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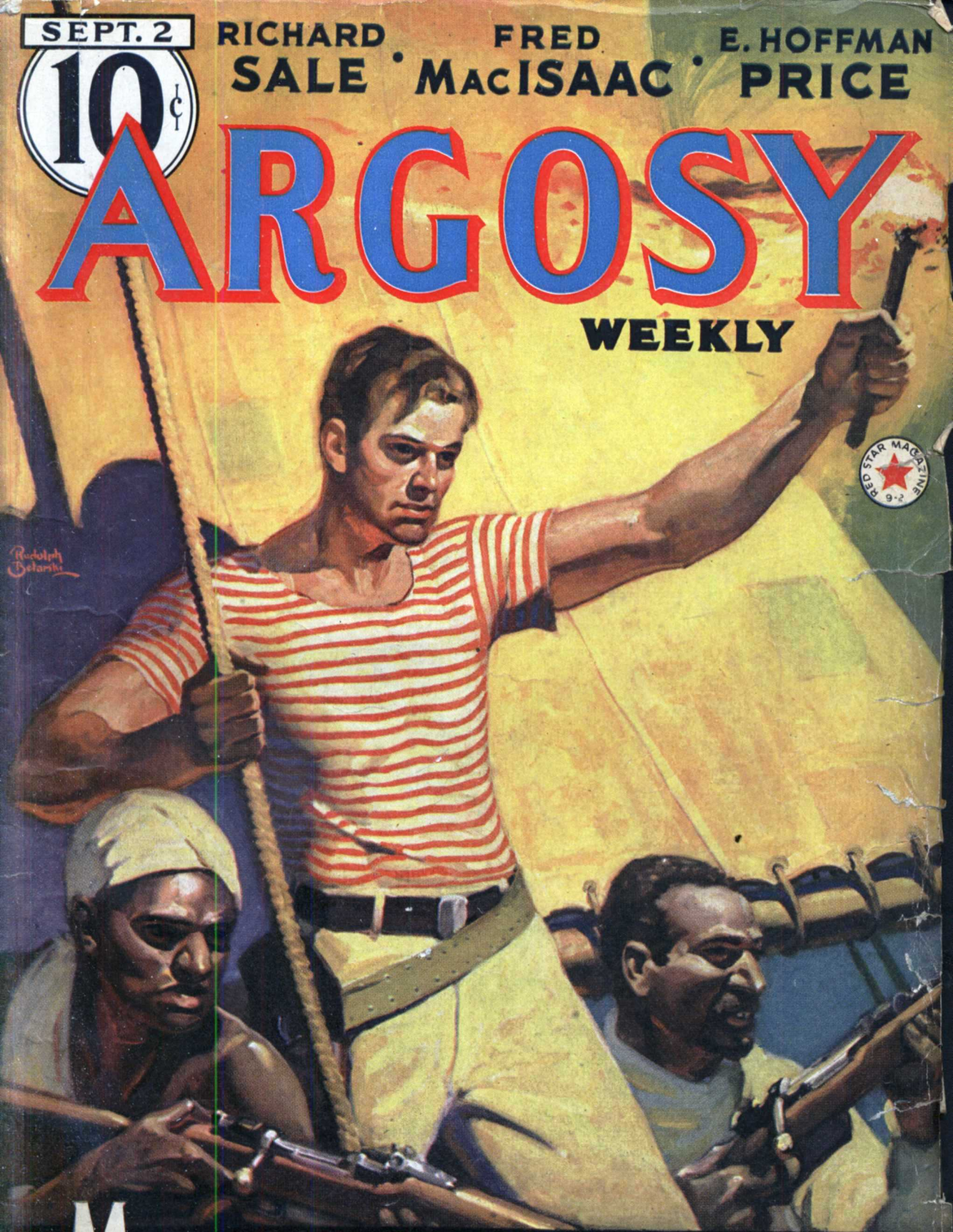

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Illustrating Guns for Ethiopia

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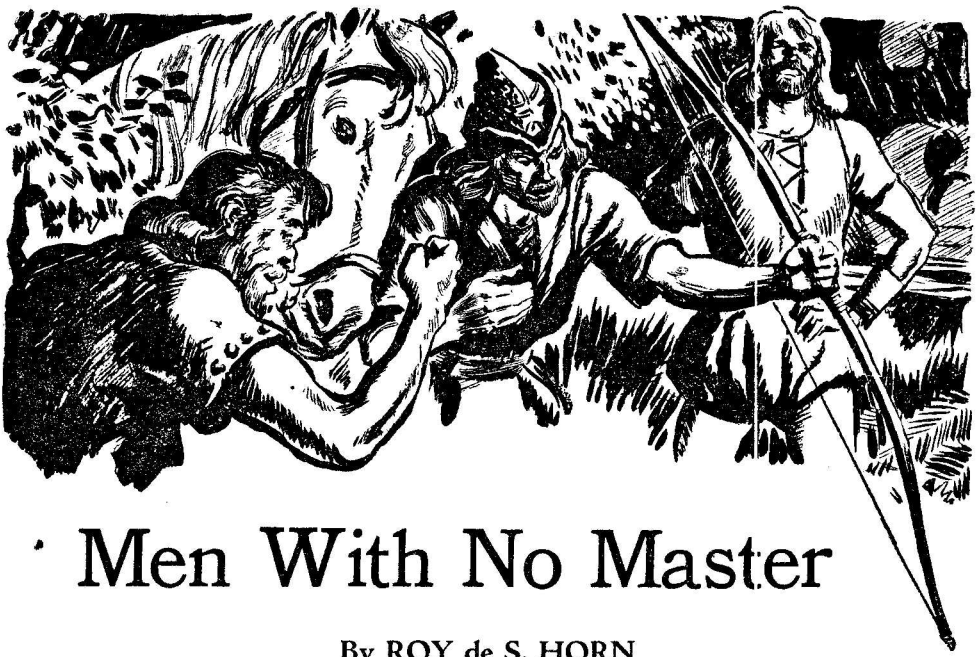

Men With No Master

By ROY de S. HORN
Author of "Raiders of the Ice," "Southbound to Singapore," etc.

Hail to the heroes of New Forest—those defiant, stout-hearted freemen, whose crossbows and bombards shall write high glory for England in the Hundred Years War. Beginning an exciting and colorful novel, the first of a series of stories about Robin the Bombardier

CHAPTER I

GIBBET RULE

AT the crossroads it stood, gaunt and gruesome, like some evil harbinger of the times. High and stark rode the great gibbet, full twenty feet above the sward, its stout timbers limned against the sky. And ever the breeze puffed, the gruesome thing suspended therefrom twisted and spun. Its dangling toes danced until the gibbet chains clinked and clanked to catch the ear of every passerby.

So unexpectedly had he come upon it, rounding the outthrust shoulder of the forest, that Robin Santerre stopped stock-still in his tracks and all but dropped the scrip bag on his shoulder and the traveler's pack on his back.

"God save us!" he mumbled. "And yet the jongleurs sing of Merrie England!"

In truth it was not fright but the sudden shock of coming on it so unexpectedly that had shaken him. For crossroads were few in all England that did not carry each its gibbet and dangling fruit. It was a time when hanging was the common penalty for every crime from striking the king's men to stealing a flitch of bacon or poaching a deer or hare from the royal forests.

And thickest of all were the gibbets on this road adjoining the New Forest that upreared so dark and so dense from the very roadside. Fair and green were the trees and the bracken where the road cutting let in the sunlight. But a hundred feet, and the light was barred off by the somber depths, stretching through thicket and fen and tangled wildwood all the leagues from the Salisbury Road to the Solent and Southampton Water. Leagues visited only occasionally by the King's hunting parties

There on the forest green the free man and the lord fought lustily

and those of the Lord Warden of the Forest and his guests. Woods inhabited solely by charcoal burners—and by the masterless men.

The twenty years up to this year of grace, 1346, had brought grievous days to England. Shattered castles and burned peasants' rooftrees marked the paths of the armies that had ravished and fought through the length of the land. First as the rightful King Edward III had waged righteous war against his own mother, the wicked Isabella of France, murderer of his father and usurper of the throne, and against her paramour Mortimer and their evil French favorites; and then the wars against the Scots. And now for the past few years the constant forays into France.

From those wars had returned ribald soldiers, as well as reckless yeomen and archers from the noted Free Companies. Men who, having known pay only in the form of pillage and loot, found it hard to change habit and exist by villein's work

even when returned to their own people.

Disbanded, taking no baron's *livraison,* and calling no man master, they roamed the land, a wild and doughty crew. Dense wildwood, like the New Forest where they found companions of like feather in the reckless poachers, was their favorite haunt. Hence timid travelers tarried not even on that stretch of king's highway between Salisbury and Romney and Rye that skirted and even penetrated the great forest, lest sundown catch them outside the safety of castle, abbey, or walled town.

AFTER his second glance Robin saw that the dangling man was very dead indeed. And since his own feet were weary from the miles to Salisbury town and he had not broken his fast since sunrise, very calmly he sat down in the leafy shade beside the road and lightened himself of his back-pack and his scrip bag. Then taking out of the scrip his dinner of bread and beef and a flask of wine, he began to eat, studying the gibbet gravely the while.

While gibbets were somewhat new to him, sudden death was not. Even an Oxford student knew his sword and hauberk as well as he knew his *aves* and his Aristotle. And from the new College of the Scots in Balliol Hall, Robin had often sallied forth into blood-drenched St. Giles's Street to repel with sword and pike the raids of the southern students against the northern.

"By his doublet and his hose yon gibbet dangler is a forest man and not a villein," he decided, "even if the stag head atop the gibbet did not mark him for a poacher. And by the pull on the chains and the length of his swing, he would be twelve stone weight, no more!"

Suddenly both his meal and his arithmetical calculations were broken in upon by a rustling from the forest at his right. And out of it slipped three men, as nimble of foot as they were swift of action.

The first of them was a great red-headed man, full six feet tall, with freckles like a pied piper. The second was lean and scarred, with pinched lips, and cheeks as gaunt as a gray wolf. The third, who bounded and laughed as he walked, was agile and slender and of no more years than Robin's own twenty.

All of them wore the doublets and green hose of forest men. Long bows were in their hands and knives at belt, while slung to their backs were their round archer's shields and baldric and quiver, with great clustered arrows with goose-quills showing.

Not observing of the youth who sat so quietly in the shade, the three crossed the road and were at the gibbet foot in a twinkling. Evidently the red-headed giant was leader of the three, for quickly he gave his orders.

"Thou art the youngest, Peter Joy, and the nimblest, if thy feet will cease bouncing long enough to climb. I will stand to the post and give a hand up, while John the Wolf keeps watch adown the road."

"A post that suits me well." Plucking a feathered shaft from his quiver, the gaunt archer notched it to his string and stepped into the road.

"I would like it better if it should be the Lord Warden himself who comes. Hanging from gibbet or buried by clergy, no doubt Lory of the Longbow would find the hell-fires cooler if Butcher de Brenn toasted in them alongside."

"Stand still, Hubert, thou great ox," said the agile Peter, as he leaped atop the huge archer's shoulders. "You squirm worse than a villein with a flea in his doublet." Then wrapping his arms and legs around the post he was up it like a mountebank. Once there he set himself astride the gibbet crosspiece and swung himself along until he was at its center immediately above the chain. From his belt he drew forth a short but heavy armorer's hammer and chisel and set the cold steel to the head of the nearest rivet, the while talking amiably to the dangling body.

"Did I not tell thee, Lory, that a deaf ear and a greedy belly bring a man to grief? If thou hadst watched the glades behind as greedily as the pot vension ahead, the warden's foresters had not caught thee. And we would not have the

labor of cutting thy bones down from this gibbet."

"Cease thy gabbling and cut the chain!" grunted the red-headed archer, Hubert, beneath. "The Lord Warden would like it little if he came upon us robbing him of his gallows-bait."

But Peter Joy only laughed. "I can see the road from here for furlongs on either side. There is a dust rising toward Salisbury, but it is a sizable way yet. Before that time—"

ALL at once he stopped short and his eyes opened wide. From his high perch he had glimpsed for the first time the silent form of Robin.

At his halted speech, the gaunt wolf-faced John had spun around, the bow stave bending under his pull. The archer's fingers quivered as they prepared for the loose, and then they suddenly tautened and held firm as his eyes perceived that it was only a single being, and him a youthful traveler, who sat there harmlessly.

"Ho! A clerk!" he cried. "By my bow, a rascally traveling clerk!"

The red-headed giant, despite his size, was no less quick. He was across the road at a bound, had laid great hands on Robin before that squirming youth could even rise. It was the archer's hands that jerked him upright.

"Spying for the Butcher, is it?" roared the archer. "Skulking in the bracken and spying on his sweet gibbet?"

"Nay." Robin squirmed to break loose, at the same time watching the drawn shaft of John the Wolf. "Nay, I was but eating my nones-meal. I am a traveler just come from Salisbury."

"Slit his gullet for him, anyway, and leave him hanging in place of Lory," growled John the Wolf. "It will be but a fair exchange for the Lord Warden. But first, run hand in his scrip satchel. Mayhap there are groats there—even a shilling."

Taking the scrip bag from Robin, the giant Hubert dumped its contents in the dust, only to swear at their meagerness.

"See?" said Robin. "Not even a shilling—"

"Then what of his pack?" reminded John the Wolf. "If he be a clerk, what need has he of a great pack fit almost for a tradesman? Break open the pack Hubert—and mind thee that we all share and share alike!"

Dropping the empty satchel, Hubert laid hands to the pack and was grumbling at its stout straps, when a call from the top of the gibbet gave him pause. Peter Joy was looking away, over the shoulder of wildwood, and up the road toward Salisbury.

"They come, they come quicker than I had thought! Drag him into the bracken if you would strip him before they come!"

"Who comes?" John the Wolf swung around now to face this new direction.

"A party—a trading party. A goodly merchant at the very least, by his train. Burdened sumter mules—carts a half score—"

"A rich merchant makes even better pickings than a rascally clerk," said John the Wolf. "If we lay well our plans—"

But the red-haired leader cut him short. "How many?" he called to the man atop the gibbet. "Escort men, I mean."

"A round score. And hard men, by their looks. I can even see their pike-staves, the windlasses of their crossbows!"

"Too many then, even for we three! Haste thee down, Peter!"

Peter Joy was already scuttling down like a scared squirrel. As he reached the road, Hubert gave a great push that sent his captive spinning. "Back to thy nones-meat! And keep a shut mouth what times it is not chewing! For we shall have an eye on thee from the bracken—and even a shout or a leap is not as swift as a full-feathered shaft!"

CHAPTER II

THE LORD WARDEN

THE next moment Robin was left blinking in the road, as the three archers dived headlong into the wildwood.

But though they had vanished from sight, he could still see the bracken quaking, and the keen arrow-point covering him from the brush.

He had scant time to observe, however, for just then around the forest corner a short score paces away came the jingling merchant train. Sumter mules, covered carts so laden that their wheels creaked, a score of escort men and drivers with crossbows to hand and pikes out-held. And alongside the foremost cart, a white-bearded, rounded-bellied man, riding on a jennet—evidently the merchant owner himself.

All this he saw at one full glance, and had not time for a second one.

For all at once the lead mule snorted, threw up its head, and spun halfway across the road in one frightened plunge. In an instant the whole road was a melee of confusion. Sumter mules were kicking and rearing, their packs bursting open and the rich goods scattering everywhere. Cart horses plunged amid their tangled harness. One of the carts overturned, lay with spinning wheels at the side of the road. The cursing carters were struggling with their animals, while the trader himself, springing down, was wringing his hands and filling the air with shrill prayers to the saints in garbled half-English, half-foreign phrase.

Forgetful for the moment of the archers' warning and the drawn arrow-shafts, Robin left his pack and scrip bag and sprang into the melee.

Catching a plunging horse by one ear, he jerked him down and straight in the harness again. To a refractory mule he gave such a great blow on the rump that it mended its ways forthright and joined its fellows in orderly place. Then setting his sturdy shoulders to the overturned cart, he heaved with such right good will that it came upright on its wheels once more.

The fat merchant stared, and then he burst into voluble thanks.

"My son, my son! Your coming must be the answer of the good Saint Christopher himself! These foolish mules and those knaves of carters had quite undone me. Thy name, my son, that I may remember thee when I say my credoes, this vespers!"

Smilingly the youth brushed away the dust of his recent exertions. "As to my name, it is Robin. And any prayers for me would be welcome, though I fear you give me too much credit."

"Nay, nay, the prayers shall be said!" The foreign looking merchant thanked the saints again and mopped his brow. "This terrible England! Two score candles will I burn in the cathedral at Bruges if I leave not my bones here as well as my goods! Two score candles for the safe return of Jacob Algelt—"

"Two score candles for the cathedral, and only empty thanks for this youth who saves a whole cartload?" It was a new voice, a merry, laughing voice, that suddenly broke in. "Shame it is to Bruges if its cloth is as poor as its misers!"

