stepped straight into a right swing to the jaw.

Mase caught him reeling with a left and right again, caught his collar and dragged him under the dark palm shade.

"Mister, my mammy never brung me up fer a stickup man, but I want to know fer what you take my name. Laid fer me yestiddy, did you?"

He went through his senseless victim's pockets. Pearl knife, cigar lighter, a good watch—a blue automatic under his arm; some loose American silver and English shillings. And a wallet.

Mase jerked it open. Some two hundred dollars, a receipted Miami hotel bill, a Hialeah racing stub and a few penciled addresses.

Mase piled the stuff on his breast and turned swiftly away. "Brother, you got me faded! Not a thing to identify you. Guess I better move along."

On Bay Street he hailed one of the ancient cars. "Hey, boy! To Bamboo Town, wherever that is, and fast!"

"Yes, sir." The driver wasn't startled for they never knew what these Yankees would do. "Quite around New Providence Island, sir."

Mase looked back. No disturbance. The British Army hadn't yet found that bird in the recess of Victoria Gardens. And, Mase thought; "I bet he won't run to the police with a squawk. Bet he don't want any public notice more'n I do. He got soaked in the mug but got his money back so he can mebbe figger why. Boy, my knuckles is skinned!"

The shore road left the closed hotels and bungalows and skirted dune country on one side, and green shoal water on the other. Mase was dozing when the driver spoke and pointed to a gray hamlet.

"Bamboo Town, sir. But I think you're wanting that American yacht."

"You named it." Mase paid him and started for a flimsy wharf beyond which was a smart launch with two men under the awnings. Half a mile off shore he saw a glitter of white paint and brasswork. He had an idea it would be best to spring a surprise before somebody else did.

He sure walked into one. The two men in the launch stared at him in astounded silence. One with a gilt-braid cap over slightly graying hair, and with the manner of command, watched him with steely eyes. The other was a little yellowish chap, native anywhere around the West Indies. Neither said a word. That silence was a sinister threat wrapping young McKay even in the noon tropic sunshine.

"Mornin'!" His grin was innocent. "Mr. Joe Neal, are you?"

"Mr. Neal is on board," the tall man was curt. "I'm Captain Jett."

"Yeah, I guess you're the man who just telephoned me. McKay's the name. Mason McKay from Jigger Key, Floridy. Pleased to meetcha."

That menacing silence grew. Then the sailing master said, "Get aboard, Mr. McKay. Any—luggage?"

Mase grinned. The dead man's box burned him again. "No, I travel light. I can move faster. Always best to be on yore toes."

He lounged to the launch cushions. Jett muttered that the yellow man was Rambo, a pilot from Grand Cayman. And Rambo was scared.

MASE tried to guess as the tender streaked across the blue cove to the anchored yacht. Scared? Jett and Rambo both knew that this was not the man to whom Jett had phoned this morning.

Jett wasn't scared but bewildered. He wolfed a cigar with grim lips, and when the launch came alongside, motioned Mase to the gangway. Mase was on deck swiftly; he was one who always wanted the jump on the other guy.

Half a dozen well-fed, lazy black crewmen forward gave him casual interest. Then Mase had another surprise. He'd expected some kind of trouble but the blond young man who got up from a drink-stand under the aft awnings stretched out a hearty hand.

"McKay, eh? Mighty glad you're here. I feared Captain Jett wouldn't locate you so soon. Everything—all right, McKay?"

"Yeah. Right as right. Except I mashed my knuckles some in the car door comin' over." He looked at Jett and Jett was a cold mask. He grinned to Mr. Joe Neal. "Yeah, right. You picked the right McKay!"

Neal laughed. "You were likely puzzled. But I asked a sponge buyer if he knew

of the McKays. I wanted a—a—bodyguard, you might say—and he recommended you. He said you McKays were a fightin' clan that dated 'way back to wrecking and civil-war gun-running days."

Again Uncle Dave's tin box burned Mase's leg. This cheerful yachtsman wasn't telling it all. Captain Jett was present.

Mase grinned. "Well, about a stone fish, it didn't make sense. I knew that much."

"Sure." Neal laughed again. "Damn the fish. I wanted some reason for cruisin' about, and science was it. McKay, I've had money just one year, and am not set for it yet. Get me? This smart little boat and all came as inheritance from my grandfather, old Scotch John Neal—a rum-runner's fortune, in fact, to a Princeton student. And now I found some loose ends, puzzlin' angles. Your uncle, Dave McKay skippered one of Scotch John's ships. I'm hunting something Dave died for. See?"

"No," Mase grunted; and glanced at Captain Jett. Neal turned.

"All right, Captain, let's have the hook up and be out."

Jett went forward, watching the shoreline. Dismissed, and knowing it. Rambo got the anchor up, the winch groaned, the motors throbbed slowly, and the black engineer put his head above the gratings again, also watching the shore of the ancient pirate isle.

"Pretty nice job, this eighty-five footer Grandpop left me."

"Yeah, Mr. Neal, but too fancy. I'd play 'em close and watchful."

"You sound right," Neal smiled. "Well, I'll turn the ace up—all of 'em. I wanted your Uncle Dave's papers, hoping that in them is a clue to what became of eighty thousand dollars of old Scotch John's money. Your Uncle Dave, his most trusted skipper, took it in for the last load of liquor Grandpop got through. Dave didn't have it when his schooner piled on Ronvador Reef. I've traced up all leads. Ever hear of the hi-jacker king, they called the Wolf? Old Kelly Blount of Ronvador? He robbed the rummies righto."

"Never heard of him. I was a kid like you must have been in them days. Your grandpop and my uncle was hard men in hard doin's." Mase looked at the midship wheelhouse. "Excuse me, but does Captain Jett figure in your business?"

"He was another of Scotch John's masters. Why you ask me?"

Mase started to tell of the mystery man he had slugged in Nassau, whom Jett had planned to bring aboard as Mase McKay; and then checked it. After all Neal knew Jett and he didn't know Mase. Better wait and watch before starting anything.

Mase grinned cheerily. "Oh, nothin'! Just wanted to know if your skipper knew all these waters. But Rambo, a Cayman Islander, would anyhow. Go on."

Neal grew serious. "This yacht is set for Ronvador. From what I hear it's a ghastly, hurricane-wrecked island down the Old Spanish Channel. Old stone house dating from pirate days. Used to be sugar lands in slave times. Kelly Blount owns it now. The Wolf retired when the rum trade fell. But old Scotch John swore vengeance on him for many things. The last was the way he treated your uncle's crew when they were wrecked on his island. Either he robbed Dave McKay of eighty thousand dollars or Dave cached it there, somewhere in that hijackers' hideout. I'm going to find out who got it."

"The Strangler," Mase grinned. "Dave said so. Ever hear of that?"

"Strangler? No. Jett and I have run down all the old yarns we could around the old rum ports. Kelly Blount had an evil name but I never heard that Strangler."

"Strangler." Mase grinned. "Strangler got it!"

THE steward announced dinner. Rambo had the wheel. The little white cruiser was combing spray. Jett joined Mase and Neal below. The saloon was no spot for a 'Glades hunter. White and gilt and mahogany. Too much shiny junk on the table.

They talked of ships and seas and

shoals; the skipper giving McKay odd sidelong glances now and then. He excused himself soon to go above for a change of course. Neal shoved dishes aside.

"Well, McKay, I'd like to see what you brought along."

Mase dragged out the thin tin box. "Here's Uncle Dave's whole estate except a half-plug o' chawed tobacco, which I swiped out when I was fourteen. Boy, it masticated bad on yore stomach."

He spread stiff, salt-stained papers and Neal looked. "The dope I got was that Dave McKay had a map, or chart—marked."

"Guess you mean this." Mase unfolded the largest wrinkled sheet. Stained by seas—perhaps blood. There were smudged lead-pencil marks and figures. Crude lines such as a child or a dying man might make, ending in what could be a tree, a rock, a bird's nest—anything.

"I'm pretty good on swamp-Indian sign," said Mase, "but this mean's nothin' to me. But say, before Uncle Dave went to sea for your grandpop, fightin' hijackers, he was a Floridy swamp man!"

"Meaning what?" said Neal.

"Dunno. Just a thought. Well, sorry you seem disappointed about any clues in this junk. But, Neal, stow this stuff safe, will you?"

"Safe is right. There in the bulkhead." He crossed to a little green safe open in the wall, and then Captain Jett called down the open skylights. Mase McKay had seen a shadow on them when he spoke.

"Mind stepping up, sir? Raising north reef of Ronvador. Have to go around it and in. Charts are not much good with the storms changing the shoals and channels every year or so. I'd like you to see."

"Right." Neal started above. Mase followed, but he took one keen look at the open safe, and the dead sailor's tin box within. The three stood in the wheelhouse and Rambo was forward with binoculars.

The *Wing Song* ran south, then westerly and overside Mase saw riffling white bars under clear green. There seemed a twisting five-fathom channel toward a distant cove between low bare hills, but the yacht passed the inlet north by west. Neal grunted: "Goin' in?"

Jett glanced at the sun. "Mr. Neal, I'd lay off tonight. Bad shoals there. I know better anchorage; then I'd go ashore in full day for your talk with Blount if I were you. Might be—trouble."

"Got to deal with the old Wolf, Jett, somehow. Well, you're the skipper, not me. It looks like a fort in that cove. And the seas have smashed every green thing off the flats. Sure's a hell spot."

Mase was watching Rambo. The Cayman Islander had been watching seaward, not Ronvador Reef. Then he nodded to Jett and came aft. Mase picked up the glasses from the chartcase and turned them to port as the gloomy hills shut out the tiny harbor view.

He saw what Rambo had seen. A black dot that flashed. A big fast powerboat that vanished about the east spit of the sands.

"If it had tailed us today it knows where we're anchorin'," Mase thought. "I'm no deepwater man but I guess that. Shadowed again!"