WHIRLING, Robin stared at the cart whose concealing canvas towered almost alongside him. There was a slit there, and through it poked a head. The eyes were merry, as the voice had been, and the lips were red and curving. Yet belying them was the matted hair of an old crone, her bonnet coif all but shielding her ears and cheeks.

"Eh? What? Thou shameless hag! Keep thy mouth shut ere it be shut for thee!" The fat merchant rolled his head from side to side, turned hurriedly to the smiling Robin "T'is but a sharp-tongued crone I gave room to, in pity for her weary years."

Nevertheless he was fumbling in his great leather pouch as he spoke. Drawing out several coins he regarded the silver ones covetously for a long moment, then dropping them hastily back into the pouch, he made shift to hand the other ones to Robin.

"There—that will buy thee ale and meat at the next inn. And if in saying vespers thyself, thou shouldest remember the name of Jacob Algelt of Bruges—"

Smiling at the trader's miserliness, Robin dropped the coppers into his scrip bag. "If

it were not already past nones-time, I would bide with you a while, lest the sumter mules be frightened again."

"Nay, nay," the merchant said hurriedly. "Before night we should be in Rye, and safe, both as to goods and bones. In truth it has been but a sorry venture—to London and back without profit. . . . This road—it leads to Rye?"

"Rye?" Robin shook his head. "Nay you took the wrong turn two leagues back. Did not your carters recognize this wildwood here to the right as the New Forest?"

"The New Forest!" Apparently the evil reputation of the New Forest had spread even across the Channel.

"If you will proceed straight ahead to Bewly, however," said Robin, "I doubt me not you will find direction there how to get to Rye."

With one more fearful glance at the gibbet and its fruit, the merchant of Bruges shouted to his carters who straightway began to harry the animals forward again. Before the whole party was straightened out in orderly file again, however, it was overwhelmed in still greater catastrophe.

For from the forest depths to the right suddenly broke out a great baying and crashing, followed by the winding of a horn. Then full into view burst a lordly stag with seven-point antlers wide spread, its eyes rolling and its flanks heaving from the hot chase. Close on its heels leaped and bayed a pack of great deer hounds; and pell-mell behind them came the mounted hunters themselves.

SO close pressed was the fleeing stag that the cart train before him seemed less danger than the harrying hunters behind. In between two carts he plunged, so close that his antlers all but brushed them as he sought the covert beyond. And hot after him raced the hounds, between cartwheels, under the legs of horses and sumter mules, so that immediately they were rearing and plunging again in fright, and the whole train worse tangled than the time before.

But that was not the end of it yet. Equally regardless, the hunters themselves rode down and through and over the train, putting their mounts to it as they would to mere gullies or fallen trees in their way. Mules plunged until they lost their packs, while two carts were completely overturned.

Some of the hunters had gained through and continued the chase, but most were checked short by the tangle of carts and mules. Instead of making apology, however, they showered the carters with oaths and curses. In particular the leader of them, a dark, nobly-dressed, hawk-faced man of over thirty, rained blows on the nearest hapless carters with his riding whip, all the time shouting in fury:

"Knaves! Varlets! Heard not the blast of the horn for clearing of the way? Ten lashes of the hangman's whip would teach thee better manners!"

The trader, Jacob Algelt, was wringing his hands again at sight of the new wreckage. Toward him the angry rider turned with whip uplifted.

At that Robin's lips tightened, and he was about to spring between, when someone else forestalled him. Out of the cart leaped the crone, her skirts flying, her eyes blazing beneath her matted hair.

"The devil's sorest murrain upon thee! Wouldst strike an old man, with hair already white with age?"

So spiteful was she that for the moment even the angry huntsman was taken aback. And before he could recover, one of the other riders, broke in with a ringing laugh.

"She has thee there, Hugo!"

He was a young man of thirty or thereabouts, and dressed in hunting garb like the others. But the fineness of his fur-trimmed mantle and cap was only matched by that of the hawk-nosed huntsman himself.

FOR another moment the hawk-nosed hunter glared at trader and woman alike. Then with narrowed eyes he swung his mount aside and led his party down the road and around. In so doing he was caused to ride close past Robin. So fixed

was that youth's gaze upon the trader and the crone that he did not glance up. And so the horseman came almost abreast him. And let out another great oath.

"By the great dragon's bones, it is beyond belief! Know you not enough, varlet, to doff thy coif before thy betters?"

And with a slash of his whip he not only cut the bonent-cap from Robin's head but left the mark of the leather on the tip of his ear as well.

For one second the youth stood, white-faced, trembling. Then his right hand plucked downward toward his belted tunic under his mantle.

"Seize him!" shouted the huntsman, turning to the three men in foresters' habit who rode close behind him. "To the gibbet there with him, and make a lesson for all such villeins!"

But the same pleasant-faced rider who had laughed before, now spoke again. "Hang him if you will, Hugo. But I ride on after yon stag. Who slays the deer wins the cask of wine—remember our wager!"

Grumbling, the hawk-nosed Hugo gave over then, and with a curse lashed his mount in the direction the hounds were still baying. But the pleasant rider, hesitating for a moment, looked down at Robin.

"Know ye aught of the whereabouts of a man named Wat the Armorer, whom rumor hath it is to be found not far from this forest and the masterless men?"

Robin slowly shook his head. "I am but new come from Salisbury. Ye must needs ask a more familar man."

"Then ye had best get on with your carts." The horseman pointed toward where the carters, under their master's driving tongue, had gotten the animals straightened out once more. And then suddenly he leaned in his saddle, so that his lips were close to Robin's ears. "Warn thy sister that her mat of hair hath slipped—and that young eyes and a neat angle are illy fitted to a crone's rags. Especially when the Lord Warden, Hugo de Brenn, is no more blind than I!" The next moment he was galloping off after the rest of the racing huntsmen.

The merchant's carts were scarcely around the next bend, and Robin was just stooping to gather the scattered contents of his scrip bag, when from their place of concealment stepped the three archers again.

"By my bow, there is no luck in us!" John the Wolf was scowling toward where the merchant's party had vanished. "A rich merchant—and too many escort men to chance a foray! E'en Lory of the Longbow had no such murrain upon him as this!"

"The clerk's pack is still here," laughed Peter Joy. "And the clerk as well. Over timid he was of thy goose-feather warning, Hubert, or he would have snatched flight in one of those covered carts!"

"Then get at the pack," ordered Hubert, the red-headed one, "and after that up with thee to the gibbet again. If the Butcher rides too well covered by huntsmen and verdurers to risk losing a shaft upon, we can at least rob his gibbet from under his—Hola! What devil's luck is this now?"

Pounding hard adown the Salisbury road had come a new sound, the unmistakable thud of horses' hoofs at a fast pace. Not one horse, but many, and with it the jingling of spurs and armor plate. Though they were still shut off from sight by the jutting forest fringe, the horsemen were undoubtedly close, and coming fast.

"Back to our bracken!" ordered the red-headed archer. "And, clerk, the warning before is still as meanful now."

CHAPTER IV

THE MASTERLESS MEN

THE new comers who burst in cavalcade around the forest point were neither hunters nor merchant's men nor yet ordinary travelers. In the fore and in the rear rode men full-armed even to lance and helmet tightlaced to hauberk rings. They formed a compact group in the midst of which rode the only two who were not fully armed. One of them was a much scarred man in rich velvet and gold-plated shoes, but the other was a slender boy of scarce sixteen mounted on a dappled jennet. His clothing was plain black, though of the

finest cloth, and his face and hands were unusual by reason of their fairness.

At sight of the gibbet with its dangling body they halted. And the boy's face clouded and his brows grew troubled. He spoke quick words to the older man. "Another gibbet? We have seen more such sights in the past three leagues than along all the rest of the road even unto London."

"The Lord Warden of the New Forest has troubles enough, I doubt not, what with the poachers and the masterless men." The scarred man pointed. "See? The varlet's crime is shouted from the gibbet over his head."

"None the less I like it not." For the first time the fair-faced boy noticed Robin standing on the opposite side of the road. He waved him nearer. And now Robin, giving due regard to the heavy-armed men, did not delay about doffing his bonnet.

"Canst tell me how far it is to Romney?" The slender boy spoke in a voice tinged with a French accent. "And is there at Romney a seasonable place of abode?"

"I do not know Romney overwell," returned Robin. "But it is some several leagues distant yet. Bewly is nearer. And at Bewly is the Abbey, and inns in the town, and Bewly Castle, the holding of the Lord Warden of the Forest."

The cavalcade jingled on with Robin looking after them curiously. In fact, so curiously that John the Wolf's snarling voice was almost at his shoulder again when he heeded.

"A curse now on all hauberks and casques and those who wear them! Had it not been for those men-at-arms, I would have had the stripling's jennet and clothing ere now."

"But not worth fighting a dozen men-at-arms for, John, old Wolf." Red Hubert's voice was placid, but his eyes were fixed curiously on Robin. "The pack, the pack of this young sprig, Peter. Have a look in it."

So meek had their captive seemed through all this time, that neither Peter nor John the Wolf gave him a second's glance. Peter was reaching for the pack straps, when Robin's hand moved quickly to his waist, and up again. So fast it moved that the keenpointed knife was pressed tight against John's ribs before he could turn, could even gasp.

"You were so eager to split my gullet just now," Robin said crisply, "how would it seem to have thy own paunch opened? Shift but one step and thou wilt know the answer!" And he pressed the needle point a fraction inch to give weight to his words.

SO swift and unexpected had been his action that even Red Hubert still held his bow with arrow unnotched. Peter Joy gawked from where he knelt over the pack. John the Wolf's eyes popped wide. And he let out a wild bleat.

"Spit him, Hubert! Spit him!"

But instead, the red-headed archer suddenly burst into laughter. Laughter in which Peter joined.

"How now, old Wolf? The joke is turned serpent and coiled back on thee! Ye had best been satisfied with the scrip bag, and let the pack be."

But the gaunt old archer continued to roll his eyes and shout, his body frozen against the knife point. "He is mad—the sniveling clerk is mad!"

"If he be sniveling clerk, then am I a tonsured priest!" retorted Red Hubert, again running his keen eyes over Robin. "What is it you really seek in these parts?"

"Now that you ask me civilly," said Robin, still keeping his knife pressed hard, "I seek a man. A man named Wat the Armorer. And if anyone of you know and will lead the way to him, I might even forego the letting of this gray wolf's blood."

"Wat the Armorer!" The gaint archer repeated the name amazedly. "What want you with him?"

"That," said Robin tersely, "is my business— and also in some degree the business of John here, it would seem."

"And your name?"

"Robin. Robin Santerre."

Apparently Red Hubert was satisfied, for he slowly nodded. "So be it. Put up thy knife, clerk, and we will sheathe our shafts.

John, hand him his scrip bag and pack, and be thankful that he asks no more. And now do you, Peter, climb the gibbet again that we may be finished with our work."

Quickly Peter Joy swung himself up and out on the cross-piece once more and resumed his chiseling. This time no interruption came, and with a sudden clank the chain gave way, dropping its burden on the ground beneath.

Swiftly lifting the dead man's shoulders while Peter and the grumbling John seized his feet, Red Hubert led the way into the forest. Within a few yards he located a little trail.

Down this for a half-mile they tramped, until they came to a storm-felled tree a little off from the trail. Into the hole between the uptorn roots Red Hubert rolled the body of Lory of the Longbow, kicked enough earth from the crumbling sides to cover it, then stepped back to the trail again. He led the way at a jog-trot now, delving deeper and ever deeper into the great forest.

EVEN before they came to the thinning of the forest, they could sense the nearness of the smithy, for the whole forest aisles resounded with its hammering. Then the red-haired archer thrust through the woodland fringe and the smithy stood immediately before them.

It was but a three-sided shed set at the edge of a little stream where a woods road crossed. Its front lay open to the weather, and there was the great anvil and the forge with its rising smoke and blowing bellows. On either side of the forge were racks with hammers and chisels of all sorts, and bars of metal stock, as well as the cunningly rounded and pointed anvil pieces for the curving and forming of helmets.

Behind the anvil, pounding at the glowing metal tonged in his left hand, stood the smith himself, bare of chest and bare of head. He was grimy, and grizzled of hair, but despite his age his shoulders were as wide as Hubert the archer's. His corded muscles bunched and rippled as he swung the heavy hammer. Between strokes he turned his head to bellow for more speed form the jerkin-clad helper who sweated at the leathern bellows.

"Hold, Wat!" shouted the archer.

Dropping his hammer and brushing the grizzled hair back from his sweating forehead, Wat the armorer looked their way.

"Hast cut down Lory from the Butcher's gallows, or did leave him there for the Butcher to laugh at, in passing?"

"Cut down and buried," replied Hubert, grinning. "And almost under the eyes of the Butcher himself who came that way a-hunting."

"Good!" The armorer nodded approval. "Though had you hung the Butcher up in Lory's place it had been even better."

"Zounds!" exclaimed the archer. "Art never satisfied, old forest boar? Lory was fair caught, stealing the king's deer, and the Lord Warden gibbeted him for it. We have stolen the body from the Butcher's gibbet, so it seemeth to me a fair exchange all around."

"Nay!" said the armorer, "it is no fair exchange, for God put the deer in the forest for honest freemen as well as for kings and barons."

"A saying that would get thee drawn and quartered if it but came to the Butcher's ears," retorted the archer lazily. "For me, I am content to fill my own belly regardless of who owns the deer."

"Which is why the Butcher de Brenn still hangs men like Lory of the Longbow," growled the armorer. "Whereas if all freemen stood together—" Suddenly he broke off, his eyes catching sight for the first time of Robin. "Who is this young sprig you bring with you?"

HUBERT gave Robin a great thrust forward and laughed. "A traveler from the north, so he says. But John the Wolf asserts that he is a sniveling clerk—"

"A clerk!" The old armorer fastened keen eyes on Robin. "What does a clerk here? And from whence come you, clerk?"

"From—from Oxford," answered Robin,

feeling himself suddenly all alone under the grizzled armorer's fierce gaze. "I came, seeking to learn more of the armorer's art from one whom men say is the master armorer of all England. Wat the Armorer—"

"From Oxford? Seeking me?" The armorer's eyes widened. "And what Oxford armorer did you serve under?"

"None—no one," said Robin hesitatingly. "But in Balliol—the College of the Scots—I found that while the books well stated the theories of iron, including the smelting of ores and the compounding thereof, they were deficient in the practice. Hence I came out to seek out Wat the Armorer to obtain that practice which I was lacking."

"And thy name?"

"Robin Santerre."

"Santerre!" At the French name, the armorer's brows lowered. He mouthed the word distastefully. "Norman-French—and a blight upon it! There is no place here among honest Saxons for Norman clerks nor yet Norman murderers!"

"Murderer, perhaps, but no sniveling clerk," put in Hubert, laughing. "He had his knife in John the Wolf's ribs here before a man might wink."

"Knife, eh?" The grizzled armorer flashed out a hand with speed that belied his age, and plucked the lean knife out of Robin's belt before he could move. He tossed it to Hubert. "Break me this blade, and then drive him from the woods. Let him seek his fellow Normans at the Butcher's Castle of Bewly."

Hubert the Red shrugged his shoulders, set the knife point upon a stone end, grasping the hilt in his strong hands and with his foot planted between point and hilt, gave a great tug. But the blade gave no whit. With a grunt of surprise the archer threw his whole weight onto the blade. But again the steel withstood the effort. A look of amazement spread over the archer's face.

THE smith was no less startled. Reaching for the knife, he studied it keenly. "How now? Whence did an Oxford clerk secure a knife of my own make to pare his meat?"

"It is no knife of thine." Robin shook his head. "It is of my own fashioning, from the little smelter and the forge off St. Giles Street. Though I doubt me that the books—"

"Books!" John the Wolf let up a howl of derision. "He hath thought to learn the armorer's trade by reading out of musty books!"

"Aye, the books of that Sir Mohun of Kent who followed our own King Richard to Jerusalem and Damascus—may God rest his soul," said Robin devoutly. "Scorn not the knowledge that lies in books, Archer John."

But Wat the Armorer was trying the keen edge of the knife with his thumb. Plucking a grizzled hair from his own temple, he passed the blade edge across it, and the hair sliced as cleanly as though it had been gossamer.

"Powdered charcoal!" he exclaimed, staring at Robin. "Powdered charcoal in the compounding of the second melting! Didst thou that?"

"Aye, and in the third melting as well. Then thrice heated and cooled for temper, in a bath of oil and not water—according to the precepts which Sir Mohun of Kent had from the Saracen swordmakers of Damascus."

"The very precepts which I had from my father—who had it from his own grandfather who was armorer to that same Mohun of Kent!" exclaimed the armorer. "In truth there may be somewhat in this matter of books, after all. What else didst thou learn at Oxford College, Robin the Clerk?"

There came a slight twinkle into Robin's eyes. "In truth there were other subjects that stole my fancy. The matter of fulcrums and weights, the science of levers—"

"Levers!" It was Peter Joy who interrupted, chuckling. "Such as levering thy shoulders under an overturned cart, perchance?"

"That is one sort of leverage, yes," said Robin soberly. "But a bow is also a lever,

according to Roger the Franciscan, and the more powerful the lever, the stronger and longer the arrow flight."

"Now I know these books teach foolishness," said John the Wolf. "Because the flight of the shaft depends only upon the strength of the archer behind it."

"Yet it is still true that it is the leverage of the bow, and not the size of the archer that maketh for far flight," returned Robin. He turned to his back-pack which he had dropped to the ground. "Given proper leverage, a small man may send a shaft or quarrel farther than a larger man. I have here a rude-fashioned thing of my own—"

THE grizzled armorer was watching interestedly, but Peter Joy and John the Wolf whooped derisively as Robin unstrapped the pack and began to assemble the parts he drew from within. "A crossbow! A devil's windlass, such as the Frenchmen and Genoese use!"

But Wat the Armorer stared at the fitted parts, and then stooped to pick up one of the heavy quarrels. "A six-inch bolt, and a full pound weight! No such arbalest have ever I seen!"

"And two head staves, instead of one!" marveled Hubert the Red. "And neither solid yew nor ash, but strips of horn laid back and front along the yew wood!"

"Roger the Franciscan held that such a compounding gave greater strength and pull than solid yew," sail Robin. "Which I have found sooth, since with it I can hurl yon double-weight quarrel twice as forceful and far as any ordinary arbalest. The same power and leverage could have been gained by lengthening the bow stave, but that would have made it unwieldy. So I but doubled the number of staves."

"And thinkest to double the flight of the bolt by doubling the staves?" John the Wolf scoffed. "Can two crossbowmen shoot twice as far, then, as one?"

"If they could string both bows to a single cord," said Robin. "That is what I have tried to fashion—two bow staves with a single string and single windlass between, thus giving double throw to the single quarrel." He glanced along the stream. "Had I but a mark—"

"Peter," said Wat the Armorer, "do thou go down a hundred paces and hang thy target against yon tree. And do thou, Hubert, stand forth with thy bow and shoot against this devil's windlass."

As Peter Joy slipped off his round archer's shield with its tough bullhide stretched over the stout hickory backing, Robin nodded. "Two targets were better than one, and three were better even than two. Unless thou wouldst not want them spoiled—"

Peter gaped, but Wat the Armorer roared, to send him flying. "Take all three targets, then, and hang them one before the other. And if this Oxford clerk make not a goodly showing, after all his gabbling, we will give his doublet such a dusting as he will not likely forget!"

Stringing his great five-foot bow, the red headed archer moistened his finger to test the windage, then plucked a long goose-feathered shaft from his quiver and notched it to the string. Standing wide-legged and sidewise to the tree, he drew until the bowstring touched his ear and the muscles stood out on his arms and the blue veins on his forehead. Then with a twang and a hiss the loosed arrow flew. It was like a shaft of light, singing sure and true to the target. And as it thudded almost into the center boss of the hide-covered shield and stood there quivering, Peter Joy's shout came ringing back.

"A full-drawn shaft! Through the first shield, and barbed deep into the hickory beyond the hide of the second!"

Hubert the Red stood down, with a little chuckle of contentment. "Match that if thou canst, clerk, with thy Oxford windlass!"

CHAPTER IV

ON GUARD, FREEMAN

BUT Robin, with the arbalest staves beneath his feet and the windlass to his stomach, was already cranking the two

ratchets that stood out from the windlass on either side.

Disengaging the windlass, he raised the crossbow, grooved a quarrel in its place against the taut string. Then with arbalest leveled and left elbow steadied, he sighted for a bare instant. At the trip of the trigger, the double staves straightened with a mighty twang. So swift was the bolt itself that no eye could follow it, but the men's eardrums sang with its hornet flight, ending with a shattering crash. The foremost shield leaped and fell from the tree, and the two remaining ones hung trembling. And Peter Joy's shout this time was one of utter disbelief.

"Through the three—through the whole three! Not only through the shields, but the bolt is buried flush into the tree itself!"

"The targes! Fetch the targes!" roared the armorer.

And when they were brought, John the Wolf and Hubert stared with crestfallen faces. For not only were the rawhide covers pierced, but the hickory behind was riven and shattered until it hung in splinters, so that they would be no more good for any man.

"A week's work, a week's work to make another targe!" groaned Hubert the Red. "And where will I find other hickory of two years' seasoning?"

But Wat the Armorer was turning the splintered wood over in his hand. "Catapults and ballistae I have seen with such power. But they were of such clumsy weight as to need transport by cart and built implacements, for siege. Never before have I seen bolt from hand arbalest that I thought might pierce through shield and pauldron and hauberk of mail—"

"Not even armor of proof may stand against it," said Robin quietly.

"Aye." And suddenly a great light came into the armorer's eyes. "Perhaps the day has come quicker than I had thought. For in their hauberks and byrnies and casques, the barons and their men-at-arms have been able to over-ride ordinary men, unregarding of our pikes and arrows. But a hundred freemen with only these hand arbalests would blast aside even the Butcher's men-at-arms as if their armor of proof were no more than leather jerkins."

He turned suddenly to Robin. "What other things studied thou in books, besides levers and the making of arbalests?"

A twinkle came again into Robin's eyes. "Aristotle and orisons and the lives of the Blessed Martyrs. But there was also the book of William of Deves on ambushments and the ranging of battles—and Sieur Roland de Barbusse on catapults and ballistae and engines of siege. And a most excellent treatise by Sir Walter of Winchester on the intaking of castles and walled towns, as well as sallies and sorties of the defense—"

"By my beard!" ejaculated the armorer. "And they discoursed on such subjects at Oxford?"

"Nay," said Robin, laughing. "The Franciscans were more partial to Aristotle and the orisons. But the books were there to be read, and I thought it shame to waste them."

"And wouldst still seek the armorer's trade in a forest smithy?"

"If Wat the Armorer has place for an apprentice."

For a long moment the armorer studied him intently. Then suddenly he nodded.

"So be it. But no man fashions armor cunningly who knows not its use. I have here two casques and byrnies all welded and riveted, but as yet unproved. Thou and Peter Joy are of a size. If wilt don one casque and hauberk while Peter dons the other—"

As he spoke, the armorer was reaching down two steel casques and shirts of mail from their hooks on the smithy wall. With them he brought forth two long swords, full forged of blade, but as yet with no edge ground.

RECOGNIZING that there was more to the armorer's request than mere testing of new armor, Robin stripped to his shirt, pulled on the padded gambeson, and over it the coat of mail, and then the

basinet or light helmet. Peter Joy was reaching for the other armor, when John the Wolf suddenly thrust him aside.

"I have a bruised rib yet from the point of his knife when he caught me unawares. Now let us see if he can give bruises when a man is equal armed and wielding just as ready a blade!"

The unsharpened swords, as Robin realized, would not cut through the tempered mail, but they had weight as heavy as a battle mace. A full-swung blow from them would deal a buffet that would search out any defect of chain mail or rivet—and mayhap of the man beneath.

But as John the Wolf prepared to arm, there was a sudden exclamation from the read-headed Hubert. "Hold! Who comes?"

Through the silence had come the sudden neigh of a horse, the thud of trampling hooves. Hubert the Red leaped for the nearest thicket, snatching a shaft from his quiver and fitting it to bowstring. John the Wolf and Peter Joy were at his heels, slipping to cover like so many weasels. When horse and rider rode into sight around the curve of the woodland road, Robin stood with the armorer and the bellows helper.

But the horseman rode alone. And at sight of him, Robin's eyes widened. It was that same pleasant-faced huntsman who had chided the Lord Warden, Hugo de Breen, on to the chase, and so saved Robin from summary hanging.

Seeing that it was but a lone rider, and him unarmed, the three archers now came stepping into the glade again. The newcomer flashed them a glance and then rode past. His attention was only for the armorer.

"Art thou named Wat?" he inquired. "Wat the Armorer?"

"Aye." The smith nodded. "What do ye want of Wat the Armorer?"

"A set of armor complete—from casque to sollerets, from hauberk to pauldrons and jambes. I go shortly to the wars. And I have heard it well said that no man fashions plate of such proof as Wat the Armorer."

The armorer stared at him, scowling. "And thy name?"

If the rider noted the insulting lack of the customary "sir," he made no show of it. "Allan—Sir Allan Mayne," he said quietly.

"The surname smacketh strongly of Norman, and I doubt not that it is spelled with an 'e,' though Allan is better English," growled the armorer. "Art thou Norman?"

"Nay. Call me rather an Englishman, for it is a name I like me much better." The young nobleman tossed a clinking purse toward the smith. "But take thy price from this purse and sack up the armor, for I am in haste to be gone."

But Wat the Armorer let the purse lie where it had fallen. "I make no armor for roof-burning Normans. Get thee to the armorer of thy own castle; let him fashion thee casques and hauberk and camail, and then pay him with blows, as is the Norman wont."

At first the horseman frowned with anger, and then suddenly he burst out laughing. "Ye do me too much honor. Neither castle nor armorer nor even esquire or man-at-arms boast the overlordship of Allan Mayne. I am the most landless night in all Christendom, I wot!"

"A knight without castle or man-at-arms?" Wat the Armorer stared, and then scratched at his grizzled head. "In truth that sounds more English than Norman, since the Norman thieves have left us English with naught more than our name. And ye would still buy my armor?"

"If thou wouldst sell it, old forest bear," laughed Sir Allan Mayne. "English shirt to an English back; English sword in an English hand — and devil take the Frenchmen!"

Again the armorer scratched his head. "Almost do I believe thou art true English-born." Suddenly his eyes narrowed. They glinted cunningly. "But I sell no mail that has not stood proof. There is no better proof for armor than the sword blow that smites it. If thou wouldst test the armor I make, here is casque and

hauberk and gambeson. And here is a free-born Englishman to swap buffets with you!" And he gestured toward the amazed Robin.

IT WAS a pointed test, for none of the domineering Norman blood would exchange blows, save in battle, with men of lower birth or outside the order of chivalry. However, Sir Allan Mayne swung down from his horse without a word, reached for gambeson and hauberk. With his half-armor on he reached for the blunt-edged sword that Wat held out, and for the first time he looked toward Robin who was already similarly prepared.

"Thou hadst better don shield and paulron as well," he said carelessly, "to make the odds fairer. For I have fought in both Flanders and Guienne—"

"No," said Robin stoutly. "I am already armed as thyself."

But the Armorer called out impatiently. "Ready? Then lay on!"

With the word, Both Robin and Sir Allan Mayne sprang into action. The knight's sword, hissing in its sweep, slashed out a cut that would have sent sparks flying from Robin's helmet had it landed. But the sparks flew instead from the hilt guard of Robin's own blade as it rose in swift parry. And the riposte came so swiftly that Sir Allan did well to cover with his own blade in time.

Back and forth the two slashed and parried, till the blades rang like hammer on anvil, and the staring archers shouted with excitement. For though the knight had the greater strength and experience Robin had the speed and agility of youth. What blows he did not parry, he dodged, bending and leaping until the grass around was all trampled in a circle. At length they both paused panting, the sweat beads standing out on their foreheads and cheeks.

"Thou wieldest a good sword, freeman," said the knight, between breaths.

"And thou a heavy one!" returned Robin, panting with effort.

But again Wat the Armorer roared the signal. "Lay on!"

Sir Allan, however, was better used to fighting a-horse than on foot. It might have been this that led him into momentary error. All at once his sword glanced off from a high sixte parry. And before he could recover guard, Robin's own blade, sweeping around in fierce moulinet, dealt him such a great buffet on the casque that it rang like a bell. Under that stroke, Sir Allan Mayne crumpled and stretched his full length on the beaten sward.

IN AN instant Robin had dropped sword and sprung forward. Anxiously he jerked loose the points fastening the casque to the hauberk, and threw the basinet aside.

But though there was a great bruise atop his forehead. Sir Allan was not unconscious. Grunting, he drew himself to a sitting position, shaking his head.

"Methinks I am lucky that this happened not in battle in Guienne," he said ruefully, "for then I would have had my throat sliced like a hare's while I lay blinking. But as it is, I have lost both horse and armor, for such are the rules of tournament and tilt—"

"Nay," said Robin, panting, "it was but a friendly passage for the testing of the armor, as asked by Wat—"

"Nay, and still nay again," said the armorer, chuckling. "It was as much for the testing of the men as the armor. And a test I like me very well. For I have gained me an apprentice who will know the use of armor as well as the fashioning of it. And an Englishman has gained him mail for the wars—if he will take it as a gift and not as purchase."

"Gift?" The knight stood to his feet, staring. But it was Hubert, the giant red-haired archer, who broke in with the next word.

"Before giving thy armor so freely, old woods boar, thou had best ask thy Englishman why he rides so friendly in the hunting party of the Butcher de Brenn!"

Startled, the knight turned toward him. Hot words were on his lips. But it was Robin who spoke first. "With the hunting

party of de Brenn, perhaps—but not so friendly. For he called off the Butcher when he was all but sending me to the gibbet to join Lory of the Longbow!"

He had removed his own helmet, and now Sir Allan's eyes ran over his face, even to the ear still bloodied from de Brenn's lash. "So thou are that one, eh? Methought you had gone on with the trader's wagons, especially after the warning I gave you for thy sister."

"Trader? Sister?" Wat the Armorer looked from one to another, puzzled. The red-haired archer quickly told him of what had happened on the Salisbury road.

"They were hurrying toward Rye," said Robin, "but they had driven off onto the wrong road. Mayhap by now they have found the right road."

But Sir Allen Mayne looked troubled. "Hugo de Brenn did not even pause for the killing of the stag, but turned in haste back to his castle of Bewly again. I like it not." He turned toward Wat the Armorer. "If thou wilt choose me speedily a casque and hauberk and other armings to fit my inches, and take the reckoning from that purse, I will ride after the merchant. Even Hugo de Brenn would hesitate to make a foray upon a train escorted by a friend of Woodstock's."

"Woodstock? I know not the name," said Wat, frowning. "But he must be of exceeding estate and authority if his very name would give pause to the Butcher's greed. Here is your purse, however—and the armor is yours for the wearing. No man who is guard against Butcher de Brenn can pay money here."

He was choosing all the fittings that went to arm a knight cap-a-pie—when another alarum broke the forest stillness. It was the noise of a man shouting and stumbling along the woodland road.

CHAPTER V

WIND THE HORN THRICE

IT WAS the fat-bellied merchant. Only now his rich Flanders mercery was torn and muddy from plunging through wildwood and swamp. He was wringing his hands as he came in sight. Then, seeing the party at the smithy, he cried out again, and stumbled forward, to fall at the very feet of Sir Allan Mayne.

"Rescue! Rescue!" he gasped in broken, queer-accented words. "Outlaws—robbers—they have fallen upon me! Help, gentle sir, for the sake of St. Christopher! Oh, my wagons, my wagons—my daughter—"

Rudely Sir Allan jerked him upright, shook the senses back into him. "Hold thy noise, fat belly! Where have they fallen upon you—these robbers? Who has stolen thy carts, thy daughter?"

"At the road crossing—the last road branching before the fringing of the forest!" wailed the unhappy merchant. "Armed chevaliers—men-at-arms! A round dozen of them, in full mail. What men I know not, though I heard someone of the carters shout out the name of one Hugo de Brenn before he ran—"

"De Brenn! Making forays on merchants, kidnapping women on the king's highway!" Sir Allan Mayne spat the words out with a bitter oath. "And cozening me with sweet words to join his hunt party! With such a man it was well warned to Edward of Woodstock that he had best—" He broke off, snatched for the casque Robin had so recently jerked from his head. "It may be too late. But at least I can ride after and bring de Brenn to personal challenge!"

But Wat the Armorer was reaching down a great cow's-horn that hung on the smithy wall. He set it to his lips, blew three prodigious notes. And after a moment, three more.

"There is yet time, perchance," he said, "if the carts are as heavy-laden and slow as you say, merchant. For the forest road to Bewly is soft and mired in places."

Sir Allan was staring at him in wonder. "That horn, that thrice winding of the horn?"

"Listen!"

Ringing back through the forest glades, almost like an echo from the north came a repetition of the three blasts. Then

another horn sounded, but this time from the south. From all parts of the New Forest they came now, some loud, some so far away as to be faint, almost beyond hearing.

"The masterless men!" said Wat the Armorer. "Masterless, but fleet of foot, strong of arm, and straight of eye! Before we reach the curving of the road where it leaves the forest for Bewly, there will be a full two score or more! And not even Butcher de Brenn in all his plate of proof can laugh at the masterless men."