IT WAS dusk when the yacht nosed slowly in toward low coral rock cliffs, with sparse piny hills above. The hook went down, very softly, Mase thought; and every man, white and black, stared at the empty ridge of Ronvador.

An odd silence gripped them all; about the little obscure ports all down the Indies, men had muttered sinister tales of Wolf Blount's island. Mase glanced aloft. No riding light.

When they went to the saloon he saw the ports were shuttered. Neal sat at the head of his table and lifted a cocktail. He laughed uneasily.

"You'd think we'd come to raid a house, rob a bank, pull a dirty job, wouldn't you now? Just a business proposition: I'm ready to make Kelly Blount a fair offer if he'll coöperate in finding Scotch John's rum money. Dave McKay's chart ought to mean things to Blount."

Jett grunted. "You're a Neal. Blount will hate your guts. But maybe we can dicker. He's broke, living like a hermit I hear. Maybe crazy; he's sure got blood on his soul—rum-running lads that his hijacking gang met up with and they never made shore with cargoes. Some just vanished. Old Scotch John was one man Blount feared, though."

After the meal they smoked and talked. But not of Ronvador. Jett shut up gruffly and Joe Neal seemed depressed.

Mase was glad when the owner said he'd turn in. Before he started for his stateroom he shoved the steel door of the little green safe shut. Mase watched Jett's face. Mase saw the tin box was there; but not in just the exact position it had been left.

"Tampered with," Mase thought. "Wonder if Uncle Dave's chart is there now? I guess so—but copied mebbe. Bet there's an inside deal on. Mebbe I ought to've told Neal I feared something."

Sitting in his bright little stateroom Mase, too, was depressed. Jett's room was just across the passage. The master had a small stairway directly to the chartroom amidships, but the main companion led from the aft cabin. Mase stretched on his bunk, dressed, and listened. Jett didn't come below. The yacht came about in the tide softly.

Mase grunted; he wanted to keep the shoreline in sight from his port, with his light out, but now he watched open sea beyond the shoals. After an hour of silence, except for the drowsy fans, a wan light came from a distorted late moon. Mase stole out, went forward, and stealthily shoved his head above deck to the chartroom. Dark, empty. The little dinghy which had bobbed at the end of its spar off the ladder, was gone. Mase grinned approvingly.

"Thought I was a good Indian but this Jett can prowl too. He gets ashore catfooted. Well, here goes for a look about myself."

He lowered himself soundlessly into warm tropic tide. Stroked softly, watching for the phosphorescent stir of a shark. But he dragged to the weed slime on the coral chunks, stood up on the short beach and peered about.

There was the boat drawn up, and a dusty trail to the hills above the low cliff.

Mase followed that with Indian swiftness on a trail hard to lose. It reached the ridge, came down past sterile fields, then along stone fences until he saw the starlit cove, a little single-sticker at anchor, and back of the broken rocks among the hurricane-wash sands, the grim bulk of Ronvador Great House, relic of eighteenth century cavalier planters and sea rovers who plundered the Spanish King's ships.

A DEAD isle. Bare of grass or shrub or tree. Bare as dead men's bones under a twisty moon. Mase followed a wall till he stopped at a sandy area across which he saw the lower arches of the stone house below the gloomy verandas staring seaward. A squat round tower at one corner, a West Indian water catchment or cistern.

Mase stared. "Sure give you creeps. Dark, still as a tomb. But Jett's here."

Jett, come on a midnight dicker with the grim master of Ronvador House? Mase was wondering when a low voice spoke in the shadows. A strange voice—yet he had heard it somewhere!

The Cayman Islander stood out in the dull moonlight but the third man tensed McKay's nerves.

The stranger turned to Captain Jett in the shadow of the wall. "Listen, this job's got to be fast. Blount's got a few field boys in the old slave huts down that left lane. And dogs kenneled behind the house. I scouted it all from the hills after I landed on the east point. Jett, no use trying a deal with Kelly Blount. He'll shoot on sight. We got to put the old Wolf away and rummage the place by that McKay chart."

Rambo protested hoarsely. Jett rasped: "Bittsy Malone, you can't pull the stuff you could do in the States. British colony law is pretty stiff. You don't knock off Blount unless we must."

"Yeah. And must is the word." The man called Bittsy croaked impatiently:

"If you don't get Blount tonight he'll deal with Joe Neal tomorrow. And McKay—damn his eyes! He got to Nassau after all and slugged me this mornin'. I'm rememberin' that!"

"You lay off 'em all. You was brought for a job. I can't show in it for Blount'd know me. He'd start war on me. But you can go tell him you got McKay's old chart and if it means anything you and he can find Scotch John's cache. You and Rambo go in on him."

Mase went lower along the wall. Bittsy Malone! That was the bird whom Jett had intended to ship aboard the *Wind Song* in the name of Mase McKay. Bittsy was a fast worker; trailed right down in his speedboat to Ronvador and had signaled Jett tonight. Malone, a Baltimore gunman, who had learned a lot of Joe Neal's business.

Rambo was scared again. He started to protest against any rough work, and Jett stormed at him. Bittsy weaved out in the open, studying the dark bulk of the house. Jett warned him again.

"Get Blount out of bed. Fetch him down to the shore and talk. If he won't deal then—well, you handle it. But a dead man here—"

"I don't leave cold meat around," muttered Bittsy. "Neal and his gang won't see any job around here. Wolf Blount'll just be missin'. I'll be on my way south, with or without that eighty thousand cash money. You can meet me in Nuevitas, or some of the East Cuba ports. You'll know where and how, Jett. You'll be back on board Neal's boat before daylight and fetch her down here after breakfast. You'll be surprised as anybody that Kelly Blount's not at home. He never will be. All I want is for him to talk first."

Mase crept closer to the cistern tower at the house wing. He got it all. Bittsy was a killer and wanted to kill. Jett was another but had to cover. Rambo was a frightened tool of the two. Jett put heat on him: "You'll go along and you'll do as Bittsy says. Hear me, Rambo? Scared of that old dope's name, that's it. Get going!"

BITTSY was crossing the sandy yard and Rambo faltered out with him. Jett slunk back to the deep shade of a roofless stone shed among rusted and primitive sugar machinery abandoned sixty years. Mase crouched and followed the outside wall as silent-footed as a hunting cat.

Around the circular cistern he stared up. Against the stones a big dead palm leaned over the upper gallery. Topless, choked by the massive convolutions of a wild fig vine, the only living thing about the house. Mase put hands to it; he'd climbed them in the 'Glades on trapping days, and he made less noise reaching the gallery than did Bittsy Malone coming up the front sunwarped stairs.

Mase stood by the stone parapet of the cistern close to the house wall listening to Rambo's whisper around the corner.

The wide gallery ran all around the house; every window was closed with immense wooden shutters held by slave-hammered hinges. And windows were few; Ronvador House was a grim fortress of the days when sea raiders brawled in the roadstead.

"That tough guy comes around here and I'm in a spot," Mase said. "Mebbe my old man was right. This Mr. Blount ain't goin' to like me any better than this Bittsy boy does. But if Bittsy cracks on me with his gun he'll wake up the old Wolf and a bunch o' black lads, so I guess he'll consider."

He heard a sound and shrank against the lichened wall of the cistern. The dead palm threw a shadow just here.

At the front corner of the house he saw Rambo watching this side. Then the Cayman Islander stole back to Bittsy at the great oaken doors. They had to figure on calling the master of Ronvador out without an alarm.

Then Mase heard that slight sound

again. Back of him. A small door in the rear wall had opened. In the black patch of it a tall figure stood soundlessly watching. A lined, savage face under a shock of white hair. The master of Ronvador wore a dirty silken dressing robe, and the hand that held this closed also held a long-barreled pistol. The one-time feared chief of the Out Island hijackers stood watching young Mr. McKay in a silence that got Mase's nerves.

"Excuse me," Mase grinned. "I ought to come to yore front door but you got callers there already. Mebbe I made a mistake, but that's me."

"Three," muttered Blount. "Two in front and one here. I expected it. For years. Bound to come. Rats who couldn't leave old Blount to rest at last. Come to ask of Scotch John's money—burn his soul! His last schooner breakin' on my reef, and his mob half-drowned beggin' old Blount for help! So Scotch John's men are back, eh?"

"Listen," whispered Mase. "Let's talk, mister. No use of you and me battlin'. McKay's the name, and Neal's schooner is here. But that ain't it. You look out, old man; a real gang's after you. Jett—"

Old Bount gave low terrible laughter. Crazy, Mase thought. He fixed his death's head eyes on Mase and no mercy was in them.

"Look out!" said Mase. "You old murderin' devil, look out! They want you bad. Yeah—the money. Dave McKay said: 'Strangler!'"

The gaunt Wolf stopped rigidly at that word.

Mase whispered on. "The rum skipper you chased off this isle died but he said: "'Strangler! Strangler got it!'"

"Said that?" Blount was muttering to himself. "McKay said that? Strangler—got it? By Beelzebub, after all these years I know!"

His fierce eyes widened, his toothless jaws opened. The long pistol wavered, lowered. "You ain't the Strangler?" Mase muttered. "I thought—I dunno . . . There was a sort o' chart—"

"Damn the charts! I know now. It's mine—mine!"

"I tell you, look out. Death around the corner for you! Look—"

Blount turned his head at a creak of the front gallery boards. Bittsy Malone stood there watching down the side between the curve of the cistern and the house wall. Old Blount was watching Mase cunningly. Then he seemed to nod and fade backward into the small door, and it closed noiselessly. But laughter? Was there insane, sinister laughter behind the oak planks?

MASE had no time to listen. Bittsy, the Baltimore gun, was out in the open watching. Bittsy saw a moving thing under the shadow of the dead palm's bare top. Something that tried to ease and fade between the ancient stones of the parapet. Mase leaned back until he could see the stagnant pool far below glisten faintly.