HURRIEDLY lacing the last points of his armor, Sir Allan Mayne leaped onto his horse, snatched the sharp sword the bellows helper stretched out to him. "Up behind me, then, Wat, thou grizzled bear of the forest! Thy legs are too old to run with younger men."

"My legs are stronger than that horse you stride!" retorted Wat, and slinging the horn by a thong from his shoulder, he strode at rapid pace into the forest. Jerking the dazed merchant onto the horse behind him, the knight followed, while the three archers, with bows in hand and quivers a-shoulder, dog-trotted after. Robin, delaying only long enough to throw off the heavy hauberk of meshed steel-links, picked up his double-staved arbalest and pouch of quarrels, and hurried on their heels.

Not a half-mile had they trotted, before out of the greenwood the forest men came trickling to join them. By ones and twos they came, the most armed only with yew bows and quiver and hunter's knife. And every little while the grizzled armorer would wind his horn, three blasts each time.

"Three blasts for the Bewly road—four for Southampton Water, and five for the western edge," Peter Joy explained to Robin. "Two blasts, quick repeated, for scattering when the Warden's foresters are on the prowl."

By the time they came toward the thinning of the woods, there were almost the full two score of masterless men that Wat had promised. And it gave Robin amazement that, wild and hard as they appeared, the forest men seemed to obey the armorer as leader without question.

Then at last they came to marshy ground on either side, and made their way only by reason of a higher open ridge that ran between. The tinkle of a slow-flowing stream came to Robin's ears.

"Bewly Water," said Peter Joy. "It spreads and gathers here in the low ground, before pitching itself down toward Bewly town and the sea."

Then they were out of the marsh and at the cutting of the roadway. Wat the Armorer stepped to the roadside, parted the brush and looked through it. He waved his hand.

And it was full time. For already the sweet-toned bells of Bewly Abbey were beating vespers, and the night-shadows crowded deeper and faster over the forest road. To his left Robin heard the noise of cartwheels and horses approaching. They were out of sight around the road curve as yet, but the creak of the heavy cartwheels was plain, the crack of the carters' whips, the coarse shouts. A woman's voice cried out, and was drowned out in jeering laughter.

ROBIN heeled his arbalest and wound the windlass, glancing about him the while. Peter Joy was at his shoulder; Wat the Armorer stood tiptoe peering through the brush; Sir Allan Mayne swung his long sword as he sat taut-lipped on his horse from which the merchant had been dumped. But of the two score other forest men, there was not a one in sight. They had sunk unseen into the thickets and the bracken.

And then the cavalcade of horsemen and carts came into sight, creeping along the purple-shadowed road. In the van rode three full-mailed men-at-arms, swords on pommel, glacing to left and right. Behind them came the sumter mules, still laden, and then the carts, with three other men-at-arms on either side. Lastly, bringing up the rear, came three more men, armed

cap-a-pie, and amid them, bound atop a sumter mule, rode the girl. Her false hair mat had been ripped away so that her own long tresses tumbled raven-black. Her face was white and pinched, but at every jostle of her mount she spat out bitter words at the armed man who rode beside her. It was his voice that had jeered before. And listening to it now, Robin was sure that this was Hugo de Brenn.

Still Wat the Armorer waited. The last two wagons and the horsemen herding them were almost abreast when the armorer swung the horn to his lips. Its mighty blast ripped the forest stillness.

Instantly mules were shying, horses plunging, and men cursing with surprise, then with pain and anger. And well they might. For the forest brakes on both sides of the road seemed all at once a-boil. Bow strings twanged, and arrows thicker than swarming bees hummed and beat on shield and casque and chain hauberk. Other forest men, as agile as squirrels, were dodging and twisting, slashing at horses' tendons and bellies from underneath. Still others, racing for the sumter mules, were jerking them around and off the road, plummeting from sight in the blackening thickets.

But though jolted and reeling from that arrow hammering, the men-at-arms were proof against all but the most cunningly aimed shaft. Once they had recovered from their surprise, the mounted men jerked their horses around, slashed about on all sides with their long Norman swords. All save two or three whose mounts, hamstrung or fatally stabbed from beneath, shrieked and fell kicking to spill their riders.

CHAPTER VI

RESCUE FOR RANSOM

ROBIN had not waited to glimpse all that, however. At the first tumult he had leaped into the road, racing toward that sumter mule where the bound girl rode amid her three capors. Behind him he heard Sir Allan's shout, the trampling, of his horse's hoofs.

That reckless moment might well have been Robin's last. For the horseman who was riding side-guard at that point was swinging about even as he plunged into the open. The mounted man gave a shout, raised his sword, hurled his horse upon Robin. Robin threw up his arbalest, finger to trigger.

Lucky it was for Robin that a shaft struck the animal at that instant. It reared in air, kicking and screaming, and the slashing sword missed his bare head by inches. But Robin's finger, slipping on the trigger, tripped the string; and the quarrel, instead of piercing the rider, drove deep into the horse's belly. The animal came down all a-spraddle, already kicking in its death throes and pitching its rider over its head.

Weighted by his heavy armor, he lay there, as anchored and helpless as a turtle upon its back. Then a forest man leaped on the downed man's chest. It was John the Wolf, the skinning knife in his hand stabbing and slashing. The gaunt archer cursed as the knife point glanced from plate and link. Fiercely he began slashing around the helmet base.

But Robin had no time to see how that fared, either, for another scream from the girl called him on. He saw her sumter mule close at hand, but upon him at that moment spurred one of the three men-at-arms who had guarded her. Robin ducked underneath the horse's belly, and heard behind him the clash of steel and Sir Allan's shout as he engaged the man-at-arms.

Robin was at the girl's side now, reaching for her mule's halter. Her sudden scream brought his head about in time to save him. There almost upon him was Hugo de Brenn. Already the Butcher's blade was raised aloft, poised for the downward stroke.

There was no quarrel in Robin's arbalest groove, nor time to insert one. Dodging, Robin threw up the crossbow to intervene between skull and blow. The parry saved him, for the blade slashed down and past, shearing the bow-staves clean so that they fell loose from the stock and hung

a-dangle from the ends of the bow strings.

Dropping the useless crossbow, Robin caught at the horseman's saddle and leg. With a leap he was up and astride the horse behind the rider, binding his arms with a desperate clutch. At the same time his right foot, cunningly crooked under the stirrup, twisted and heaved. De Brenn went plunging to the ground, with Robin atop.

The fall must have dazed de Brenn; he lay as limp as a sack. In that moment Robin knew that he had but to pry the visor open with his knife point, thrust deep, and de Brenn would never mount horse again. But Robin leaped to his feet and caught at the halter of the sumter mule once more. He whirled it around, girl and all, and jerked it into the cover of the forest edge.

He all but stumbled over the merchant Algelt, shouting prayers as if they could have been heard. "Cease thy yelping!" ordered Robin, panting. "Thy daughter is safe—she is even here!"

But Algelt looked once at the girl, and continued his yells: "The carts! The two heaviest carts! Save the two last carts if ye cannot save all!"

Robin's lips curled with disgust that the man could think of his goods when his daughter was still in bonds. But from the roadway Hubert's voice shouted back: "The wagons! The two rearmost carts! Give me a hand, Peter—John, old Wolf! The fat merchant says that it is in these that he hoards his gold!"

"Then into the forest with them! In with cart and horse!" yelped back Peter Joy. "A ransom—we will hold the old potbelly to fair ransom for his gold! Here, John! A hand with this cart!"

TO ROBIN'S amazement, with a rumble and crash, the rearmost cart came off the road and straight through the bracken, steered deftly by Hubert. After it came the second cart, urged on by Peter Joy and John the Wolf. Wat the Armorer's voice rose in a shout. 'Two more carts! and leave the rest here! It is time we scattered!"

From the road the sounds of the mêlée suddenly diminished, ceased almost altogether. Only the curses and groans of the horsemen rang loud. Robin found himself leading the mule with the girl atop, her bonds now slashed, and following close behind the second large cart. Ahead he could hear Hubert and John the Wolf already squabbling over shares of what the carts might contain. Other archers came filtering through the thickets, leading captured sumter mules with their burdens. Just ahead of Robin Algelt stumbled and groaned, still crying out at the loss that had befallen him. Behind rode Sir Allan, with Wat striding at his stirrup.

Suddenly at a narrow point between mire holes where the swamps hugged the little ridge on either side, Wat called a halt. He cut the throats of the horses pulling the third and fourth carts that they had saved, aand left them lying jumbled, barring the way.

"That will hold them back until daylight, at least," he said. "And by daylight we will be far away, and past all finding!"

He put his horn to his lips, blew two short blasts, and then repeated them. To the sides and rear came the answering blasts of the masterless men as they sped away.

Once again the march through the forest began. But this time it was in darkness, and moreover there were the two laden carts and the dozen sumter mules as well. But Red Hubert and the other forest men seemed to wind their way amid thickets and swamp as surely by dark as by brightest day.

Steadily they drove the cart mules on, while Robin stumbled and tripped and a dozen times was off path into the mire. He was so near to death from weariness he did not realize that the girl atop the mule was aiding him to keep from falling.

He hardly knew when the ground began to slope upward, the slippery mire to turn to solid earth underfoot. Thickets and brush gave way to a dry clearing. The creaking of the carts ceased, and there

rose instead the mumble of many voices. Torches gleamed on all sides, and warm firelight beat upon his face.

But of what came thereafter, Robin knew nothing. A single tuft of grass had tripped him. In his weariness the ground was softer than the finest bed. He stretched his limbs on it gratefully and, spent with exhaustion, slept where he lay.

CHAPTER VII

BOMBARD

WHEN Robin stirred next it was fair morning, and the sun was drenching his body with pleasant warmth. The crackle of burning wood came to his ears, and there was a smell that could only be roasting venison.

Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and stared about.

He lay in an acre clearing, with dense thickets hedging it about. But in the center, a cook-fire crackled and flamed, while men held venison and fish and hares on spits to roast, and still others roamed about at various tasks.

A voice laughed at Robin's shoulder: "Ho! So the body is not a body at all, but only sleeping!"

It was Hubert, the red-headed archer, and with him Peter Joy, chuckling, and even John the Wolf's gaunt face was smiling.

Ashamed, Robin struggled to his feet stiffly. Wat the Armorer thrust a smoking piece of venison at him on a spit. "Eat, lad. An armorer's 'prentice needs all his strength to clout the red-hot iron!"

It was then that Robin saw Sir Allan brushing down his horse with a rude brush made of broken branches. A merry face with red, laughing lips and bright eyes, showed for a moment in the slit cover of the near cart and then was gone, but the sound of sweet laughter lingered after. Then it all came back to Robin, and he stared about anew.

Wat the Armorer read the expression in his eyes. "Nay, lad, ye will have no sight of Butcher de Brenn or his men here. In the near three hundred years since the Normans landed, naught but Englishmen have set foot on this spot."

"So ye give me cozen as an Englishman and not as Norman, eh?" It was Sir Allan Mayne, come from caring for his warhorse, a great piece of venison in his hand on which he munched with satisfaction. "It is a name I like as well as the stout armor you gave me last eve."

"And a name you proved with stout blows against those same Normans," Wat nodded approvingly. "Had you not proved it so stoutly, you would never have set eyes on this clearing."

The knight's eyes were laughing. "I can well believe that. A dozen times I would have been mired to my stirrups had not your forest men led me back onto the good ground again. How you ever brought the laden carts through the swamps, and in the night at that--"

"Who would know the forest, if not the forest men?" returned the armorer. But there was a look of satisfaction around his firm mouth. "On the highways and in the fields, the Butcher's men-at-arms may ride unbeaten. But in these fens none but free-born forest men come except with our leave."

"Not even the King's men?" Sir Allan's voice was sharp.

"Not even the King's men," answered the armorer stoutly.

And looking about him at the easy carriage of the forest men, and remembering the tortuous trip through the cunning swamp paths, Robin could well believe that. But a thought occurred to him, brought back by almost forgotten words.

"What if the Lord Warden calls out the levies, sweeps the forest with a thousand well-armed men? He must be biting his nails and raging at last night's ambushment."

"Let him rage," said the armorer carelessly. "If he seeks to follow the way we came he will be mired crupper-deep a hundred times before he reaches here. And if his men-at-arms keep to the open glades, we will rap their hauberks with

so many arrows they will be sore of rib and glad to get them gone the way they came."

But Robin's mind was still troubled. "What if his foresters lay hold on some forest man, and put him to the torture to make him reveal the way to this clearing?"

"They could tear him to bits, and his lips would still be silent," Wat replied. "The forest men are all freeborn Englishmen—not castle villeins cringing to the lash."

"AT OXFORD," said Robin slowly, "I read a copy of the Great Charter signed a hundred years agone by King John at Runnymead. By it is guaranteed that no freeborn man may be prisoned or done to death without trial by jury. Nor amerced of goods by taxes to which he has not subscribed—"

"A thing as worthless as the goathide on which it is writ," said Hubert scoffingly. "Certain I am that Lory of the Longbow was not given any trial other than that of the gibbet chain. And the King himself—"

"You speak treason!" said Sir Allan Mayne sharply. "The King is an Englishman even as ourselves, and a just man. And his son, the Prince, even though but a boy, is even more just. I know because—"

"How then does he allow de Brenn to commit robbery and murder and kidnapping of women on his own highway?" demanded Hubert angrily. "Yet did we not witness all this with our own eyes?"

"The King's domains are wide and far, both in England and in France," returned the knight. "Not even to his eyes and ears can come knowledge of all that happens in his realm. And I doubt me not that were he informed of what de Brenn does, he would be as sharp of judgment as you yourself, archer!"

Then he turned to Robin. "You speak of having read Magna Carta, of which even I know only by hearsay. I have curiosity to know your name, especially after the great buffet you gave me not twenty-hours agone."

"My name is Robin—Robin Santerre," said Robin, coloring. "I read the Charter at Oxford where I was a student, though I can lay claim to but little knowledge."

"Aye—only knowledge of the use of arms and the making of such devil's arbalests as no man hath ever seen before," laughed Red Hubert. "But where is the devil's windlass that outdid my strongest bow and made matchwood of my stoutest targe?"

"Ruined—cut in two by de Brenn's sword," said Robin gloomily. "It was stout yew, and the best of tempered horn. I misdoubt me that it will take some weeks to fashion another."

But Sir Allan was still regarding him with curiosity. "Santerre? Robin Santerre?" He translated the French surname into Anglo-Saxon. "Robin Lackland. We should be brothers at the least, since I am also a knight without acres or castles to my name. And whence came you to Oxford?"

"From Scotland, though I have but small memory of it since I went to Oxford as a stripling," said Robin. "My father had a small holding on the border, but he died at he battle of Halidon Hill, and I sold the holding for the expenses of my clerkship in the Scottish College at Oxford."

"You have a good right arm, as I can testify, even if you have no lands or wealth," said the knight, smiling. "What more does any man require? For these be years when a fighting heart and a good swordarm can carve both honor and estate from the battlefields. In truth that is the hope that bears me up. And even now the king—"

BUT at that moment they were interrupted by a forester who came running into the clear, his hose muddy and his face streaming with sweat. He came straightway toward Wat the Armorer, shouting out as he ran:

"De Brenn—the Lord Warden! I

watched, even as you ordered, Wat, and the Warden's castle is a bustle with activity! Men gearing on their armor—stablemen harnessing the horses—archers and bowmen looking to their weapons and bolts! There are scores of them, hundreds of them!"

"De Brenn at Bewly Castle?" The armorer's face was instantly alert. "Mayhap he is even foolish enough to think he can sweep the forest with men in full armor—"

"Not only the castle, but on every road and highway!" panted the messenger. "By the scores, singly and in troops, they are gathering. The call must have been sent out; he must be gathering the levies!"

But suddenly Sir Allan laughed. "Nay, it is not de Brenn who is rousing the levies, to make an onslaught on the forest men. It is for the war. And it is the King himself who has sent out the call to arms."

"The King? War?" The armorer repeated the words with both surprise and no little doubt.

"Aye. It is that for which I sought your stout armor," said the knight. "Ere I left London the King's messengers were hurrying to every knight and baron in the realm, assembling the King's forces. War hath been declared between England and France."

"And the Frenchmen come to invade us here at the Solent and in the Hampshires?" Red Hubert's brows grew dark. "By my bow, if any Frenchman lays foot to English ground, to harry and burn, he will find himself so full of feathered shafts that he will seem a fowl readied for the plucking."

"Nay, not Frenchmen invading England," Sir Allan told him. "It is we who will invade France. The King of France has seized Guienne, which is lawful fief of our own King Edward, and so we must cross to chase the Frenchmen out again."

"But Guienne—is that not in France?" demanded the armorer.

"Yes. But it is possession of our English King, come down with Normandy by inheritance from William the Conqueror."