Malone was coming. Alert as a cat now, gun out and ready. The thing he had seen must be old Blount. Kelly Blount, the Wolf, whom the rummies had sworn to kill a decade ago, Blount the raider of their cargoes, robber of their offshore money when they'd been paid.

Bittsy came up, his gun coming higher as he spotted his man. His voice was low but it was steel when he halted.

"All right, Blount! We come for you, sure! Come along, old rat, down the front way. You and me are havin' a talk. Just you and me along the shore, see?"

Mase McKay was trapped. Over the stone parapet into the cavernous cistern was his only way out. Behind Bittsy he saw Rambo, the yellow Cayman Islander, gasping with fright. But Bittsy was giving Mase rasping orders.

"Put 'em up and come. Down the stairs, out from this house. They said you were hard, hey, Kelly Blount? You ain't nothin' to me!"

McKay stepped out in the moonlight. No other place to go and he figured Bittsy wouldn't shoot. Bittsy wanted old Blount

and gunning McKay wouldn't do right now. But Bittsy halted at Mase's grin.

"Ain't we met somewheres? Oh, sure, this mornin' at the hotel!"

"McKay," said Bittsy hoarsely. "Yeah—is Neal here too? Keep yore kisser shut, McKay. Yeah, you put one on me—and I'll remember. We're tyin' you up, McKay; and a gag. You're one who don't talk."

"Feller, I don't want to talk. Nothin' to say fer once. I sure said it to you this mornin'. Lookit, my hand half broke."

Bittsy was cursing his cringing guide. "Go through him for a gun. You, Rambo, jerk out of it and fast."

Rambo pointed a shaking finger. "The door. Open—that old man, he's death, sir. His door—open! He—there he is!"

THE master of Ronvador stood in his doorway watching grimly. Satisfied surely that his enemies fought. His death's-head face was too much for Rambo. The Cayman Islander yelped in fright and started along the veranda. Jett had heard the voices and he had come up the front steps. Rambo went howling past him, and Jett knew secrecy was useless now. He came on quickly jerking orders to Bittsy.

"Well, we got to do it. Got to. Take him down, Bittsy." Then Jett also recognized Mase McKay. He stopped, staring; and Bittsy went dancing around with his gun, first on Mase, then old Blount.

And old Blount suddenly fired. The roar of his big old gun filled the portico space. Fired at the one man he knew and hated. Jett.

Mase McKay heard Jett's body crash down the front steps. Bittsy Malone whirled upon Blount but before he could shoot Mase was upon him.

Bittsy's gun exploded upward between them, the slug flew into the dead palm top, as Mase hurled him backward between the embrasures of the tower. Bittsy clutched desperately and jerked. Then he yelled.

Both men were in midair—falling. Bittsy fired upward again at Mase's chin but the worst Mase drew was a face burn. Mase thought he heard Blount coughing huskily as the gun's roar filled the cavernous cistern.

Then they both struck scummy water, Bittsy under the Florida conch. Mase fought back from the yelling gunman, stroked for the stones and held on.

The late moon over Ronvador hills made a wan light above them. Bittsy saw Mase and swam clumsily for him, the gun above water.

"You're out, McKay. No matter what, you go now." He raged and fired, and Mase slipped from the rock and dived. He plunged around the circular wall and thrust his head up smoothly. Bittsy was clinging to the opposite wall cursing with the deadly fear in his heart.

"Hey, you," Mase grunted. "Listen above. You shot Kelly Blount and he's the only man could get us out. Hey, Kelly, old-timer!"

Silence. Mase saw the twisted dead palm and tropic stars beyond.

"You," Malone snarled, "I was after you. Well, you're here, McKay."

"Yeah, we're both here. Blount's the only hope. And the only man could say where Scotch John's money is cached. Cut the shootin' now."

Silence again, as fear clutched Malone deeper.

He saw Mase scanning the grim walls. Mase fixed his eyes on a patch of water-matted intake-gutter five feet above the water. A stone overhang held an ancient lead pipe that had brought the rains from the roof. He wondered how big that hole might be. The stones had been broken by decades of storm waters roaring down from it. Bittsy muttered as Mase studied it.

Perhaps, if one man could support another on his shoulders for a minute, that stuff might be dragged away. At least the drain could be explored.

Mase swam directly below the spot and looked as he listened to Bittsy's muttered curses. The rocks were rougher here where the rainwater for a century had pounded

down the side. But a man couldn't climb them alone. Mase was studying them again when something struck his hand. Warm and wet. He rubbed it, smelled, and watched past the drain inlet to the moonlight-checkered rim of the wall. He stared at his hand, then upward.

"Blood," he muttered. "From the top. So who? Must be Blount—the old Wolf dragged himself to the edge and is watchin' down here. Must be; Jett's dead at the foot o' the outside stairs. Blount—"

He peered up, straight up, just his face above water. Yes, he saw the outline of head and shoulders over the parapet.

Something glittered and it took hunter's eyes to make it all out. Bittsy had stopped cursing and floundering, intent on holding to the rock crevices. That silence was terrific. Once, when a drop of blood fell it made a *plink* on the water by Mase's head and sounded like a shot to his strained nerves. He tried not to breathe audibly.

"Old Wolf Blount, wounded, mebbe dyin', layin' up there with a gun. Waitin' for light—waitin' to kill us both when he can see better."

The old hijacker king wasn't dead.

Mase saw his shoulders move once and his big ancient pistol glinted again. No use appealing to him for aid, for mercy even, Mase thought. Blount's reputation was a sinister thing among all men. Rats swimming in a bucket to old Blount!

He could enjoy his last hours of life watching two enemies die in this hole. Mase couldn't clear himself even by telling the truth. If Blount lived until daybreak, he was doomed, with Bittsy who had come *to kill the master of Ronvador House.*

"He moved again—tryin' to spot one of us. No word—just shoot. Which one first?"

HE THOUGHT once of trying to placate Blount; of calling to him that young Joe Neal had not come on a mission of vengeance but to deal with him about Scotch John's money. To say that Jett and Bittsy had planned to raid his house, kill him on the chance that they could find it. And while Mase seethed inwardly with this, Bittsy moved his hold on the stones. There was a ripple—and the light was stronger, mingled dawn and moonset.

And old Blount shouted, maniacal laughter, that boomed hollowly above them. Bittsy had not discovered him; he yelled frantically.

"What's that? God's sake, who's that?"

"Kelly Blount," Mase muttered. "You didn't get him up there. He's crawled to the wall, waitin'. Figure it, you tough guy. Not so nice, eh?"

He could see Bittsy's wet face dimly upturned. Blount's head was against fading stars, above him the dead palm trunk in the clutch of the choking vine. An idea suddenly burned into Mase's brain—nobody but a swamp man would understand . . . and Uncle Dave McKay had come out of the glades to be a rum-skipper for old John Neal!

But Blount knew! His terrible laughter came down to the prisoners. "Come up and get it. Come on, rats! Both o' you! I killed Jett, and now you two come!"

"Say," Mase called. "Get us out. I haven't any gun. Bittsy, drop yours. Throw it where Blount can see it sink. Mebbe we can deal—"

"Guns?" roared Blount. "Too late fer guns. All the gang guns in the world wouldn't do you any good now. Drop 'em or shoot as you like."

"Like hell I'll drop mine," said Bittsy. "Not with a lunatic up there." He muttered lower: "Talk to him, McKay, keep him busy."

Bittsy had his right arm above water. *He was unsteadily trying to center on* Blount's head twenty feet above. Mase barked at them both.

"Cut that, Bittsy! Blount, I can tell you a lot if I was out. I—"

"The Strangler!" Blount yelled. "Dave McKay's man, come to rob old Kelly—and you gave it all away with that word! Dave's word!"

Bittsy was raving. He was chilled and weak but ferocious as a trapped rat. He

clung with one hand, seeking toe holds below water and fired up wildly, shot after shot, with Mase howling at him from under the overhang of the gutter. He had one good foothold. The choked inlet was just at his fingertips. A boost from Bittsy would have let him clutch it, perhaps drag his body to it.

But Bittsy was too wild with fear to listen. He came pawing water across the cistern, the gun up, glaring at Mase. Blount's face had appeared again at the rim watching them. Bittsy yelled.

"One slug left, McKay! That's for you —you got me down here. You don't go out on no deal with anybody. You're through!"

Mase watched him flounder on. He stiffened his body and swung out from the wall down upon Bittsy's shoulders. The gun went off and lead snarled upon stone. Mase struck him with a stiff elbow full in the face as they both went under.

Down in that ancient ill-smelling pool. Mase kicked and thrust at a writhing body. Then he had to come up. He broke water, sought the roughened stones under the overhanging slab and clutched them panting, staring at the surface.

Bubbles; a little whirl that didn't break. Mase found himself counting seconds slowly, grimly. Bittsy did not come up. The pool came back to little ripples under the growing dawn. Mase heard a rasping noise above.

THEN he saw a thin rope dangling, jerking downward as if unsteady hands payed it out. A rope with a noose, and when it neared the water old Blount croaked weakly.

"Come on you. Stick your head in it. Hang yourself or climb where I can blast lead through you. No difference!" And wild laughter came again. "Or drown if you want—like a rat. No difference!"

Mase didn't answer. That voice told him it was useless. Old Blount was gorging on savage revenge. No mercy was here.

Blount was fumbling with his rope again. Now it hung straight down, the upper end fast to the dead palm trunk. The old man shook it until the noose was a yard from Mase's refuge.

Blount peered down but his victim was under the inlet ledge. Blount crawled to the right muttering. He didn't want this silence. He had heard a whirling fight and a gunshot; two drowning men in his pool, and then silence. Blount wished to jeer at them to the last. He floundered back and dangled the rope. Mase heard his pistol clink on the parapet but Blount's voice was slow and tired now.

"Come on, you hell's breed! Hang yourself or climb the line. No difference. I'm waitin'. Hear me? Answer, damn you!" He hung far out, his savage eyes glowering to seek them out.

"Come on . . . Strangler's waitin' fer you. Strangler's got it!"

Again his weak jeering. He leaned on the rope and out, pistol in hand. Then Mase lunged close to the wall. Old Blount was crashing down. Down his rope which slipped through his nerveless fingers. He fell like a black bat with outstretched wings upon the water, moved his gray head weakly and then under.

"Kelly!" Mase hurled out under the noose and down to grasp a limp figure under water. He dragged Blount to the surface and saw the thinning blood below his neck. Mase watched his eyes and then dropped the body. He swam back to his perch suddenly very tired.

"Iron man he was. Bittsy bored him through but he kept on baitin' us to the last. Joined Bittsy now—two men and two guns in the cistern mud. Bet there's other bones below 'em—if all I heard o' this hijackers' castle was true. Hey, Blount! You did me well!"

For he swung out and grasped the noose. Fought up and got a foot to its knot. Then Mase climbed, so weak he feared to stop. When he cleared the parapet he stretched on the wet rocks panting.

IT WAS a clear beautiful tropic dawn but Ronvador House was a thing that could not be softened. Stark and gray, sinister under the sunrise. And silent.

When Mase reeled up he heard or saw no living thing. Ronvador field hands had fled to the far end of the bleak island at the first gunshot last night. They would not return until a Colony commissioner fetched them. Then, looking out the cove, Mase saw a white yacht slowly picking a way in. He tried to grin.

"Reckon Joe Neal thought Jett and I deserted the ship. Well, Jett's face-up in the yard. Neal'll certainly be surprised."

He staggered up and tried to yell at the *Wind Song* when she came to Blount's broken wharf, the black boys at the lines calling anxious orders to each other. No one to give commands with Jett and Rambo gone! Neal did his best. Then he stared at the gray house and yelled, seeing Mase McKay clutching the wall on the upper gallery just below the palm with the hangman's noose. Mase lifted and shook it.

"Come up here, mister. Man, I had a night. Sure was hell! Come and look. And I got news. Know what Dave McKay meant by *Strangler!*"

The yacht owner was sore and bewildered. Rolling out to find his skipper and guest vanished, and the boat on the beach were too much.

"You? McKay? What you mean?" Neal halted when he saw Jett's body at the stairway, then he bounded up pale and flustered. Mase McKay sat on the parapet of the cistern and grinned weakly.

"Glad to see you. Ought to take an epidemic fer my nerves after what goes on last night. I can't tell it all, but old Blount's gone. Wolfin' his teeth at the world to the last. Thought you'd come here in revenge for your grandpop's money. Say, I guessed it all now!"

"You, what?" Neal halted, staring at the rope and the dead palm. He peered over at the black water and at blood smears on the rim.

"Uncle Dave McKay wasn't crazy. Not quite. Strangler, he said, with his last breath. Hospital folks in Key West couldn't get it. But a Floridy swamp-man might guess. Uncle Dave tried to tell the McKays. The Strangler!—only green, livin' thing on this skeleton of an island that's been hurricane-washed to the bone. Look at the palm!"

"Dead," Neal muttered. "What about it?"

"See what killed it. Look what's grown around it—a strangler fig that's killed every tree in the glades it ever curls about. Chokes them, covers every inch in time and feeds on 'em till they rot."

In a cleft of gray folds not two inches wide, Neal saw the rotted wood of the palm trunk. Its broken top just showed above the convolutions of the strangler vine whose few green leaves flickered over it. About the strangler trunk Blount had tied his hangman's rope.

"Get a boy and an axe," said Mase, as Neal merely stared dumbly. "We split the strangler away down a bit and we find where Dave hid Scotch John's money to keep it from Hijacker Blount—and mebbe from his own men when Dave thought he was weakenin', and Blount drove 'em to sea again. Their boat was lost and every man drowned mebbe. All I know is Uncle Dave was picked up beyond Andros adrift. But he cached that money and tried to mark it on a chart that McKays'd know. Only we was dumb. Boy, gimme that axe and go get me coffee off the boat."

Mase swung to his job, and Neal found his voice. "Jett—dead, and Blount dead. And some killer named Malone with him at the bottom of this stone well! It's goin' to be hell to explain to the law."

"Yeah, them Britishers are funny. I bet we got to lie outa some angles o' this job. And get into American waters before the big squawk starts. Blount's black boys will come back when they see yore yacht leave.

"But if we take Jett's body aboard and slide him overboard, mebbe, somewhere's, they won't find the other two dead men in that cistern mud. Gosh, I hope not soon! But lookit, mister, below this green wood of the strangler vine! A rotted twist of the old palm. Now, McKay knew that vine's a fast grower. In a year it would twist

across the split palm and creep up. Seven years and you'd never see the tree. Here's Scotch John's money pack—old oilskin tied about with rotted cord. Look it over, Neal."

Neal didn't believe what Mase tore from the hole in the palm trunk as the living strangler vine was hacked away. But he tore the stiffened packet open. The steward was coming with the coffee. Mase grunted. "No use lettin' yore crew in on this deal now. Count it on board. Man, we want to be outa Colony waters before Government House starts askin' how come and what for!"

But Neal jerked away at stiffened mouldy packets of grimed ancient American money. The rubber bands had rotted but you could count the packets and figure. Neal shoved the mess inside his shirt and started for the shore.

"All right, Mase. The stuff checks up to forty-five thousand it seems; and there's a sort of note in pencil wrapped around it. Smeared bad, hard to read. But your uncle's handwriting, same as on the map, I think. Something about a bank down the Leewards—a branch bank on Dominica Island. Mase, Dave McKay was square—he tried to account for it all and let you know—for Old Scotch John. Mase, I'm cutting you in on this. You McKays are a square outfit."

"Come on. Let's get down the islands and nose out the rest o' that rummy's dough if you're correct. Yeah, them McKays are pretty level; but don't ever ask my old man his private opinion o' me."

THIRTY DAYS FOR HENRY

What trio is it that right-thinking men call "The Shame of Arizona?" Who are those lethargic lawmen that have turned the sober workings of Justice into a vaudeville routine? Henry Harrison Conroy, naturally, and his loco companions, Judge and Oscar. Now, because men have died violently in Wild Horse County, Sheriff Henry must blunder through another hilarious saga of Tonto Town. A new novel by
W. C. TUTTLE

WE'RE RUNNING LINE

Neals have their necks out—that's an adage among surveyors. And young Al was the stubbornest of the lot. Al Neal actually enjoyed thrusting his Adam's apple under the guillotine of Destiny. Even a jinxed right-o'-way job couldn't get him down until yesterday let its ghosts loose. An exciting novelet, by
LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

ALSO: A colorful novelet about Bretwalda, the magic axe, by
PHILIP KETCHUM

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 8TH

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Thunderbolt

By JOHN AMES YORK

Author of "Show Me the Way to Go Home," "Requiescat in Pace," etc.

An Argosy Oddity

THE plane took off from the hidden experimental drome at sundown. It slanted into the copper sky, then swooped back to circle the field where officers saluted bowing dignitaries and shouting mechanics hurled up their greasy caps. The lone pilot waved, circling again, and opened the throttle as he turned tail to the sun.

There was a flagged court with the green hush of the garden around it where the Great Leader walked at end of day. He smelled the earth and heard the fountain whisper and found a certain ease there.

His bootheels clicked as he marched through his thoughts and his shoulders squared his pale uniform. . . . *Twenty paces and face about. . . . Twenty paces back.* . . . From the towers and hidden lattices the keen guards watched and the shifting eyes of his aides and secretaries trailed him from the long table. Thirty men saw each stride he made, each breath he drew, and waited the lift of his finger.

Halt-an . . .

"To the National Council," he said, "a proclamation. Upon this anniversary of our victory we must reaffirm . . ." He rolled the words on his tongue, declaiming them, and the shrill hypnosis of his voice was stamped upon the watching faces. "Immediate release," he said.

"Yes, Excellency!"

"To Giroux, Paris . . ."

The coming dusk was hazing the horizons west where his ramparts were, where his enemies hid, where his greatest battles were yet unwon. End of another day, and another worm's pace toward the goal of his destiny. He touched the sweat upon his brow and weariness went from his fingers to his brain. How many more to wait? These days so short, the hours so few, and no hand but his own to hold the sword steady!

"To the War Class of 1945, greetings . . ."

In the distant sky he saw the plane, a black dot above the sun, winged symbol of his power. Three thousand more by August they had promised, and the fate of ten nations in his grasp. "In your fist more strength than man has known," his inner voice pronounced. "In you a greater greatness than the Mongol Khan and all the Caesars."

"Yes," said the Great Leader. . . . "To His Majesty's Minister, London . . ."

The coming plane grew in his sight, its nose boring east where the path of his destiny lay. East to the wheatlands and the oil and black earth tough with vital ore. East where Napoleon's dreams were slain and a better man would prevail.

"That plane—" he said. "You have checked?"

"It is your great new Phalanx bomber, Excellency," said his aide at the telephone. "Captain Hugo at the wheel in the first

war-load test. They pronounce it your mightiest aircraft achievement."

The Leader nodded. "What next, Karl? The trade agreements, our espionage reports—"

"But Excellency," said the aide, "there is not time. In ten minutes the monthly honors to confer. At eight your broadcast. The Ambassador's dinner—"

Excellency curved his hairy lip in a smile. (A weary smile for the lucky ones to remember.) "You are right, Karl," said the Great Leader simply. "The hours are so brief for me and I but one man alone."

He raised his eyes to the drone of the swift bomber, his thunderbolt. He lifted his arm in stiff salute when it flew over and his officers joined the cheering guards as the bright ship banked to parade again.

Back it came, slanting down.

"Hugo is rash," an aide whispered. "He flies too low."

"He is diving straight at us, the fool!" another said. "Does he think he has schoolboys to thrill?"

Straight and steep the ship came on, its bright wings flushed with the sun's last red and three long bombs cuddled sleek at its belly. With a cyclone roar and a whimper, down, and none could say who first cried "Crash!" or shouted "Run!" but the voice of the Leader led them all in the screaming.