The armorer shook his head. "What have we English to do with Guienne or any other part of France? I can make no sense of these wars and bickerings. Let the French stay in France, and we English in England."

"Aye. But where then would we landless Englishmen win our lands and wealth if there were no wars and we took them not from the French?" said Sir Allan, his eyes gleaming. "There are rich towns and cities in France, to be plundered by the Englishman who is stout enough. Even an archer there, with fortune, may win wealth enough to secure him his ease for the rest of his days.'"

"Even an archer, say you?" John the Wolf's ears pricked up. "How then does one get to this Guienne? Is it on the highway beyond London then, and toward Scotland?"

"Nay, it is over the water, in France—across the Channel, which the Frenchmen call the *Manche,*" answered the knight, laughing. "That is why the levies are gathering at Bewly, and Romney and Rye. For in those harbors we will take ship to cross to France. Prince Edward, the king's eldest son, is already on the way to make ready the ships and the levies, and the King himself will follow."

"The Prince come to Rye and Bewly? Then he is a fool," said Wat the Armorer sourly, "to lay his head in the trap. For I remember me that twenty years agone de Brenn's father, the old Warden of Bewly, was hand in glove with Mortimer and the French Isabella. And his son Hugo is no better. If the young Prince Edward comes trustingly to Bewly and lays his head in the trap—"

"How do you mean—trap?"

"What else? Butcher de Brenn could win great ransom for the king's own son, did he seize him and turn him over to the French. He could stop the war and win himself all of Guienne and Normandy in exchange, at the very least!"

SIR ALLAN MAYNE'S brows frowned, and a dark gleam came into his eyes. "By my halidon, there is sooth in what

you say! For I do not trust this Hugo de Brenn myself. I must go in haste to warn the Prince." He looked around at the archers. "If any stout yeomen here would take service with a knight who has no holdings but who will swear to lead where honor and wealth may be had, I would welcome such to come with me."

Then, to Robin: "And you, Robin Lackland, I love thee well for the stout buffet you gave me yesterday. And gladly would I have at my side the arm and man that gave it."

But Robin shook his head. "The cutting of men's throats in battle is a bloody business for which I care not a whit. It is the fashioning of metals, the science of levers and forces that interest me—"

"Then there is room for such in the king's artillery—the making and laying of ballistae and catapults and engines of seige—"

But at that moment there was a sound of grunts and groans and stumbling steps and from the nearest cart stumbled the merchant, Jacob Algelt. Hanging to his daughter's arms, he stood and rubbed the stiffness from his limbs. It was evident that his age was too great for the arduous happenings he had experienced in the past twenty-four hours.

At sight of him John the Wolf gave a round oath. "Ransom in France is a pleasant thing, and something to give thought to. But we are forgetting the ransom in hand. Didst not say the merchant's gold was in these two great carts that we saved from de Brenn last night, Hubert? And are we not entitled to fair ransom out of the gold that we saved?"

"Rightly spoken, Old Wolf!" exclaimed Red Hubert. "Trust thy nose to smell out money wherever it may be. Give us a hand then and let us look at this gold."

Despite the old merchant's shouts and protests they leaped inside the carts, slashed off the canvas covers, and began to throw about the contents with great noise and bickering. Then Hubert's voice rose in surprise and disappointment.

"There is no gold here! Naught but two long-shaped bells of metal for the carillon of some minster or abbey! And stone balls for bowling, and sacks of fine crushed charcoal which we could find at any charcoal burner's hut!"

"And the same here!" cried John the Wolf, scowling down out of the other cart. He glanced at the Flemish merchant. "Where is the gold? For thy lies, we would do well to throw thee back to the Butcher!"

"Nay, not gold, not gold!" gasped the old merchant. "I said not that it was gold. I said save these two carts, for that they were of great value."

"Great value? Value in stone balls and charcoal?" John the Wolf cursed. Suddenly he began to hurl them out of the cart, so that the balls thudded about the old man's feet and the charcoal covered him until he was black. "Take them then, old liar!"

ROBIN had picked up one of the balls, studied it. He peered into the cart at the long, bell-shaped things of dark metal that lay within. Then, stooping, he thrust his hand into one of the sacks, took some of the charcoal powder into his hand, sniffed at it and touched it to his lips. Startled, he turned keen eyes on Algelt.

"Not only charcoal, but brimstone and sulphur! Is not this serpentine—wildfire?"

"Serpentine!" The old merchant blinked his eyes. "How didst thou know?"

"In his treatise in the library at Oxford, Roger the Franciscan did give the rules for the compounding of charcoal, sulphur and brimstone to make wildfire. In truth I did make shift to compound something of it myself, to the singeing of my own hair and eyebrows."

Robin sifted the powder in his hands again. "There seemeth less than the proportion of sulphur and brimstone, but doubtless it was shaken to the bottom of the charcoal by the jolting of the cart. But what of these stone balls? And surely those great metal tubes, by the thickness of their sides and by their shapes, are no bells for any carillon."

For a long moment the merchant stared at him. Then he nodded reluctantly. "No. They are bombards. And the balls are the missiles to be cast from them by the firing of the gunpowder."

"Bombards!" Sir Allan echoed the word amazedly.

"Aye. It is as I said," responded the old merchant slowly. "These bombards and their balls and powder are more value than were all the merceries and goods in all the rest of the carts and packs. For with these bombards a ball may be hurled further and straighter than the missile of any catapult or ballista, no matter how huge. With them one may batter down walls, breach cities, or blast through shield, haubergeon, and hauberk of the stoutest armor made."

He ceased speaking, his old eyes traveling from one to another. They fell as he noted the derisive grins spreading on the archers' faces, the look of disbelief even on the countenance of Sir Allan Mayne. The Flanders merchant clenched his hands.

"It was even thus when I tried to approach the Court in London. I offered your King the wherewith to blast apart any wall or army in France. For ten thousand *livres* I would have hired him the bombards and the missiles and even provided the bombardiers to serve them. But the King would not see me. And when I tried to bespeak the Prince, I was forestalled there also. By a great, dark-faced man with a broken nose and scarred cheek who bade me begone to hell and take my bombards with me."

"That would be Sir Murray Wilton, the Prince's henchman," said Sir Allan, nodding. "I have fought alongside the old warhorse in Flanders and elsewhere. And he would not give you heed?"

"Not even though I begged him to arrange a test for my bombards against his strongest catapults and ballistae," said the old merchant mournfully.

"And scant wonder," said the knight, nodding. "Catapults and ballistae, a man may believe, for he may see the workings of the beams and ropes. But he would be daft who believed that with fire and charcoal powder and a tube, a man could hurl a missile through a wall or a man in full armor." He turned to Robin. "Is that not sooth?"

But Robin was thoughtful. "Roger the Franciscan wrote naught of using the powder in tubes to hurl missiles. But he wrote that fearful indeed was the force released by the burning, so that no pot or cannister might hold it. And Roger Bacon, the Franciscan, wrote that many strange discoveries would come to pass that we living men wot not of."

"ROGER BACON, the Black Monk!" At the name, the archers stumbled back horrified, and even Sir Allan Mayne hurriedly crossed himself. For though Roger Bacon had been a Franciscan—a Gray Friar—report had damned his name through all Christendom as a Black Monk, a man in league with Satan. For had he not written of boats that would move without either oars nor sails, and that men themselves would fly in air like birds?

"I can well believe, merchant," said Robin, "that these same bombards may do what you say they will. What are your plans, and where were you taking them when captured by the Lord Warden?"

Jacob Algelt's lips quivered, he looked about him with fright. "To—to the King of France. I had spent many *livres*—all my fortune—in the casting and the compounding of the powder. I had to recover my loss from someone. If the King of England would not hire my bombards, mayhap the King of France would."

"And help the Frenchmen slash us to pieces with these devil's tubes and powders?" Red Hubert let out an oath. "That were treason indeed! Lay hand to him, John—Peter! We will into the fire with him and his powders, and no doubt be the better Christians for it as well!"

Before the merchant could move, the archers had closed in on him with black looks and words. Nor did Sir Allan make move to halt them.

"Mayhap that is a good thought, archer,"

said he. "Such devil's weapons were well enough to use on paynims and unbelievers. But the French are believers even as ourselves. And to blast a Christian apart with such foul means is not becoming to an Englishman."

The girl gave a scream, endeavored to throw herself between, but strong arms held her back and helpless. Wat the Armorer made protest, but was as quickly silenced. Screaming and kicking, the Flanders merchant was hoisted up, borne on the shoulders of stout forest men toward the fire.

Robin looked around helplessly, but there was no weapon in sight that might avail against the archers. And that they meant to throw the old man into the flames was well evident. For as all men knew, only fire could purge the black magic from a man who had made a compact with Satan.

Closer they carried Algelt to the fire, their faces grimly set.

Again the girl screamed. And suddenly Robin spun about. Dipping his two hands into the nearest sack, he filled them to heaping with the black-grained powder. Then he raced after the archers.

They were already at the fireside, pressing their captive to the flames. Bursting past them, Robin hurled the full contents of his two hands onto the red embers.

In an instant there was a hissing *whoosh*. Smoke and flame billowed and spurted, ashes and great chunks of flaming embers were hurled afar. The smoke cloud billowed about the archers, swallowing them in its acrid fumes. So that with shouts of fright they broke and scattered, coughing from the smoke and ashes, and beating at the embers that were charring flesh and doublets.

Robin too had been caught in the quick-spurting flare; his own hair and brows were singed and his eyelids dusted with stinging ashes. However, he brushed at them for only a moment, before falling to with his hands to beat out the red spots that were charring the merchant's clothing in a dozen places.

Old Algelt's howls were prompted more by fright than by pain; but most of all by the helpless rage of a man who knows that he has been wronged. Robin himself was silently cursing these fools who understood science only as devil's work. The smart of his burns was no worse than the impatience he felt; and it was not easy to hold his peace.

IT WAS Wat the Armorer, however, who pushed forward first, even bolder than Sir Allan Mayne. He lashed at the coughing forest men with bitter anger. "How now, dolts, knaves! Hast so soon forgot the oath ye sware, to do in anything as I bid—the oath to hold me leader of all the masterless men?"

Hubert and John the Wolf cursed and rubbed at their stinging eyes. "Aye, Wat. But naught was said about necromancy and black magic from Flanders."

"So ye would have held Robin's arbalest to be black magic too, in that it would outshoot any ordinary bow, had ye not sense to understand its fashioning," retorted the armorer. "Go soak thy heads, dullards, and may the soaking give ye wit to understand this charcoal powder too! Stand back from the old merchant! Leave him unscathed and get thee gone!"

"But the very smoke and fury of this brimstone is proof that it is devil's doing—"

"Get thee gone, I said! Or wouldst that I should cast this entire sack into the fire and crisp every man in this whole clearing?" Suddenly they saw then that the armorer clutched in his hands the opened bag from which the other powder had come. And from the sternness of his face as he held the bag forth, they saw that he was full purposed to do as he had threatened.

"Nay! Nay!" Hubert stepped back, and the other forest men gave way along with him. "Hold thy hand from that devil's compound, old forest boar. Thou art still leader, and we masterless men will do thy bidding—ill as it may be that we let this Flanders necromancer go free from his

scotching. Mark me: the man's accursed."

Still mumbling, they moved away. Running forward, the girl caught at her father and led him back to the wagons. Robin turned to Sir Allan.

"You spoke of it being foul work to use bombards against the French," he said. "But what difference if a Christian be slain with catapult or bombard? Death comes equally in either case. So it seems to me far better that we use the bombards ourselves than let them go to fall into the hands of the French. Also I have a curiosity to learn more of these bombards."

Wat nodded shrewdly.

"If they are in truth stronger than a catapult to smite through mailed armor," said the old armorer, "it may well be that here is the thing that will make a freeborn forester the equal even of a highborn knight. A hundred yeomen with such bombards would be even stouter armed than if they carried those double-staved arbalests you showed us yesterday."

Sir Allan looked from one to the other of them with blackened brows, and it was plain that the knight was not over-suited with their words. But at last he stood back, as if washing his hands of it all.

"Bombards or no bombards, I must be gone. If de Brenn has treachery in mind, I must seek out Edward of Woodstock at once, that he may be warned away from Bewly."

Perhaps it was the mention of Bewly that made Robin suddenly remember what the knight had said not long ago—something about a trap prepared by the king's enemies. And with this memory flashed the picture of a brilliant cavalcade around the forest point; a slender, richly-clad boy whose brows grew troubled at sight of a gibbet.

"Edward of Woodstock!" Robin looked at Sir Allan sharply. "Is this Edward then a youth of some sixteen, slight built and of exceeding fairness? And accompanied perchance by a dark man with a much scarred face, and a dozen men-at-arms as well?"

"Aye. That would be Edward of Woodstock, and the scarred man would be Sir Murray Wilton. Thou hast seen them then?"

Robin nodded. "At the crossroads gibbet on the Salisbury Road yesterday, just after you rode through the wagons in the chase. They asked the way to Bewly town, and if there were inns there."

"Bewly!" Sir Allan whirled to his horse. "Then I must needs hasten! Perhaps it is already too late, and de Brenn already hath seized the Prince!"

"The Prince!"

"Aye. Edward of Woodstock, the oldest son of the King. The Prince of Wales—though by reason of his dark armor, some there are who call him the Black Prince!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Guns for Ethiopia

Crouching in the shelter of a little crater, he saw camels racing against the besiegers

When three nations keep their eyes on Africa, the line between good business and skullduggery is often obscure. But the Fuzzy-Wuzzies' Chamber of Commerce can cope efficiently, if sharply, with treachery. . . .

A Complete Novelet

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

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I

THE breeze that mixed the reek of wool and tobacco and rawhide on the dock was hot as the sun blazed down on Tex Baylor's forty foot *sambuk*. She was a homely hulk of unpainted teak; but Baylor had learned better than to judge men or boats by their looks on the Somali Coast.

A customs clerk in sticky whites watched the crew stowing away twenty cases of cartridges. But for this messy detail, he would be occupied as nearly every white man in Djibouti was at that hour: hoisting a vermouth *cassis* or something equally tall and cool. He squinted as he looked up from the tally sheet and said, "Some day they'll catch you, *monsieur*. You cannot keep up gun running forever."

"Been talking to Poulain again?" Baylor drawled.

The clerk's face changed. He had the foolish look of one whose thoughts have been caught undressed. "What's Poulain got to do with it?" he snapped, and began scratching the prickly heat that afflicted anyone who was silly enough to wear shirt and pants in Djibouti.

Baylor yawned. "Oh, nothing at all."

Annoyance and prickly heat, he sus-

pected, had led to the clerk's peevish expression of a widespread hope. That moment of confusion clinched things; without any doubt, the fellow had been talking to André Poulain, who was Baylor's chief competitor in the arms business, and head of a local syndicate that was hostile to independent traders.

Sandy brows sheltered Baylor's eyes, which were deep set and framed with a network of sun wrinkles. A turban protected his head, and an Ethiopian *chamma* kept the sun from his shoulders. Beneath this airy robe, which reached to his rawhide sandals, he wore a coat of tan and a breech clout, like his Danakil crew.

As he listened to the monotonous singsong that accompanied the loading, Baylor wondered if anyone had noticed the two extra dugouts that were half concealed in the gear that littered the deck; if anyone had seen two Somalis slip aboard the *sambuk,* to hide in the sweltering hold. Two men and two small boats were Baylor's ace in the hole, this trip, and the clerk's remark convinced him that forethought had not been wasted.

"Another box, O Brother!" the first of the Danakil crew chanted as a hundred and forty pound case went from his hands to the next in line.

"A box, by Allah!" the second sang.

"A box, by Allah, and stow it well!" someone droned from the hold.

"They were tall as Baylor, broad-shouldered and tapering down wedge-shaped, like the men painted in Egyptian tombs. Every rib was high-lighted as they swayed in the sun. Butter, thoroughly rancid, protected their bare torsos, and butter oiled their bushy hair. They wore loin cloths, broad bladed knives, and rawhide sandals; and they had even less on their minds, since worrying was the skipper's job.

The shipping manifest indicated that the cartridges were destined to Maskat, on the Arabian coast. Actually, they were going across the Gulf of Tajura, where a caravan would carry them inland to Ethiopia. This annoyed the Italians, but Baylor reasoned: "I always packed a gun back home in Langtry, and darned if I don't see why an Ethiopian hasn't the right to have a gun."

Everyone in Djibouti felt that way about it. There was a routine for complying with formalities and yet supplying the demand; but the other traders resented Baylor's competition. He had friends in forbidden Tajura, where white men landed at their own risk. Thus, instead of having to hire a native skipper to evade the coast guard, Baylor delivered the guns himself, and at a lower cost. This would have been bad form for a Frenchman. For an American, it was unpardonable, as Poulain and others agreed.

Musa, the Dankali mate, bounded ashore. "The cargo is stowed."