He screamed out his breath and blindly he ran, but his feet were not so swift as that meteor plummeting. He could not outrace the caterwauling whine that shrieked to crescendo nor the rushing bellow that swept him into its maelstrom blast and hurled him high in the white singing silence.

●

HE LAY face down and with hands that could not feel he felt soft nothingness. He could not see, he could not think, but beside him he sensed a presence and a breathing. He lay and he did not dream.

When he could move he made his fingers crawl. He clawed them blindly out and a door was there to scratch upon. The door opened and a warm light glowed. A voice spoke.

"Yes?" said the voice.

There was a strength in him and he stood. The other breathing presence was beside him but blinded out in the great shining light. The presence spoke:

"I am the traitor pilot," he said. "I followed a star that I dreamed and it brought me here."

"You are home," said the shining voice.

"And I am the house-painter of Vienna," the Great Leader said. "Are there houses here for me to paint?"

Announcement!

ALL-STORY
LOVE TALES

is going to be published ***twice a month*** this summer. ***The next issue will be dated July 15th,* and will be on sale at all magazine stands from June 28th to July 15th.*** Until further notice, ***All-Story LOVE Tales*** will be published on the **first and fifteenth of each month.**

Don't forget!

The next issue of *All-Story LOVE Tales* will be dated *July 15th* and will be on your neighborhood dealer's stand *Wednesday, June 28th, 1939.*

The Editors.

**The same "Class-A" romantic fiction as always . . . 10c*

Voyage to Leandro

By HOWARD RIGSBY

CHAPTER XXII

WHERE A MERMAID LIVES

NOT crawling, but running, I came to the beach. I had been given a reprieve from misery, and strength and hope bubbled in me again. Then, mute and constant as a shadow, Robb intruded upon my well-being. He waved from the south end of the beach and started to run toward me. I whirled and left the bright dimpling world, hurrying into the ground. It took a light to make those inner walls gleam back redly, and I had none. I stumbled along into the sulphur and the dark, groping wormlike, as that Spaniard must have centuries before me, hearing the rank water dripping and the hiss of the stream ahead.

At last I stood in the choking stench of the inner tomb with the bones gleaming at me from the floor, and I was afraid. It was clear to me that Mr. Tracy had desired my death; I could hear him chuckling madly over it in the subterranean chorus of the stream. Yet I could not turn back now. Here in this black nauseous heart of Leandro I had found my fate, bid to it by the whim of an idiot. Yet when I had stood there for a moment my fear left me and I almost welcomed it. Then the walls around me began to glow and there was a quick shuffle of footsteps and a light approaching in the corridor. I started to fling myself into the stream, and hesitated. Robb burst into the chamber with a torch and the walls flamed.

"Stop there!" I warned, holding Sorenson's knife.

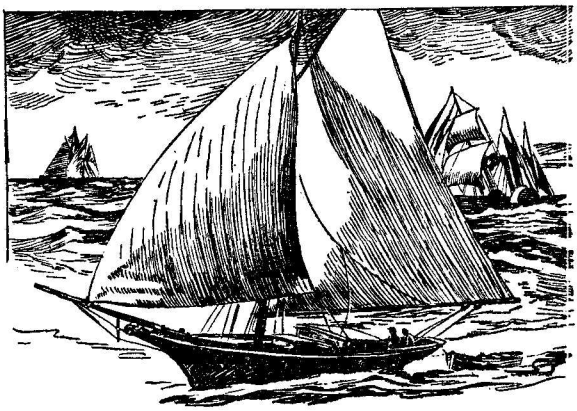
"Dave," he said, "go ahead—cut my throat with it." He held his arms wide and his torch flared and hissed wildly.

I stared at him, realizing that at last I was the master, the strongest of us two. Since I was already committed to cast myself into the stream I could not lose, whether that way led to Nautilus or to death.

"You must try to understand," Robb said. "I've had a tough life. I've had to fight for everything, Dave. And if the other night I offended you, I'm sorry. When I was a lad like you I saw men drunk and I hated them, too, yet I learned to understand and forgive them. Every man has a right to that, Dave—a right to be understood. I'm only asking that you try with me. When you're older, you'll know. There will be a blackness in you and you'll drink and forget."

I laughed at him. "I understand you all right," I said.

His face was wild and red in the glare and his eyes in it looked comic for they were sad. "Ah, Dave," he said. "You should not speak to me like that. You've no money-changer's heart. Why the first day I cast eyes on you, there before the cave, I liked you. And when I got to know you better I thought that if I had a son of my own,



The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, was published in the Argosy for June 3

I would wish him to be exactly like you."

"I know," I said, "you fooled the turnkey at the jail and the sailors of the *Lady Hook*, but not me. Why, damn you, you must be crazy to think I'd believe anything you'd say after you killed Charlie and shot me."

"Shot you!" he cried. "Dave, I was mad—wild. Don't you see? I couldn't understand why you'd run off and I was just firing into the air to scare you." He paused. "Killed Charlie? . . ."

"Yes," I said. "That changes things, doesn't it? You can't use me now. You can't get fifty thousand dollars from Mr. Stribling."

"I wasn't going through with that plan. We're building a catamaran now to get away, so at last leave this 'cursed place. The pot's going to boil again soon, Dave, and I want you with me. Use you? Lad, I meant it when I said shipmates. There's no other way for you. You can't go back. Come with me, Dave. We'll laugh at the world again and we'll be free!"

Free? . . . I had possessed freedom, and now I knew it for a lonely terrible thing to own completely. Freedom meant turning your back on all that you held dear and running heedlessly into disaster. Freedom was a foolish dream of children. And Jeremy Robb could no longer fool me because I was no longer a child.

Robb coughed, choking, and advanced a step. "Come," he said. "This is no fit place to talk unless we wish to die like our Spanish friend there. Let's get out in the open before it's too late."

The fumes were swirling in my brain and I said, "Death suits me. I prefer it. Goodbye, Jeremy Robb!"

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

I GRINNED at him, taking a careful backward step into the water. Oh I wanted to prolong this gesture, to drag it out and watch him suffer because he was scared and I was not.

"I'm going away," I whispered. "Away—for good!"

He held out one hand. "Dave, now—now wait." He began to tremble. He swayed a little and glanced down at the bones and then at me. "Don't, Dave," he said. "Don't drive me mad!"

I laughed. "I don't have to do that," I said. Then I choked and I knew that I must go at once or faint there. I waved my hand at him and as I fell back into the water he screamed like a woman.

For a moment, swept on into the rotting blackness, I fought the water. But I had scarcely begun to die when I was free of it and there was light and the rumble and suck of the sea.

It was a scene of strange secret beauty. On either side buff sandstone walls rose, slanting inwardly to an apex I could not see. In this place the torrent which had borne me became innocuous and lost itself tumbling through rocks in a depression along one side of the vault. Ahead were framed the sea and a cone-shaped slice of sky. Following one wall above the stream bed ran a stone floor wide enough to build a house upon and, on it, and toward the mouth of the vast stone cranny, was a shelter made of sailcloth. Before this burned a small fire, the smoke rising in a perpendicular column to lose itself in the upper shadows.

As I stepped out of the stream, a girl came along the cave floor and looked down at me. She wore a brief kirtle of goatskin and her black hair hung forward over her shoulders. The eyes in her dark face were very keen and kind. With an effort I shrugged off the feeling that she, and all of it, was a dream. This was Nautilus.

"You're David," she said.

"You're Nautilus."

She laughed. "That's Chris' name for me. It's silly. My real name's Rhoda." She looked shy when she said it and suddenly she was no longer a fabulous creature, she was just a girl.

"Well," I said, "where's Charlie?"

A look of concern clouded her face. "He's up here," she said. "Oh, if there was only some way to keep him from suffering so."

I started to climb up out of the stream and slipped. She leaned down and offered me her hand, but I ignored it and managed to scramble up unaided.

The canvas shelter was made from part of the *Shark's* mainsail and Charles was lying inside of it on some skins. He looked feverish and his eyes had the harassing dull look of one who suffers constant agony, but he appeared to be glad to see me.

"I thought maybe you'd decided to stay with him and go to China," he said.

"How did you get here?"

"Why, I went in the water and then I looked around for you, but I couldn't see you. Then I got up on a rock out there and stayed there till it was night. When I came back to the beach I called for you." He nodded toward Nautilus. "She came along and brought me here." He stared at me. "What's the matter with your head?"

"Where?" I asked. Out of the corner of one eye I noticed that Nautilus had turned her attention from Charles to me.

"Your forehead!" Charles said, pointting to his own temple. "Where do you think I mean?"

"Oh that," I said lightly. "Robb just shot me a little. It made me unconscious," I added.

"Do you want to lie down?" Nautilus asked me.

I shook my head and looked at Charles' foot. It was bundled in cloths. "How is it?" I said. "Pretty bad, is it?"

"You'd think so if you had it!" he said angrily. "And so would Jeremy Robb, too. Oh, I know, he was talking about my aches and pains, just as if I was a weakling, and like it wasn't anything. He let me drive that nail in him—sure! But let him have this foot. That's all. Just let him have this! He wouldn't think he was so tough then." He stared at my feet resentfully. "Neither would you."

I thought bitterly of Robb.

"Let's see it," I said.

Charles nodded at Nautilus. "Go ahead, show it to him—so he can get sick."

I FROWNED, feeling my face grow warm. Why did Charles have to say that in front of her? Yet a moment later this slight pique was lost in a shock of sickened pity as Nautilus unbound his foot. Red, smouldering, gangrenous, the foot was absorbed in a vicious festering life of its own. It was reaching for the ankle now, leaving in its wake havoc and decay and exuding a vile stench. Charles shut his eyes and sank back.

I shuddered. "What are we going to do?" I asked Nautilus wildly. "We have to get help—get a boat. We have to get him ashore, to a doctor!"

"Oh, it'll never get well," Charles said. "What's the use? I know it'll never be any good again."

Nautilus stood up and took my arm. She led me a few steps away from the shelter and pointed toward the entrance of the cranny. Balanced bottom up on two large rocks was a boat, or what looked like a boat.

"I'm tarring it now," she said. "With you to help me the work will go much faster."

I walked along to it.

"It will get us to the coast," she said. "It's a kyack like the seal hunters used to use. Peter Long from Monterey showed me how to make it. The canvas I had on it finally wore out, so I couldn't use it until I found your sails to fix it with."

The boat was about ten feet long and consisted simply of sailcloth fastened over a framework of wood. It was so light that Nautilus lifted it easily and turned it over so that I could examine it. She had sewn three thicknesses of our canvas over the frame. This tapered to a point fore and aft for a slot in the middle, about six feet long and just wide enough to admit a body, was decked over.

"It's really quite strong," Nautilus said, noticing my concern over the craft's frailty. "Wait till we get it all tarred and you'll see."

"Well, let's do it right away," I said quickly. I looked at her. "Do you suppose he'll die?"

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. "We have to hurry," she said. "Take off your clothes and I'll show you where we get the tar."

I hesitated. "My clothes?" I said.

"We have to swim. The tar is in pockets in the rocks. Have you a knife?"

I took off my sodden jacket and shirt and sweater and Nautilus hung them by the fire to dry. I stood shivering in my wet underwear and trousers while I watched her tie a thong to Sorenson's knife so that I could sling it around my neck. She handed it to me with an empty sack.

"Come on," she said. "I'll show you how."

"Robb!" I said suddenly. "He might follow me!"

Charles sat up. "Robb!" he cried. "Where?"

"Where?" Nautilus said.

"He saw me get in the stream," I said.

Charles reached under the pile of skins and brought out a long rusted rifle. He laid it across his knees and stared toward the back of the cavern. "Let him," he said gritting his teeth. "Let him poke his head in here. I'll show him who's tough."

Nautilus said, "Come with me, David."

I followed her along the floor past the boat. When we came to the mouth of the cave I saw that it dropped off to a shelf of rock below which the sea was prancing and racing furiously. Nautilus stopped to tighten the girdle which held her knife and sack. She glanced back at the shelter.

"It won't shoot," she said, "that old gun."

I looked down at the sportive dangerous water. Could I really be thinking of going into that, I wondered. Why didn't I tell her I couldn't do it?

"Ready?" she asked.

I SWALLOWED a lump of fear and was surprised to find myself nodding at her. She dove into a green hump of heaving rock-snaggled fury, did it as casually as I would step off a curb; and she was, after all, only a girl. Before my fear could freeze me there, I shut my eyes and followed her, knowing that I was only heeding a foolish pride and that I would probably drown and be of no help to her.

The water grasped my weary body like cold hands, squeezing and tossing me, like a whimsical giant, letting me feel its power. Nautilus bobbed confidently ahead of me. I took a stroke or two and twisted around a rock, scraping my leg on its teeth, then Nautilus caught my arm and I found footing beside her.

She had her face quite close to mine, saying something, and I forgot where I was and did not try to listen. I stared at her face, watching her lips move and admiring the sheen of her tan skin with the water on it.

"Listen," she said. "But you're *not.* David!"

"Nautilus." I would never call her Rhoda. For a moment we stood with the spume frisking around us, examining each other's face curiously, half-shyly, and each smiling a little. Then the thought of Charles' pain fell like a shadow between us. She pointed to the tar-filled cavities in the rock, gave me a little smile and slipped away in a passing surge.

The tar came out readily but it was in such small quantities that the work was like picking the meats out of black walnuts. Meanwhile the sea was tugging at my legs and during some moments I was submerged to my neck.

Nautilus had gone behind a point of rock and the fingers of my left hand had almost refused to cling longer to the rock when she reappeared at my side. Her sack was almost full while mine was bulging only slightly.

On our swim back to the cranny I began to learn a little of the way of the sea among rocks. Maneuvering in such a place proved to be a matter of timing. When a swell, flowing through the rocks, was going our way we took it at the flood and if we were going contrary to the direction of the swell we waited for the ebb when the remnants of the swell would turn tail and flow back. In this way we traveled in a circle, until, finally, we took a crest which landed

us neatly on the ledge below our cranny. After that I began to understand a little how Nautilus, and fish, felt about the sea. . . .

It was impossible to ignore Charles' foot, even for a moment. The threat and urgency of it affected our every word and movement. We cooked some fish, eating silently, and then Nautilus heated the tar in a pot and began spreading it on the seams of the kyack. It was easy to see that we would have to make several more trips before she had enough to finish. And that would mean at least one more day of agony for Charles.

He had been silent since we came back and occasionally it was so evident that he was just barely stifling a scream that I would wince and suffer with him.

As I nodded with weariness, in the last glow of the fire, I could hear him mumbling. And I was afraid to ask him what he was saying for fear he might be out of his head. Then he spoke distinctly:

"Flesh—I despise it."

"Charlie," I said. "We'll get you to a doctor, maybe tomorrow. He'll fix it up."

"It's just flesh," he said. "It means nothing to me." He sat up, weaving a little and then sank back on his elbows, sweating. "What would your dear friend Jeremy Robb do? I suppose he'd cut it off."

"Charlie," I said. "I wish you could let me have that foot for a while."

He flung over toward me. "There's nothing like this going to stop me!" he cried. "You hear me, Dave? I'm as tough as he is."

"Try to sleep," I begged him. "Please, Charlie, try to sleep."

Suddenly he flung himself back and moaned, twisting and beating his fists against his forehead. I sat helpless, watching him, and the tears began to roll down my cheeks. Nautilus came up and I didn't care if she saw me cry or not.

After a while Charles stopped twisting and lay stiffly with his eyes shut, making little noises in his throat and then I decided I had to close my eyes for a minute and that was all I knew.

CHAPTER XXIII

KYACK TO SEA

EVEN when I finally woke I thought that I was dreaming. Far up in the top of the fissure the wind was playing a lonesome tragic tune and for minutes I lay in a vast unfamiliar place, expecting to wake. Only when I sat up and saw the triangle of gray at the end of the vault—recognizing it as a token of reality—did I know that I was awake. Outlined under the black shape of the boat I could see Nautilus lying sheathed in canvas. Then near me I heard Charles and identified the noise he was making as the one that had persisted in my sleep until it finally awakened me. He was laughing and it was the worst sound I had ever heard.

I crawled into the shelter, getting my hands in some sticky substance of the cave floor. I had to make him stop.

"I'm laughing at you," he said. "Laughing! Hear me?"

I put a hand on his shoulder and shook him a little. "Charlie," I said. "You're dreaming."

And then I knew he wasn't. I could see his eyes darting around and his face was wet with tears.

"Go ahead," he said. "Cut it off. Go ahead—cut it, cut it. Cut it, damn you!"

"Charlie!" I shouted, trying to get through to him, to make him stop.

"Cut it off, you craven," he said. "Cut it clear off, you moneybags!"

"You're all right," I said. "You're all right, Charlie."

"Oh, God," he said. "Mother—I've cut off my foot. Oh, please help me."

"Charlie," I said hoarsely. "You're all right. We're going home. Do you hear, Charlie? *Home!*"

There was a movement at the entrance of the shelter and I saw Nautilus standing there in the half light.

"We've got to get him to the coast," I whispered to her. "I don't know what will happen if we don't. He's out of his head, I think. We've got to finish your boat and go today!"

She leaned over suddenly and then straightened and cried out as if she had hurt herself. She stared down, pressing her hands to her mouth. I looked to see what it was and at first saw only the gleam of the axe. Near it was the bundle of cloths that had been Charles' foot.

For a while I sat staring at the bundle, shivering, and just making my mind stop. It seemed to me that if I refused to admit it might not be true; and pretty soon it would turn out that none of this was happening.

Nautilus was bending over Charles' leg. When she finally spoke her voice was choked and strange, as if she had never attempted the act of speech before. "I've put a tourniquet on it. It's not bleeding much—just bleeding a little—not much."

After that I was immune to a great deal that happened that last day on Leandro. During those hours I moved like a spectator at a bad dream. The fact that Charles had hacked off his foot with the axe was just a part of the nightmare in which we were all involved.

Later on I remember holding Charles in my arms while Nautilus put hot tar on the ragged place at the end of his leg. Chris, she said, had once put tar on his foot when he cut it chopping wood. Charles screamed when the hot tar scorched his flesh and he fought me while I just said over and over, "Now Charlie, now Charlie . . ."

NEXT, Charles was lying quiet with his face pressed into the skins. The morning was bright and I was standing on the ledge staring down at my hands. My teeth were chattering and I was lathering my dry hands, but the blood on them would not come off. When Nautilus came up and spoke to me I hid my hands in my pockets, realizing slyly that if anyone saw that blood it would make it real and all the things that were happening in the nightmare would be real, too.

"I'm going to say goodbye to Chris," Nautilus was saying. "David, hurry and get enough tar to finish the boat. Hurry."

I nodded, my teeth chattering in my head.

"David!" she cried. She put her arms around me and held me. Her hair smelled of the sea and fresh air and there was a clean warm smell to her skin. "You've got to keep busy," she said. "And don't think of it. Perhaps it was for the best. He might have died. Perhaps he knew best. A foot isn't much, David. It's what's inside of us. A foot doesn't really matter."

I looked at her, nodded, then turned and dove. She caught the next swell off the ledge and passed me, swimming strongly around toward the lee of the island.

I had forgotten my sack and I loaded my pockets so heavily that I had difficulty getting back to the ledge. When Nautilus returned I was putting the last of the hot tar on the canvas with a stick and all the boat was covered except for one space around the top which she said wouldn't matter. She had gotten a keg from her uncle and filled it with fresh water and she carried a mouldy leather money belt. It was very heavy when I put it in the boat. We took a keg of water and a skin of food and put them in the boat, too, and then we went into the shelter for Charles. He opened his eyes and looked at us.