Baylor raised his hand. "Don't sail for a few minutes. I've got some business ashore."

HE WALKED down the dusty broad street about which Djibouti's European quarter centered. Banks and offices were closed during the intolerably hot afternoon. Small plumes of searing dust rose with each footfall and settled on his ankles; waves of heat smote his thin face, and the smell of it in his nostrils was like a furnace blast. Here and there, starved dogs lay panting in the shadows of squat masonry.

Baylor found André Poulain in the arcade of a café just across the street from the Hotel Continental. The Frenchman started, and nearly upset his *apértif* when he saw who came toward him. His companion, a minor official of the governor's staff, sat there, beer midway between table and lip. He muttered something to Poulain, and gestured.

"Oh, hello, André!" Baylor nodded to the pair. *"Bon jour,* Monsieur Raynauld. Why aren't you gentlemen at the dock?"

Poulain was short and stocky. His neck bulged over the edge of his wilting collar. He was yellowish, rather than tanned; his liver was far from right, which spoiled his disposition, as also did the daily quinine.

"Comment? Why should we be there?" Poulain's nostrils crinkled as at an evil

smell, and he impatiently waived a waiter away from the table. "Why should I be?"

Baylor's smile had a Boy Scout flavor. "I'm sailing for Maskat. You might have come down to wish me *bon voyage.*"

Poulain was now certain that the tall man from Texas was not going to hit him. "You can sail to hell for all I care. You're a disgrace to the white race. Hobnobbing with Arabs and natives."

"Precisely," the official seconded. "It is not fitting."

"Now, don't be griped, André, just because you're afraid to run around on the other side of the bay."

Poulain's moustache bristled. "It's not that. You're lowering white prestige, running around dressed like a native."

"You and the syndicate," Baylor patiently observed, "didn't poke out the hand of fellowship when I was stranded here. You told me anyone who was chump enough to drive an ambulance for Haile Selassie could damn well starve. So here I am, and you might as well like it!"

It was a lonely business, being an outsider. But since the European colony did not like him, all the worse for them. Baylor grinned and went on, "Aren't you going to buy a drink?"

Two fuzzy-headed Somalis had paused to watch the argument. They stood in the blistering sun, grinning and whispering. The odor of rancid butter turned Poulain's stomach. He gestured, *"Allez, sales cochons!"* Then, to Baylor, "And that goes for you, too!"

The Texan lingered for a moment. "Listen, brother. If I should be tripped up and flung into the clink, my men would feel like orphans. They might cut chunks out of your frame, some night. You know how primitive people are."

"Eh? Who said I'd turn you in?" Poulain anxiously demanded. *"Tenez!* Wait a second, my friend. What I meant was, you ought to live more like a white man. Listen, do you think I'd turn you in to the coast guard?"

"The coast guard!" the official echoed. "Name of a camel! Is it that we would ruin the town's main business by informing them?"

If the arms trade were discouraged, Djibouti would lose the fifty per cent import duty on guns and cartridges. Though France and the other powers had agreed to suppress the trade, business was business; hence the elaborate game of cops and robbers, with an occasional Arab *nakhoda* nailed with contraband, and fined to uphold the good faith of the government.

Baylor grinned as he strode down the main street. When he came nearer to the docks, he sniffed the odor of goats and *dourra* bread and maize beer which the breeze brought from Bender Djedeed. "Smells better than the French town," he told himself. "Clean Africa."

But he was honest enough to admit in private that his attitude involved bravado to buck up his courage; that, and native stubbornness, sustained him in resolving to run his own business as he saw fit. At the start, unable to hire a skipper, he had to be his own *nakhoda.* And now he persisted as a matter of principle.

Presently Baylor was ready to clear Djibouti. Now barefooted, he gripped the deck of the *sambuk* with his toes; the fish oil that protected her teak planks from the sun made them too slippery for sandals.

"Aya lá há!" the Danakil crew chanted as they tugged at the lines. *"Aya lá há!"*

Slowly, the yard creaked up the mast, spreading the lateen sail: a challenge to the coast guard, and to Poulain's syndicate. A gust bellied the three-cornered canvas, and Selim, bending on the tiller, put her into the wind. Tacking across the oily swell, the *Arba'a Mulouk* made way from the dock. Baylor chuckled whenever he considered the name of his boat. It meant "Four Kings," in honor of the poker hand which had kept him off the beach, and made him a *nakhoda* with a deck beneath his feet.

A motor boat sputtered from the dock. It was to convoy him to Obok, the ghost town on the opposite shore of the gulf. There a customs official would gravely seize the *Mulouk's* papers, since she carried

cargo which would not touch the African coast. This done, a cutter would escort her out beyond the three mile limit. Then, without any papers to establish her connection with French territory, she would set sail for Arabia—for a while. What happened thereafter was no violation of the arms convention.

II

SUNSET reddened the volcanic crags which lined the further shore of the Gulf of Tajura, and five miles astern, a ruddy haze swallowed the white buildings of Djibouti. The *Mulouk's* cook squatted beside the tin stove which was wedged between the skipper's cabin and the bulwark; rocks protected the woodwork from the fire. There would be *dourra* bread and fish for captain and crew.

Musa, the sharp faced Dankali mate, squatted beside the low poop where Baylor sat. "I do not like this trip. Your enemies are trapping you."

"They've tried that a long time. That's why I brought the two extra dugouts and a couple of men."

Musa frowned. "Good, that part of it. But if they caught us with two Somalis not on the ship's papers they could call it smuggling slaves."

"That's right, they could." The Texan stroked his long jaw. "And in my case, they could make it stick. But what's worrying you?"

Musa explained, "Those two Ethiopians said that Shaykh Ismail's caravan will haul these cartridges over the mountains for them. But if the *shaykh* is really making a trip, why didn't he let you know? So you could send him a big lot on your own account."

"Maybe Poulain sold him a shipment." Baylor gestured. "He could meet our price and only lose part of his profit."

"I do not like this freight business," the Dankali persisted.

This confirmed Baylor's hunch. While Ethiopians did often order small lots for use back home, the customers who had arranged to ship twenty cases on the *Mulouk* had not haggled enough about the cost of transportation to the caravan's starting point. And one of them, Musa insisted, was on friendly terms with Poulain's steward.

"Can't back down," Baylor contended. "We've got to keep the white haired boys guessing. Not just once in a while, but every time."

The sun was rising when the *Mulouk* slid into the bay at Obok. The former capital of French Somaliland was a ruin which had only a few buildings that remained intact. The largest was the whitewashed barracks occupied by a company of colonial troops, who were in charge of a noncom; the others were the homes of Arab traders. But the native town was alive and noisy. From every brush hut came the thump-thump of pestles crushing *dourra*. Goats bleated, and the pungent smoke of mimosa branches flavored the air.

The sergeant, who represented not only the army but the customs, came aboard with a squad of barefooted native soldiers. He did not even bother to look into the hold of the *Mulouk*. Confiscating the papers of munitions-laden boats was a dreary routine. But this time, the noncom did not have time to breakfast with Baylor.

"Sorry, *mon vieux*." He gestured. "Got to inspect barracks. I'll have coffee with you the next time."

Later, when the *Mulouk* and her escort put out for the three mile limit, Musa said to Baylor, "He was scared to be sociable. If you escape the trap, they would blame him for warning you."

The challenge could not be declined. If he weakened once, they would put on the screws and corner him the next time. Worse yet, if Shaykh Ismail did actually expect him, Baylor had to be there, or else he would lose the respect of the caravan master. Once that happened, he would be on a par with Poulain, who had to hire Arab *nakhodas* to deliver guns to the dangerous Tajura coast. While Baylor's ambulance driving in Ethiopia had won him native friends, he could not take too much for granted.

One thing worried him. If the coast guard's high powered motor boat bore down while the *Mulouk's* crew was carrying cartridges ashore, there would be a pretty riot. Shaykh Ismail's quick triggered Arabs would riddle half the soldiers of the raiding party. That would compel the French to send a punitive expedition. Baylor, even if not captured, would be finished, for no Arab would deal with an unlucky man, nor would any Dankali. If a man was jinxed, that proved that Allah hated him, and only a fool would trade with such a person; not disloyalty, but plain prudence and common sense.

That afternoon, the *Mulouk* was bucking the swell that came from the Indian Ocean. If an Italian or British patrol caught her, sailing without papers, the skipper and crew would spend some years explaining. No story would be good enough to convince a gunboat commander that Baylor was not smuggling cartridges either to British or Italian Somaliland.

Baylor stood on the poop, and scanned the horizon. Patrols from Berbera, from Aden, or out of Bab el Mandeb; a wisp of smoke from any quarter, and the *Mulouk* would have to head for the unchartered islands that dotted the African coast. One enthusiastic captain, too intent to notice a treacherous reef, had run his gunboat aground. The odds against a sailing *sambuk* were not quite what the book indicated.

Tar bubbled from the deck. The crew huddled in the shadow of the lateen sail, and waited for the sun to dip to the iron black crags of the coast.

AT LAST she put about. The *khamsin,* blowing stiffly from the land, made her tack four miles for each one of headway. There was no longer any sullen red to outline the dark bulwarks of Africa; they had melted into blue-black sky. When a thread of foam exposed a reef, Baylor knew that he was not far from the cape in whose shelter Shaykh Ismail was supposed to be waiting.

Likewise, Baylor knew that anyone perched up there on the steep cliffs could from a great distance spy the *Mulouk's* wake; two long streaks of phosphorescence reached far astern. It was time to break out the extra dugouts which were lashed to the *Mulouk's* bulwarks, and concealed in a purposely unseamanlike tangle of gear.

This was done, and the two Somalis who were not listed on the ship's papers came from the stifling hold to help. As the little pirogues bobbed in the heavy swell, the crew lowered the cartridges. Baylor frowned, watching the transfer. Musa's face lengthened, and he said, "The load is too heavy. Better let Yusuf take our regular boat, and help them."

"If we're stopped," Baylor objected, "we'd have hell's own time explaining what happened to Yusuf! And our small boat!"

Each Somali squatted in the waist of his pirogue, and held his leaf-bladed paddle poised, ready to shove off and fight the swell. *"Wallah,"* they said, looking up and grinning, "we are not afraid. If we cannot ride through, we'll dump a few cases overboard."

"Allah go with you," Musa said, and gestured.

Rigging creaked, and the yard rose again. As the *Mulouk* made way, the cook pumped his bellows to whip up the fire in the stove. The glare reddened the sail, and was reflected from the oiled bodies of the Danakil crew. Well astern, the Somalis paddled toward the reef, whose white froth would mask whatever phosphorescence trailed after them.

Once clear of the reef, Baylor hauled for a narrow tongue of water that reached far inland. The tide was right. At other times, a sandbar blocked the mouth of the inlet.

Baylor sniffed the breeze. He could not scent the camels that should be somewhere in the mimosa scrub. He grinned bleakly, and picked up a stick whose end was wadded with oil soaked waste. It flared up, yellow and smoky, when he thrust it into the coals.

He waved this signal flare in an arc. With the wind cut off by the headland, the sail sagged, and the *Mulouk* wallowed in the swell.

Then there was an answering flare. The crew dropped the anchor. Baylor shouted, "*Ya* Ismail!"

But the *shaykh* did not return the hail. Somewhere, close at hand, a motor sputtered, then roared. A propellor churned the water, and as the launch broke cover, a searchlight blazed full in Baylor's face. The white finger swept the *Mulouk* from stem to stern. A man in uniform stood in the bow; behind him were a dozen native *askaris* with rifles.

One of the boarding party was not official. André Poulain, beaming amiably, followed the sergeant.

"Just in time for coffee," Baylor drawled. "Or do you want to inspect the boat first?"

"This is a pleasure," Poulain said, as the sergeant went below. "If you had an outboard motor, you might have got away."

"Would you like to take off your coat first?"

Poulain's malicous smile became a twist of perplexity. *"Eh, pourquoi?* Why remove the coat to see you arrested with the goods?"

"Oh, all right, suit yourself," Baylor agreed. "Now watch."

Poulain tried to duck, but an open-handed slap knocked him against the bulwark. He yelled to the *askaris* who remained on deck, but they merely grinned at the way white men played. As Poulain tried to recover, Baylor's left hand helped him up with another slap.

Tear blinded, the Frenchman struck out with pudgy fists. The Texan ducked and smacked him another. Poulain howled, "Sergeant! He's killing me. *Sacré cochon—"*

He lashed out with a kick, but Baylor twisted and at the same time wrenched his competitor's ankle. The two-hundred-pound impact when Poulain hit the oily deck brought the sergeant up the companionway on the run.

The *askaris* and the crew were doubled up with laughter.

"So he's killing you, huh?" the sergeant roared. *"Nom de Dieu!* I've a mind to help him. You fat jackass, you come down here and find twenty cases of cartridges! What in hell—what in hell do you mean, sending me on a crazy trip like this, as if I don't have enough to do at Obok?"

He turned to his laughing *askaris*: *"Fixe!* What's so funny? Get back on that launch!"

Poulain was the first one to leave the *Mulouk*.

Baylor leaned over the rail and said, "If Shaykh Ismail knew what kind of a rat you are, Brother André, he'd send a man to cut you crosswise."

Poulain choked, coughed, and shook his fist. As the launch hauled for the gulf, Musa said to Baylor, "He is not yet dead. This was tried for profit, but the next time will be for hate. And the governor likes him."

Baylor chuckled. "But the coast guard don't! Now we'd better go back and pick up our cargo."

The twenty cases were buried that night on the narrow beach of a barren little island which attracted neither fishermen nor natives in search of firewood; nothing grew on it, and the stench of sea fowl droppings commanded it to no one except a skipper seeking a cargo of guano. The cartridges could not be taken back to Djibouti without the payment of another fifty per cent import duty, since they had been cleared for export to Arabia. And from enjoying his laugh at Poulain's expense, Baylor ignored the fact that that little island was inside the limits of French Somaliland.

III

IN THE weeks that followed, Baylor freighted hides and tobacco to Hadramaut, and once a load of pilgrims from Berbera to Jidda. Then there was a cruise to the pearling waters of the Farsan Islands, where a *shaykh* bought the twenty cases of cartridges that Baylor licked up, en route, from the guano island. And of course, there was a trip to forbidden T jura, to meet Shaykh Ismail, and deliv consignment of guns.

The white-bearded Arab almost laughed aloud when Baylor told him of the encounter which had already been noised all up and down the coast. Outside the cubical house, Dankali drums sounded, and a goat herder sang to frighten prowling leopards which might creep through the thorny mimosa hedge that guarded his flock. Inside, Shaykh Ismail squatted on a rug spread on the hard packed earth floor, and drew at the stem of his water pipe.

"Once more, they have not caught you," he said, and clapped his skinny hands. "Ahmad! *Shewayya ziyadeh boon!*"

A Soudanese came in with a fresh pot of coffee, and refilled the thimble-sized cups that nestled in silver holders. Baylor said, "In the name of Allah,' and noisily sucked the creamy froth from his drink; with practice, that can be done without scalding one's lips. "Once more, ya Ismail. But I'm worried a bit. Things have been too easy."

Ismail frowned, and the tip of his nose curved a little more, so that it was like an eagle's beak. His deep set eyes reflected the smoky light of the dammar torch. "We might meet at Khor Ali, next time," he finally said. "Two hundred rifles. One hundred cases of cartridges."

Baylor nodded. "Having any trouble at the Ethiopian border?"

Shaykh Ismail spread his hands, palms up. "When native *askaris* guard the passes, I give them a present, and they look the other way. When Italians are on duty, there is firing at a blockhouse, an hour's march away from their post. Before they find it is a false alarm, I am through." Then his wrinkled face became childishly candid, and he added, "Sometimes, most of the infidels are killed on their way to help a besieged neighbor."

"By wild mountaineers?"

"Lawless fellows in the hills," the Arab solemnly affirmed.

Baylor sipped some more of his sticky coffee. Unless the flickering light deceived him, the rifle and belt in the corner had once been in the Italian service.

And then several men came in with leather bags of Maria Theresa dollars, the favorite currency in Ethiopia. Baylor called for his crew and said, "Load them up and get ready to sail."

"You haven't weighed or counted them," Ismail reminded him.

"Too much trouble."

The old man stroked his beard and smiled; some of the traders did take time to count the change. Outside, camels were grunting. Their bells would be removed long before they reached the frontier, and the men would stop singing. Those who came into the little house for final orders wore sandals, for even their calloused feet could not stand the thorns of the trail and the high plateau.

Ismail rose when he finished his coffee. "Brother, André Poulain is afraid to murder you, but he will find another way. Though Allah knows best."

At sunrise, the *Mulouk* was back again in Djibouti. Later, cleared by the customs, Baylor went to the Bank of Indo-China. Six of the crew, now wearing newly washed *chammas*, trailed after him. Each balanced on his head a goatskin bag of dollars. They chanted as they marched; they always sang, but this time it was not the one about the girl in Berbera.