"We're going," I said. "You're going to be all right, Charlie."

His face was very white and he didn't seem much interested. Nautilus wrapped him in the skins and then made him roll over on a piece of canvas. She wound that around him and we carried him down toward the entrance and put him in the boat.

Nautilus picked up the paddles and looked back into the cranny. The canvas shelter was there and the fire with the tar pot on it was still burning, and the bundle of cloth that was once Charles' foot was there, too. Nautilus turned quickly and handed me a paddle.

"Get on your knees in the bow," she said, "and just balance. I'll paddle till we get away from the island."

We each picked up an end of the boat

and staggered with it down to the ledge.

"Clear into the water," she said. "And hold it. Then you get in—carefully."

In the water the boat heaved up even with us as a swell passed under it and then fell off so that I had to lean far down to hold onto it. Below me, Charles opened his eyes and looked up at the sky.

"Now!" Nautlius cried, as the kyack swooped up to us again.

I stepped quickly into the bow and kneeled. Then Nautilus, lithe and fluid as the water itself, was in. To get room to kneel she had to lift Charles' head and put it in her lap. A second later her paddle slashed into the next swell and the kyack sprang forward under us, quivering.

WITH just three layers of canvas between us and the water, the contact was almost as intimate as swimming, and Nautilus handled the boat as if it were part of her own deft body. My faith in her ability was so great that it did not occur to me to be afraid, yet only inches separated us from catastrophe as we threaded a way between the rocks. It seemed endless. We would wait while a swell spent itself, splitting its power into a dozen channels and then we would scramble madly through the waste before the next swell could catch us in a cleft. At other times we would shoot forward like a bubble on the charging torrent.

The trade wind drives the sea from the north toward Leandro and splits it into two currents. When we had come upon the island in the *Shark* we had been caught in that current which bucks through the rocks on the windward side. But the water that passes the cranny where we launched the kyack is leeward bound. To get clear and into the open water we had to pass first along the entire west length of the island, finally coming free at the south, where we would at last be able to set a course to eastward.

As we swept around from the north a rocky buttress slid away and we could see the calm sparkling water washing into the cove, the white sand and, beyond, the cabin nestling among its oaks. Jeremy Robb and Sorenson were working in the cove, lashing some logs together.

Nautilus paddled on steadily and we did not speak to one another. The two in the cove remained unaware of us. We were abreast of the cove, sliding through the rocks that bound it before we were sighted.

Robb had straightened up from his work and I could see that he was speaking angry goading words to his companion. Then we slipped into his range of vision and he stood for a moment transfixed, his stare meeting mine across the water. He dropped the adze he was holding and, like a man walking in a dream, he took a step or two across the sand toward us. He cried something that came to us only as a blur of sound. We swooped and plunged in our black cockleshell and, galvanized now, he ran down into the surf as if he would swim out to us. But he stopped when the water reached his knees and whipped out his pistol and fired. There was a little buzz of sound above my head.

Two more of Robb's bullets droned small above us and then he turned and ran out of the water and we could sense the madness that had seized him by the fury of his movements. Mr. Tracy had appeared before the cabin and he was standing there with his thin arms raised as if he were blessing us. Robb was bent over two of the logs that were lashed together and he was beckoning furiously to Sorenson. I could see the huge Dane slowly lift an arm and scratch his head and then the head pivoted lazily to glance out at us. He shrugged. He knew it was no use.

The cove was now on our stern, slipping away, and Nautilus began to sing. The water chuckled around us and the sound of it where it was booming along the southern cliffs grew louder. Robb danced suddenly up and down. He rushed across the sand to Sorenson and began to beat him on the head and shoulders with his gun. Sorenson retreated, his big arms thrown up to shield his face. He stumbled and fell and the berserk little figure kicked

him. He staggered to his feet and ran with long fumbling distrait steps across the sand and then I turned my head away from it.

Yet I had to glance back once more before we passed beyond the island's southern tip; and, though I had clear vision for only a moment, that scene is sharpest in my memory of Leandro. When I looked it was to see that Sorenson had fled to the ledge where I had once fished while Jeremy Robb enchanted me, and there, cornered, the Dane had finally turned on his Jer'my. For a moment he poised, big and mad against the seascape. He was holding Robb above his head as if he didn't know what to do with him. Robb, just as the southern cliffs blotted out my view, Robb, like a frantic doll, was hurtling down.

And at last we were free of the current, gliding over the swells. Blinded by the sun I picked up my paddle and drove its blade into the water. Somewhere in the haze ahead lay the coast and we moved toward it steadily with only the swish of our paddles marking our passage. Behind us Leandro grew small, dancing on the sea.

CHAPTER XXIV

JOURNEY'S END

AT SANTA BARBARA the combers charge up the long shelf like plumed knights in shining armor, splintering their lances again and again upon the beach. From far off our sun-weary eyes had seen the façade of the mission on a rise of ground at the foot of a green arroyo, but the flat town hugged the earth under the shade of its eucalyptus and pepper trees and we could see only the smoke of its breakfast fires lightening the pale hot sky. By then we had been paddling for nearly twenty-four hours.

Off the town that morning lay just one vessel, a navy school ship flying the English flag. My lips were cracked and puffed, but I strained them in a grin and called back a greeting to the neat young sailors who crowded her rail as we crept past. I could see their faces bright with interest and hear their excited voices as they stared at Nautilus. She waved her paddle at them and dipped it again without fatigue; all the previous day and during the night she had paddled and when Charles had raved she had sung to him and quieted him. He was in possession of his senses now and did not appear to have much pain.

As we drew in toward the surf line we saw that several carriages were drawn up along the road that led from the town to the beach. More were arriving every moment and people on foot and on horseback were beginning to stream down onto the sand.

"Look!" Nautilus cried delightedly. "Horses! Real ones."

My first thought was that all these people had learned somehow that we were coming and had gathered to witness my arrest, but it was soon obvious that they were bent upon some mysterious affair of their own and were not at all interested in our approach. Two riders were racing their mounts in opposite directions along the beach. Each carried a pole with a piece of white cloth tied on one end of it and when they were perhaps a mile apart they reined in and, leaning from their saddles, drove the poles into the sand.

Meanwhile, the people in the center of the beach had gathered around two splendid palaminos, small, golden, aristocratic animals whose muscles rippled in continuous nervous motion as their riders held them in, prancing and backing. The riders wore colored shirts and had silk scarves tied around their heads.

Suddenly the crowd split apart. The palaminos, followed by a few horsemen, began to canter down toward one of the poles, while another party moved along the beach toward the other pole. Nautilus was holding the kyack just back of the surf line now and her eyes when I glanced at her, were brilliant and amazed.

It was going to be a race. The two palaminos had reached the pole and their riders had wheeled them and were edging them

up even with it. Nearby a big man wearing a big black hat sat a white horse and held a revolver aloft. There was a puff of smoke from it and then the sound of it came to us and by that time the palaminos were streaking along the beach. Behind us there was a burst of cheering from the school ship and the people ashore shouted and threw their hats into the air as the horses swept past.

"What was it?" Nautilus asked breathlessly.

"A race," I said.

She clapped her hands. "Wasn't it lovely!" she cried. "Will they do it again, David? Do they do it every morning?"

It was a strange country to me and I knew no more about it than she did. I rather wished that she might have made her debut into the world at San Francisco where I would have been in a better position to explain the marvels of civilization to her. These people on the beach looked quite alien and undependable and I could not help thinking that such a wild group might lynch me upon discovering that I was a fugitive killer. Then with a pang of guilt I remembered Charles.

"Ready?" I asked, turning.

Nautilus was watching the swells rolling up behind us. She nodded. "Now!" she cried.

We drove our paddles in and the kyack leaped forward with the sea pushing up under it. We shot ahead, faster and faster, rising higher in the air while the water under the bow began to crumble and roar. Nautilus was out of the boat as I was just deciding that it was time to be and she cushioned our landing so that the kyack settled gently, like a great black bird, upon the beach.

THE people who had gathered to watch the horse race were straggling back up to the road, but some of them, catching sight of us, stopped and watched us ride the surf in. Several small boys started running down toward the kyack and the body of the crowd, appraised by their shouts of some unusual happening, halted. Soon everyone was looking at us and a narrowing circle, with the boys as a nucleus, began to form around us.

The kids pointed their fingers at us and giggled at the lithe brown legs that showed beneath Nautilus' scanty costume, but when I glowered at them they shrank back against their elders and contented themselves with making faces at us.

"Well!" a deep voice exclaimed. "Where do you hail from?"

It was the man on the white horse, the one who had fired the gun to start the race. Appealing to him, I pointed down at Charles.

"We have to get him to a doctor quick," I said.

The big man had a pleasant intelligent face and when he took his hand down from picking his teeth I saw a star gleaming on his lapel.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked.

"He's lost his foot," I said. "Are you the police?"

"I'm the sheriff," he said. "Why?"

I went over close to his horse and motioned for him to lean down and then I whispered in his ear: "I'm David Lester."

The sheriff looked for a moment as if he might be going to say, "What of it?" Then he pulled a pair of spectacles from his pocket and clamped them on his nose. Next he produced a sheaf of papers and fumbled until he found a yellow telegraph form which he read.

"You the ones from San Francisco?" he asked, peering down at me.

"Yes," I said, wishing he would not speak so loudly.

He nodded at Charles. "That the Stribling boy?"

"Please," I said. "We've got to get him to a doctor."

The sheriff whipped off his spectacles and pointed them at some of the Mexicans in the crowd, calling out their names. "Get a holt of that boat," he commanded them, "and carry that boy up to the road. *Pronto!*"

At the roadside Charles was removed

from the boat to the seat of a carriage and before he was driven away to the hospital, I crowded forward and whispered to him: "Don't talk about the watchman, Charlie. I'll handle that. Hear?"