The new ballad, whose scandalous Dankali verses brought grins to every native face, was about André Poulain. Most of the white-clad Europeans understood enough of it, but they pretended not to. The teller behind the wicket said to Baylor, "The bigger your balance, the heavier the fine when they catch you."

"I'll retire before then," was the answer. "But if you want to make a piece of change for yourself by telling the coast guard—" He leaned closer. "I'll give you a confidential tip. The next load will be a honey, and I'm landing it—"

The teller straightened up. "*Monsieur,* I am not interested."

"I guess nobody is. Not after Poulain's bright play."

Baylor turned to stand for a moment in the door, and watch his crew heading for Bender Djedeed. A Somali woman, balancing a basket of *dourra* on her head,

glided past, and used her eyes to beckon to an Arab who carried half a dozen freshly killed chickens. And a boy, practically naked except for a staff and a gleaming coat of butter, herded eight bleating goats toward the native settlement; some of the kids scampering after their mothers would soon be in a pot surrounded by the crew of the *Mulouk*. Baylor sighed and shook his head. He had no place among the official and commercial crowd; and though he was a friend of the natives, trusted and esteemed by them, race and color barred him from hearty African mirth.

A lonesome business, defying the syndicate. Among the quinine heads and bad livers of civilized Djibouti, there were plenty of amiable citizens, but these had to avoid him, since the official clique had declared him an outcast.

"One more trip, and I'm quitting," he told himself. "Not one friend on the whole damn coast!"

He had the respect of Shaykh Ismail and the Danakil who herded their flocks among the crags of Tajura. The hook nosed Arab traders drank coffee with him because he could play their dangerous game better than they themselves could; but the first time he slipped, Baylor told himself, they would shrug and let it go at that. A straight diet of esteem became tiresome.

BAYLOR went back to the *Mulouk* to read an accumulation of mail. The toothpaste ads made him homesick, and so did the advance notices of the 1940 models that, as usual, burned ten per cent less fuel. "I'd check out now," he told the silence of the six foot cabin, "if it weren't for that rat of a Poulain!"

He had a stake. Musa and the crew could have the *Mulouk*, for freight, smuggling, or piracy—whatever they pleased. And with Poulain and the syndicate thoroughly put in their place by the outcome of their own trick, Baylor could honorably pull in his horns. Such was his intention; but he did not carry it out in time.

Without any warning, Poulain showed his teeth. The coast guard found twenty cases of cartridges buried on the very island where Baylor had cached, and later dug up, the shipment that had made native Djibouti chuckle, and the Europeans shake their heads. The governor gravely explained. "Some Soudanese turtle fishers uncovered the lot. That batch you hid when you made a fool of the patrol."

Baylor knew that he could gain nothing by claiming that he had himself dug up those twenty cases and taken them to Farsan; such a contention, even if the testimony of his crew were accepted, would merely proved him technically guilty of importing munitions into French territory without payment of duty. "The Soudanese were of course digging for turtle eggs? Of course you have witnesses to prove that the cartridges they found were the same lot I was supposed to have taken to Arabia?"

The governor's eyes twinkled, and he twisted his white moustache. He relished the situation. "Naturally there are witnesses. The crew of a *zaroug* saw your boat approach. They hid, thinking you were pirates. So they saw everything."

This was quite impossible, but the fishermen would be in evidence. "Did Your Excellency ever hear that no turtle has ever laid an egg on that island?"

"That well may be, *monsieur*. But the Soudanese—stupid fellows, as you must know—did not realize that. It is quite in keeping for them to look for turtles where none ever come ashore."

The governor produced the three, who solemnly swore to every detail. The fine imposed left Baylor exactly enough to buy a ticket to New York. After the trial, His Excellency said, 'It would lower white prestige, you understand, if we had you deported on the testimony of natives."

"You mean, if I were deported, the American newspapers would play up the arms business, and show that democratic France is trying to keep the Ethiopians from having guns?"

His Excellency beamed. "You are shrewd, *monsieur*. At times, that is."

That very evening, Baylor sent Musa across the Gulf to tell Shaykh Ismail that there would be no shipment. That done, he put on a suit of white duck and went into town to hold down a table in the most brilliantly lighted arcade along the plaza. Everyone greeted him cordially.

To sulk in the cabin of the *Mulouk* would give his competitors too much of a glow. So Baylor sat there, drinking the insipid vermouth *cassis*. He was thinking. "I can sell the *Mulouk*. Get a twenty foot *zaroug*. Make a stake pearl fishing at Farsan. I'll show these mugs."

Poulain approached, smiling. "My dear fellow, this deplorable event causes me some grief."

Baylor did not want to slap him this time, because Poulain would have enjoyed seeing a beaten man lose his temper. "Bit of brandy, André?"

"But yes." Poulain seated himself. "You see how little one can depend on natives. One of your crew blabbed, which is why a cutter was watching that island and caught the Soudanese when they went back to get the cartridges you buried."

Baylor's lips thinned a bit. "So my crew blabbed, eh?"

His men had offered to provision the *Mulouk*, by getting contributions from their relatives; they proposed looting *sambuks* bound for the Arab coast until Baylor could make a fresh stake, and thought him a bit eccentric for refusing.

Poulain leaned closer, jabbed a pudgy finger at Baylor's chest. "Now you see the evil of lowering white prestige by hobnobbing with natives. But to show you there is no grudge, I and several others will lend you money for a fresh start. As an honorable trader, you understand. With Arab skippers to make deliveries, *comme il faut*. You will then be one of us, *hein?*"

"I'm afraid I would," Baylor dryly admitted. "Let me get this straight. You want to stake me—"

"So we," Poulain cut in, "can all participate in your connections with Shaykh Ismail, the one man who is giving the Italians the most trouble."

BAYLOR had not been smiling for some moments. "The real point is that you want to show other wise guys how you can make independents say uncle, huh?"

"Resentment makes you unkind, *monsieur*. Though your conversion would . . . ah . . . establish a worthwhile precedent. Your example has undermined a tradition."

"You'll take the *Mulouk* for security, I guess?"

"Of course." Poulain put his hands on the table and beamed.

The boys could take a nice profit on a hi-jacked shipment, foreclose on the *"Four Kings,"* and be certain that Baylor would not be able to stage a come-back. He was no longer homesick when he rose and said, "Nuts for you, André! I'm taking a fall out of your syndicate if it's the last thing I do! So help me God, I'll give you fellows some competition that is competition! Shaykh Ismail's the most powerful caravan master on the Tajura side and he'll stick with me. How do you like that?"

Poulain's face changed. The chatter of the arcade had ceased, and there was no longer any tinkling of ice in glasses. The glare of a phonograph and a drunken woman's laughter jarred in the sudden silence of munitions-conscious Djibouti. No one noticed when His Excellency, the Governor, stalked in, lean and sour faced.

"You're crazy!" Poulain stuttered. "You fool!"

He would have waddled away, but an Arab's sudden arrival from the gloom and into the lighted arcade startled him as well as Baylor. The newcomer wore a white robe whose length suggested the trailing garment of pride, and his hawk face made this pretentious apparel seemly. But it was his voice that made Poulain stand there, blinking.

"Sahib," the Arab said to Baylor, "my grandfather, Shaykh Ismail, sends greetings and the peace. Is it not written, 'Verily, the future shall be better than the past; thy lord hath not forgotten thee, and thou shalt be satisfied'?"

"The *shaykh* hasn't—my messenger hasn't had time," Baylor fumbled.

Ismail's grandson smiled. "Messengers are not needed. The *shaykh's* friends are his ears and his eyes." He clapped his hands, thrice. By now everyone, including the governor, was watching. "Abbas! Saoud! Maqsoud! Ali!"

As he called the names, Dankali porters filed from the gloom. Each had a bag balanced on his head. The Arab gestured. "There is silver. More than the perjurers and the spoilers have taken from you. And my grandfather will see you at the place agreed."

Without a further word, he turned and his robe trailed after him.

IV

AN ARAB had publicly slapped the syndicate's face. Baylor could feel the indignation of the café crowd as he left. Whispers raced from door to door. The porters at his heels were silent. There was only the padding of their bare feet, in the dust, and the *chink-chink-chink* of Maria Theresa dollars in the leather bags they carried on their heads. Baylor coughed and said aloud: "Who the hell said I didn't have friends?"

But sober reflection, once he reached the *Mulouk* with his heap of silver, cooled him a little. He was not sure whether friendship or pride had intervened. Shaykh Ismail had put him on the spot with needless flash. The loan could have been sent quietly and secretly.

The warning lights of Maskali and Moucha winked across the dark water, five miles away. *Dhows* and *sambuks* rolled lazily in the swell; someone was grinding spices, and the tang of ginger for a moment conquered the odor of fish oil and waterfront rankness.

Sometimes the glow of a tin stove silhouetted a raking mast and the shrouds of an Arab freight boat; the lapping of black water under the piling was broken by the soft splash of a paddle. Dugouts slipped silently among that tangle of shipping, and the muttering and laughter from boats anchored further out had a furtive quality. All Djibouti now knew that Baylor had six bags of dollars.

Poulain could not forgive this, and neither would the governor.

Then the crew of the *Mulouk* returned. Rumor had brought them from the native quarter. Being Moslems by little more than courtesy, they were full of maize beer. Musa, reeling grandly toward the pier, was improvising a chant. After each new verse, the crew chimed in with the old chorus, giving the mate a chance to compose another rhyme.

Some had been fighting, some gambling. Fresh knife slashes and handfuls of plunder proved that. When Musa fumbled for a verse, Baylor cut in, "Pipe down, all of you. We're sailing in the morning." He glanced from face to face, and missed a certain acre of ivory. "Where's Selim?"

Musa hastily explained, "His grandfather is dying."

That meant that Selim was too drunk to be carried. No one for a moment thought that the *nakhoda* believed the story, but they were all pleased when he gravely said, "May Allah be well pleased with the old man."

In the cool of the following morning—that is, while the thermometer still lingered within sight of ninety—the *Mulouk* made way for Obok. There was the usual escort, the usual confiscation of the papers, the usual convoy past the uttermost limit of French territory; and then the hot wind, the fight with the treacherous currents that swirled from the Red Sea, and through the Gate of Tears.

"We're going to have fun this time," Baylor told himself, as he stood on the blistering poop. "The whole damn coast guard's going to be laying for this trip."

He knew every inlet on the Tajura side, including a few which Shaykh Ismail claimed had not been spotted by patrols. There were some which were guarded by shifting sand bars; conditions, varying from day to day, made them dangerous to approach, except by a *nakhoda* who was kept posted by the natives. And at night, the patrols were more cautious than zealous.

flare, properly placed on a hidden reef, would trick a boat to the rocks instead of guiding it to a smuggler's rendezvous.

There would be no casualties other than wet feet and an unpleasant night. Baylor considered that device, and weighed it against sending a man out in a *pirogue,* to meet Shaykh Ismail and tell him to move his caravan to another landing place.

Though the crew was not worried, Baylor felt very much alone and unable to share their confidence. And the weight of Shaykh Ismail's loan bent his shoulders. The old Arab had forced the issue between Baylor and Poulain; had himself challenged the "white *nakhoda*" to prove himself before Djibouti and the Somali Coast.

Late that afternoon, when the black crags of the Mabla turned into forbidding purple, Baylor had the cook fan his fire, and feed it with butter and fish oil. Knife blades were thrust into the smoke, and when they were black with soot, they were washed in oil. The sail was then soaked with this improvised paint.

The men grinned as they caught the point. "*Wallah,* here is canvas that no eye can see by night!"

BLACK and silent, the *Molouk* slipped back into the Gulf, that night. A man paddled ashore in the *pirogue,* landing a mile or two short of Khor Ali. Baylor scanned the gloom with his night glasses. A high-powered motorboat could come from distant cover and nail him before he could begin to dump his heavy cargo overboard. The rifles, twenty in crate, made coffin sized parcels weighing two hundred pounds; and there were ten such, and twice as many cases of cartridges.

He had been fined and warned. A second offense would get him a "light" sentence of six months or more in Djibouti's jail. For a white man, that was capital punishment on the installment plan.

Baylor started every time that a skate flopped up out of the water in front of the *Mulouk's* bow. The breeze was now cool, but he dripped with sweat, just from watching the telltale phosphorescence of the wake. There was no antidote for that.

A crunching sound, and a shudder made him yell, "All hands forward!"

He bounded from the poop, and stumbled headlong among the crew. The combined weights made her nose down, and she slipped clear of the reef. Trembling, Baylor resumed his station. "Dump some ballast over, but take it easy!"

In the calm of the gulf, she could ride lighter than in the currents of the Gate of Tears. Then he sighed, and grinned at the low hanging stars. A fast moving launch, loaded with *askaris,* would have fouled on that treacherous ledge. When the wind hauled around, Musa whispered, "I smell camels, *ammi.*"

Baylor caught the scent, and blessed the stench of the snaky eyed beasts. Shaykh Ismail was on time.

Habeeb, at the bulwark, caught Baylor's arm, and cried, "The flare! Ghassim's made it!"

THE smoky flame, a mile or more off the starboard quarter, revealed a low lying bit of rock whose ends rose to shape an elongated crescent; it had somewhat the outline of a *sambuk.* The illusion was better than Baylor had expected. Anyone hurrying to board that non-existent boat was in for a wet surprse on the reef!

A rifle crackled, somewhere ashore. Three evenly spaced shots. Ghassim, after lighting the beacon signal, had now faked the prearranged answer that Shaykh Ismail would have made, had he not been warned. The *Mulouk* hauled for the shore, with Habeeb paying out the lead. Baylor took the tiller bar, and Musa craned his neck over the bow.

This was the most dangerous part of the trip, that last mile and a half. But the white *nakhoda* was content. The false flare had not brought a patrol boat from the lee of a cape. One ticklish moment. The *Mulouk* grazed the edge of the narrow passage, and then slipped into the lagoon.

Later, as the crew waded ashore, each pair carrying a case of rifles between them, Baylor said to Shaykh Ismail, "All that

trouble for nothing! Poulain must have figured I'd be too worried to try the hard way."

The old Arab fingered the silver hilt of his *jambia*. "When I saw how low the tide was, I wondered if Allah would guard you."

Baylor chuckled. "Allah was guarding your advance payment is what I'd call it."

There was no pause for coffee. The *shaykh* said, "This is not over. It is starting. Now that you have beaten Poulain, it would be wise to make peace with him."

Ismail's prudence was no more to be questioned than his courage.

"Let Arab *nakhodas* haul the cargo?"

"Part of the time, my friend. That would make my enemies sleep more by night."

As he went back to the *Mulouk*, Baylor pondered that advice. In underselling the other traders of Djibouti, he was arousing more than Poulain's resentment; there seemed to be caravan masters who were not pleased with Ismail's rush of business.

The old *shaykh* had widespread connections: a wife in Tajura, one back in the Mabla, one in Hodeidah, and another on the Hadraumaut coast of Arabia. Though each alliance with a powerful local chief strengthened Ismail's position, his in-laws did have their limits.

V

WHEN Baylor reached Djibouti the following morning, he had earned the balance that was in the bank. The town was abuzz. But Poulain was too courtly, and his bow too ceremonious. For the first time, the Italian consul, who had his private thoughts on gun runners and French business methods, was taking an *apéritif* with Poulain.

"Be pleased to join us, *signore,*" the consul said, and the fat Frenchman rose to second the invitation. "Do us the honor, *monsieur.*"

Baylor rubbed his palms together, but his smile was a false front. He did not like this amiability. "I'd be delighted, if the governor joined. All the distinguished people in town, then, at one table."

The consul chuckled, and returned the compliment. Poulain went on, "*Dis-donc, monsieur.* A jest is a jest. We have laughed, and you have, and it is even, not so "

Baylor seated himself. "Where does Signore Vaccaro come in?"

This improbable alliance was baiting him. Shaykh Ismail's warning kept prodding the white *nakhoda*. Vaccaro's dreamy eyes and the unnatural placidity of his sharp face puzzled Baylor.

"It is this way, *mon ami.*" Poulain gestured toward the consul. "Your activities—this guns for Ethiopia business—have played the devil back home. The cables are hot."

"What would you anticipate?" Vaccaro cut in, mildly defensive. "Your guns cost us a lot of soldiers in the mountains."

"Let's have the payoff." Baylor fingered his *Amer Picon,* and made a wry face; the boy had added too much citron syrup. "Before we kiss each other on both cheeks, ring around the rosy."

There was an appreciative laugh. Vaccaro said, "Boy, another drink for Signore Baylor." He struck a match for the Texan's cigarette. "It is this, my dear sir. To avoid unfriendliness between our governments, it is suggested that the usual arms trade continue. But let the guns go to Hadramaut. For actual delivery there, and no slipping back to Africa."

"Or any other British sphere of influence in Arabia," Poulain elaborated.