He smiled. "You 'member what I told you," he said faintly. "I'm as guilty as you. We're still in this together, Dave." He waved as the carriage started off.

Nautilus and I followed in a carriage driven by a handsome Spaniard who the sheriff introduced as Don Mike. The sheriff rode his white horse close along side of us and we were flanked by other riders and hemmed in by carriages. We traveled toward the town in a great cloud of dust and everyone was craning his neck to see us and talking about us. Nautilus, holding her money belt, squirmed beside me, returning all the stares with an excited smile and flinging her bare legs around so that everyone only stared harder.

On the edge of town we crossed a railroad track and there was a train clanging in the station.

"A train!" Nautilus seized my arm. "Look, a real train, David. Oh! Oh dear!"

"What?" I asked, for there was real distress in her voice.

"It's so ugly," she said. "From the pictures I always thought they would be beautiful."

Her excitement made me gloomy. This, I thought, was the beginning of life for Nautilus while for me it was the end. For me there would be no keen joy of homecoming, but only a jail—perhaps for the rest of my life.

Our carriage stopped on the main street and we were led, not into the jail, but into a hotel, and there, to my amazement, the sheriff left me unguarded while he went off to send telegrams to San Francisco. Don Mike had dispatched his carriage for his wife and daughter who were to bring Nautilus some proper clothes and, while we waited, he questioned me politely about our adventures and I gradually told him of Leandro and our meeting with Jeremy Robb.

But it was, oddly enough, from the hotel clerk that I learned I was no murderer. The clerk had the San Francisco paper that told of our disappearance and of the search being conducted for us. And in this account the old watchman, very much alive, was quoted as saying that Charles and I did not take the *Shark*. It was, he vowed, an old shipmate of his, a certain Johnny Ross, who had laid him low with a blow on the head and then stolen the boat.

IN MY last memory of that day I am standing happily at the window of my bedroom in the little hotel, chewing on a piece of licorice.

I remember the late afternoon sun slanting down into the areaway in back of the hotel, and there was an Indian woman down there. She was singing as she gathered in her wash.

The *Georgia*, at San Diego, had been telegraphed and was, even then, steaming to Leandro, and my father and Mr. and Mrs. Stribling were on the train for Santa Barbara. And I was free! I had even been treated as a hero, with my pictures taken for the Santa Barbara paper and people crowding forward in the lobby and breaking into the dining room while I ate to see me and shake my hand. Charles was in no danger and the sheriff reported the doctors as saying that he might have died of gangrene had he not cut off his foot and prevented the spread of the infection.

But as I fell back on my bed that afternoon, already half asleep, it was of Nautilus that I thought. I saw her as she had come down into the dining room after Don Mike's wife and daughter had dressed her in a long white dress. They had put slippers on her feet and piled her dark hair on top of her head and caught it with a jeweled comb.

For a moment neither of us moved or spoke. Then, in a sort of wonder, I said her name in a half-whisper.

She had smiled at me shyly and I had been blinded. All during the meal I had

watched her, seeing that her charm and excitement drew the eyes of the others, too. And when we looked at one another we glowed, as if there were a secret between us that other people could never know.

I pounded the pillow and buried my face in it. It was a shame, when I had so much to think about and look forward to, not to be able to think of anything but how a girl looked. . . .

Next, it is morning and I am waiting on the station platform while the train from San Francisco comes chuffing in.

I feel myself rigid with joy and fear and sudden longing for a sight of my father.

He had already jumped off and was walking toward me when the train stopped and I saw at once that there was no change in him. His bearing was still stiff, his walk precise, and his fine clever face was composed, the lips taut and discriminating. But then I saw his eyes and I had to avert my gaze quickly to his advancing feet. For my father's eyes which were always such cool dispassionate eyes were blazing and bright with tears.

He caught me by the shoulders and shook me gently. "David," he said. "Dave!" And he looked so human and so glad that I wondered why I had ever thought that he would not understand.

IT WAS twenty years ago that I saw Leandro again. Nautilus and I stood at the rail of a steamer one morning and watched Tracy Tower rear up out of the sea and then fade away behind us. And after all those years I saw that face again. It was laughing then, as I like to remember it, a timeless, ageless face, the eyes sparkling with humor and good will, yet aware of a private joke, that eternal one that is at the expense of all men.

There, on that atom of land, where Charles and I once tried our fledgling selves, they still are lying in their graves. When the *Georgia* arrived at the island they had already been interred by Christopher Tracy. The story of their death, as reported by him, was that Sorenson had killed Jeremy Robb by hurling him on the rocks and later, entirely crazy with grief, had flung himself after his shipmate.

Mr. Tracy had recovered the bodies and honored them by giving them space among the flowers that grew inside his whalebone fence, and I am sure that when he had turned the last shovelful of earth he hurried into his cabin and wrote a poem honoring the event, doing it in the manner of Alexander Pope, with many ironical asides.

Soon after that Mr. Tracy's own bones joined the mutineers. They were found in close company with his manuscripts by a party from the University which, with the loss of a rowboat and one pedant, braved the landing in order to grub through the cairns and to try to explain the riddle that the ancient Spaniard had posed for posterity on the cavern floor. So far as I know they did not disturb him. And would that they, all there on Leandro, might rest in peace. But there is one who never will.

There still are nights when the living die a thousand deaths and the dead live; and then Jeremy Robb's wild laughter echoes down the years to stab my dreaming mind with fear and turn this faint old blood to water. Then I get up restless from my bed and while Nautilus, catlike, rouses to watch, I leave our room and prowl the dark house. She knows where I go and she knows I will return.

I walk down the hall to the room that was mine as a boy, where my own sons, gone from this house now, grew to manhood. From its windows I can still catch a glimpse of the bay, and the old trees in the garden still whisper and beckon me—out the window and over the roof; sighing and pointing toward the south and the open sea, they are saying again, "Come along, old man. Come along!"

THE END

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THIS week we are under military law. The Army has taken over and the editors are standing stiffly and rather timidly at attention. According to the manual, we ought to be keeping our mouths shut, too; but we're too relieved to bother about small regulations.

Our correspondent, being a military man, speaks with great firmness, and so we are delighted to discover that he is not attempting to discipline ARGOSY. In fact, he seems to be quite pleased with the magazine; he has reserved the mailed fist for certain contributors to this department who will feel pretty glad that they aren't named. So the ensuing maneuvers must be a matter entirely between enlisted and unenlisted readers, and we plan to sit happily on the sidelines, watching through our binoculars. One last thing, however, before we get out of range: we can't help admitting that our Army correspondent trains his heavy artillery on certain things which we, too, have popped away at, in our fumbling, inadequate way.

CORPORAL G. W. SNOKE

Week in and week out, for many a year, I have always read the little column where the readers have their say, and in all those weeks, years I might say, I have always shrugged them off. When a fellow couldn't see things this way, and another couldn't see it that way, I put it down as one man's opinion, whereas, I considered that many thousands of people read the magazine, and concluded that said opinions meant little to the success and betterment of ARGOSY.

I have been reading ARGOSY ever since I can remember, and I am now a young man of twenty-one, and in all that time, never wanted to write in and tell you how I feel, mainly because I figured you weren't the least bit interested. But I see that anybody can have their say, even when it comes to fools, insane people, narrow-minded, and wacky people. So I finally broke down, and here I am.

Three classes of contributors I detest, and I feel sure they can all be classed under these heads. (1) The Fault-finders: The most vicious type. He preys on stories. He finds an error, then what does he do? He worries about it until he just *must* write in and tell somebody. And who does he tell? Another fault-finder. Then what? Nothing, because they are so pitifully few, that their comparison to true Argonauts is not worthy of mention. To you, you so-called detectives, when you read the paper, and find an error in the printing, and you cannot pick up a publication in this country that does not have at least one, do you immediately write in and beef about it? Well, if you would, you would spend eight or more hours of each day in the year writing complaining letters to editors.

(2) Crabbers. Next in line. They read ARGOSY for months, and they suddenly run across a story that does not agree with them. It never occurs to them, that out of tens of thousands of readers, there are many who like it. No, *they* don't like it, so they have to go to painful methods to let someone know about it. Myself, I didn't like *Yardmaster,* in the March 18, 1939, issue, but I am not kicking, because in that very same issue, I read the 4th installment of a very enjoyable novel, the 2nd of the magnificent "Seven Out of Time," and the last part of a delightful tropic yarn, "Lost Harbors."

(3) Miscellaneous Bugs. ARGOSY is trash, a rag, and such cracks. This one serial was too fantastic. Burroughs' last novel was utterly impossible (are any of them possible?). Why not some of these stories, and those stories? Where is so and so, why has he not written lately? How about a bigger ARGOSY? To you, and you, and you, all of you who keep cluttering up this magazine with your silly tales of woe, take all your troubles to bed with you, and have a nice juicy nightmare over them!

And to you, true Argonauts, who have faithfully read each and every issue of ARGOSY, with zest and relish, and who have weathered the constant storm, through years and years, of the column where the readers has his say, I say to you—a gigantic bouquet of praise, for you have taken it on the chin, with never a word of protest, while I, poor soul, could not.

U. S. ARMY, HAWAII

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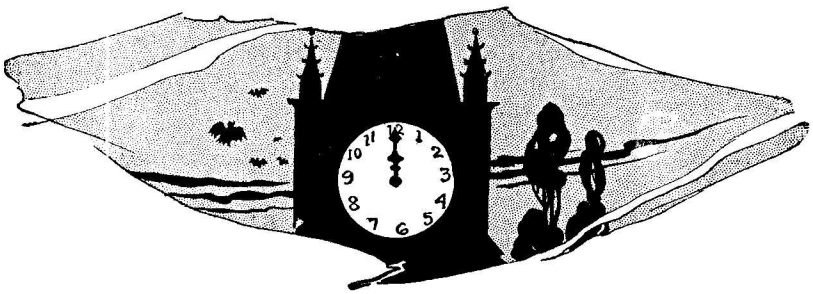

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