"I don't like Arabia," Baylor contended, for while he had connections in Hadramaut, they were not equal to absorbing all the guns he could deliver; business went by friendship and kinship.

"You wouldn't want a complete embargo on guns, would you?"

A protesting Italian government might get just that concession.

"You're a—ah—yes, what you call the stormy petrel, *monsieur.*" Poulain's smile was cloying. "But you do have Shaykh Ismail's friendship. Suppose then that we give you a subsidy. To go pearl fishing for a few months? We'll make it worth your while to forget Ethiopia for a while."

Baylor was not sure that he saw what was behind this compromise.

"And a load of guns," Vaccaro said. "Trading them for pearls, in the Farsan Islands. You will be back before the British wake up."

Baylor's smile was bleak. "I'd have papers for fishing. An Italian cruiser finds me too close to Eritrea, and won't believe me when I say that the cartridges are anchovies. Nuh-uh, *signore!*"

Vaccaro looked pained, somewhat in the resigned expression of a Byzantine ikon. His dark eyes and long nose and black hair made the resemblance convincing enough. "A gentleman's agreement, *signore.* You have no connections in Eritrea. No one could believe you'd blunder out with a full cargo and wait to find a buyer. This is no trap."

The bait smelled, but Baylor decided to snap it, and run away with line, pole, and fisher to boot. Why not "retire" for a few months?

"Sold! As soon as I can load up."

They huddled over the table to handle the arithmetic. Poulain and Vaccaro all but kissed Balor's both cheeks when he rose to set out and assemble his crew. If the strange allies thought they could give their goods away and still keep them, that was their lookout. If they meant for him to take a legitimate profit at their expense, well and good.

THE *Mulouk* was ready to clear that afternoon. Poulain patted Baylor's shoulder. "When we can squeeze a smart fellow, we buy him out. You've caused us a lot of trouble, but there's no grudge. Maybe, later, when you see that our hearts are right, you'll join us, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Before Baylor could answer, he heard a shout. Selim, supposedly still at his grandfather's deathbed, came on a run toward the dock. The crew was getting ready to cast off. Men were pulling on the lines, and the yard was slowly rising.

Baylor turned toward the reeling Dankali. Selim's spade feet tangled, and he tripped, sliding across the dock.

"Master," he coughed, "do not go!"

Poulain's face changed. Selim clambered to his feet. He was sober enough, though his rolling eyes were bloodshot, and his hair was full of chaff and sheep's dung. He reeked of stale beer.

"Why not? We came near leaving you here," Baylor dryly observed. "To mourn for your grandfather, may Allah be pleased with him."

The men at the lines ceased hauling. Musa leaped ashore to cuff Selim's ears, which stood out like sugar bowl handles. Selim ducked and made use of his new breath.

"The Italian consul—the father of pigs—he has telegraphed—to Ethiopia—to tell—which pass—Shaykh Ismail takes—"

Baylor caught Selim's shoulder. "What? How do you know?"

Poulain gulped. "*Tenez,*" he protested. "This is false—"

"Huh?" Baylor whirled on him. "How do you know?"

Musa drew a blade two inches wide and a foot long. Poulian yelled and ran. His cork helmet rolled in the dust, but the fat Frenchman risked sunstroke rather than retrieve it. No one was chasing him, for Musa had turned to Selim, demanding details.

Baylor missed a lot of it in the sputter of Dankali; but the substance was that the wife of Vaccaro's steward had told the wife of one Mahmud Idris, and she had told Selim.

"If Mahmud Idris hears about his wife being at your grandfather's funeral," Baylor cut it, "you'd better feed yourself to the sharks and get it over with quicker."

Poulain's flight was what clinched the fuzzy-witted Dankali's story. Musa asked, "*Ammi,* what shall we do now? Shaykh Ismail and his men will be ambushed by the Italians. Some spy has learned his route."

This question had no ready answer. Only one thing was plain. Poulain had teamed up with Vaccaro to sacrifice Shaykh Ismail; at one move, silencing the increasing Italian clamor, and laying Bay-

lor open to vengeance along the entire coast.

Too many natives had seen the three-cornered huddle in the arcade of the hotel. No one would believe that Baylor had not betrayed his best customer, to win a stake large enough for retirement. There was no corner of northeast Africa secret enough to hide Baylor from native vengeance. A *shaykh* with four widely separated wives has hundreds of in-laws, and these were clannish people.

"We can kill Vaccaro and the pig-man," Musa suggested.

This hint was savory but not practical. Baylor said, "First we've got to warn Shaykh Ismail."

Musa gaped. He could not find a word large enough for this impossibility. Baylor had no time to wait. It took him two hours to find a motor launch; there was no chartering it, so he bought it outright, and gave the *Mulouk* as security.

"How about the cargo?" he demanded. "That's worth—"

The owner of the boat sadly shook his head. "Open the cases of guns, *monsieur*. If they are not full of scrap iron, then perhaps—"

But for Selim's bawdy companions, the fraud would not have been discovered until Baylor was half way up the Red Sea, his departure damning him as a double-dealer. All he took from the *Mulouk* was provisions, rifles registered as part of the boat's equipment, and a few bandoliers of cartridges.

With eight Danakil seamen huddled in the launch, Baylor set out across the gulf, and this time, not for Obok.

"Shaykh Ismail will be past Tajura, *ammi*," Musa shouted above the sputter of the engine. "Head for Ghubbet Kharab, and then we'll march to Lake Assal. We'll meet him there, *inshallah*."

"If God so pleases"—the words now sounded more like a prayer than any dozen recitals of the *fatah*. But there was no other way than to hurry in a fast boat to the extreme western end of the Gulf of Tajura, and then march north, into the heart of the Dankali country. And there was a chance of cutting Shaykh Ismail's trail, or even intercepting him; for a caravan moves slowly, and his had started from a headland near the mouth of the gulf. Baylor's proposed shortcut might overcome Shaykh Ismail's earlier start.

VI

IF BAYLOR failed to meet Shaykh Ismail in the heart of the forbidden hinterland, he could not retreat in time to outrace the news of his supposed treachery. In the Dankali interior, vengeance would cut him down without parley.

Ghubbet Kharab, at the western extremity of the gulf, was an oval basin that spread north and south from the narrow mouth that was its only approach by water. Black peaks cut off the wind. Nothing grew along the rocky shore, though higher up scrubby mimosa made patches of olive gray. And in the center of this, hemmed in by volcanic ruin were two small islands, sulphur yellow from the mineral which subterranean explosions had poured out. The men said that demons haunted the basin whose name meant, "Mouth of Hell."

After beaching the launch, Baylor led the ascent, but presently Musa squeezed past him to take the lead. The light was failing rapidly. There was no sound except the breathing of the men who scrambled from one ragged tongue to the next.

Wind-blown branches of mimosa tore Baylor's hands, despite Musa's efforts to feel out and throw aside these thorny obstacles. Sometimes a dislodged chunk of lava clattered down. Half way up, Musa looked back, and muttered, "Over there, *ammi*. To the south."

The further rim was edged with sullen red. Against it, Baylor could distinguish black shapes, boldly outlined.

"Issas!" The Danakil named their traditional enemies of the south shore of the gulf; for generations, neither ever skipped a chance to murder and mutilate a member of the other tribe.

Baylor could scarcely doubt that herd guards had witnessed his approach to the neutral zone in which prowlers of tribes lurked to bushwhack an enemy. The gleam of lance heads and the brass bosses of hippo-hide shields hinted that the Issas had no rifles; they would enjoy a chance at Baylor's Danakil. An ambush could compensate for lack of firearms.

When he cleared the crest, and crouched on the northern rim, Baylor looked down on the plateau, and the waters of Lake Assal, some ten miles away.

The distance was an expanse of mauve colored pumice, of lava and volcanic mud, dotted with thorny mimosa. The breeze brought the rank odor of jackals and leopards, and far off he caught a glimpse of gazelles racing away in alarm.

The lake still glowed in the slanting rays from a distant pass. Salt gleamed along its shore, and black cones of lava framed it. Baylor unlimbered his glasses, and scanned the northern horizon, shifting his gaze slowly eastward, toward Tajura.

"Do you see him?" Musa whispered.

"Not a camel." Baylor spat at the rocks. "If we'd been half a hour earlier—but it's getting too damn dark!"

There was only a moment or two of twilight. Now that the sun had dropped below the lowest of the passes that led to Ethiopia, there was no gradual darkening. Lake Assal was now a black opal, the only detail that he could pick out, except for jagged peaks still distinct against the sky.

Hunting a caravan in that waste was a fool's task. The snarl of a leopard brought that home to Baylor. There were furtive scurryings in the gloom. The thirsty Danakil gathered closer about him. A leather water jug passed from hand to hand. No one spoke. When the intermittent gurgling at the neck of the jug had ceased, the men took *dourra* cakes from pouches at their belts. Baylor said, "I'm going ahead."

Musa was at his heels as he picked his way over the sharp lava; it bit into his sandals, and jagged tongues nicked his ankles when they turned. The men said, "*Wallah,* we are going too."

This was once when he did not have to tell them not to sing. They were listening for the first sound of the caravan they hoped to meet.

It would take the better part of the night to reach Lake Assal, and perhaps longer. Crevasses gaped in the lava floor; crazily twisted outcroppings formed invisible barriers, some waist high, some to strike a man's shins. Musa's muttered warnings and changes of direction often caught Baylor off guard.

Something white and ball-shaped made a blur in the gloom. Baylor stretched his stride to catch up with Musa. The Dankali said, "Rakhmat Daoud." It was the white-washed tomb of some local saint, "David-Who-Has-Won-The-Mercy-of-Allah."

A holy man is usually buried on the spot where he dies; and others, less saintly, are often carried miles from their homes to get a grave near that one of Allah's friends. There were markers which showed that half a dozen natives had been carried out to this lonely spot, which in all probability had once been on a caravan route.

Baylor had not counted on this. "Wait a minute," he said, and took his flashlight from his belt. "Let's see if camels have gone by here."

He played the beam close to the ground about the cairns that surrounded the saint's tomb.There were no fresh camel droppings, no tufts of hair on the rocks that edged the east and west trail which Baylor found. Then Selim yelled, "The light!"

A BULLET whisked past. The smack of a high-powered rifle drowned the whine and screech of two succeeding shots. Chips of stone stung Baylor's face as he dropped, and a fusillade crackled from the left rear.

He rolled toward the saint's tomb. The Danakil began blazing away at the spurts of flame that made a rough crescent in the gloom. "Cut it out!" he yelled. "You can't hit a thing that way!"

Musa wriggled over toward Baylor and said, "They sound like Issas, but they don't act right."

"No Issa ever wasted bullets that way!"

Cartridges were too valuable. Like their Dankali enemies, they would have waited until daylight for careful sniping. And there was another significent feature: the lurking gunners all used rifles of the same caliber. There were no coughing muzzle-loaders, nor the mixture of Gras and Lebel and Lee-Metfords that would enter into a party made up of tribesmen. There was just the clean, sharp crack of Mausers.

"Someone has prepared this for us."

"Poulain," was Baylor's guess. "Nobody else'd waste shells to keep us bottled up. It's someone who knows how we're armed, and they don't want to close in."

His flashlight had no more than precipitated the inevitable tangle. Now that the first fusillade had subsided, Baylor heard the mutter of men, and the approach of others; some had come on the run. Selim crawled toward the tomb and said, "Some on the other side now. Some working around toward the lake."

Musa's solution was, "I can slip through, alone. To Tajura, and get help."

But there was no time to be lost in getting reinforcements from Tajura. "Grab this light and wait inside."

He nudged the Dankali into the tomb, and crept out into the open. His white cape drew a few shots until a dip in the rock sheltered him. He found Habeeb, crouching behind a grave marker, and explained his plan.

The word was passed along. When it reached the last man, Baylor worked his way back to the tomb. One by one, the crew crept after him. Occassional shots punctuated this stealthy concentration, but no one was touched except by chips of flying lava.

When they were all huddled under the sun-dried brick cupola, he said, "These Issas are out of their territory. The first Dankali goatherder that comes within a couple miles of here in the morning will pass the word along, and they'll smell hell."

"*Wallah,* that is true. We are not afraid."

"It is safe enough here," Musa observed. "We can shoot better by day."

That being their temper, Baylor said, "It takes only one man to find Shaykh Ismail's caravan But we can't wait until morning. So cut a hole in the roof. One of you can point the flashlight down. To pick them out from behind the rocks that protect them from fire at ground level."

"But how'll we shoot?"

"Easy," Baylor explained. "Cut some holes in the wall, too. A couple of you bend over and make a table for the man with the light. Two more hold up a man with a gun. The odd man stays on the ground, ready to pop those that jump up and scatter when they get light and slugs reaching from above."

"*Wallah,* that is easy," the Danakil agreed, and set to work with their heavy knives.

When the loopholes had been cut, Baylor said, "While you're blazing away, I'll run out. They won't see me for popping shots at the walls and trying to duck the flashlight. And when these Issas have to leave in the morning, you can follow my trail."

They thought he was crazy; they pointed out that trying to go through the criss-cross fire that would converge on the conspicuous white tomb would be fatal. But he talked them down. When Musa insisted on going with him, he said, "You've got to stay to keep the show running. Maybe I don't know the country, but once the moon comes up, I can head for Assal."

Half an hour passed. Those who acted as a human scaffold changed places with those who plied their knives.

"*Ammi,*" said Musa, when all was ready, "when we get home, we will keep your enemies from blackening your face. By Allah, we will require your life of that pig-man and the Italian too."

Baylor grinned bleakly and caught the Dankali's hand. "Wait till I'm dead before you declare open season."

He crept to the door, and slowly worked his way to the first grave marker. He reached the second without being observed. That was the limit; only a dozen yards,

ut each one counted. Then he skimmed a it of lava into the dark mouth of the omb. That opened the show.

The shifting flashlight and two crack- ing rifles sprayed three quarters of a ircle. Baylor bounded to the next dip, nobserved. The spurts of fire from the urrounding ledges revealed a wide gap in he cordon. He bounded toward it.

Then lead *zinged* past him. He rolled lown a brisk incline armed with lava ongues. Before he recovered, his ribs and egs and back were slashed as badly as his andals.

But the ripping volleys hid the noise of is scrambling. In another moment he had he shooting behind him, and there was no ursuit.

At first he thought that blood was pour- ig down his leg. He wondered how he ould move with such a wound. Then he earned that his leather canteen had been orn in the rush. He sucked the last drops rom the flattened container. The nearest vater was Lake Assal, and that was salt.

The firing did not cease. His momentary ismay numbed him to the significance of he yelling that now came from every quarter. He ran a dozen yards, and fell ver the lip of a small blow hole in the ava. Looking up, he saw camels silhouetted gainst a rise. They raced crazily over a idge and fanned out about the besiegers.

White turbans bobbed in the gloom, and urved swords made silver tongues in the larkness. The riders had come up the ld trail that led from Tajura. Danakil spearmen rushed with the rifle-armed Arabs vho led the attack.

As Baylor scrambled out of the crater, he rising moon began to thin the shadows. His own men were running from cover, and joining the line that swept along, entered on the one who remained mounted on his camel: Shaykh Ismail was on the ob, and Musa came running to meet Baylor.

THE surprise party ended along the rimrock of Gubbet Kharab. Only a few of the Issas escaped. The only prisoner taken was a white man. André Poulain had made poor progress in following his raiders.

Musa played the flashlight full on the prisoner's face. Poulain was not sure that he had as much as another minute to live, and he could not find the words to ask for a chance. Then Baylor intervened and said to Shaykh Ismail, "My prisoner!" Without waiting for an answer, he addressed Musa: "This man's life is on your head. Help him to our boat, and do not let him fall down the cliff."

Ismail stood there, stroking his beard. When the crew had bundled Poulain over the edge, the old Arab said, "That makes it easier for me. With my men knowing that he tried to sell us to the frontier guards—"

"Huh? How did you know? I came over to tell you—"

Ismail almost laughed. "Thirty years ago, when I was your age, I might not have wondered what Poulain would do when I sent you that loan. As it was, when I got the guns, I kept my caravan waiting, back there. Until I found how things would work out."

Baylor felt foolish. "I might know you can take care of yourself!"

The mirth had now left the old Arab's eyes, and he said, "I am glad to learn what you do when you think a friend is in danger. Some day, Allah will add wisdom to honor."

Later, Baylor's descent was guided by a brush fire at the edge of the basin, far below. As the launch shoved off, he said to Poulain, "Now that you're retiring from the arms business, I'll handle your affairs for you, in Djibouti."

Poulain's courage was reviving: "What? Is it that you are trying to blackmail me? Listen! I did not try to have you killed. I came personally, to see that those Issas just kept you from marching on. They could have rushed you, but I wouldn't let them. You can't prove—"

Baylor cut in, "The native mind is too simple to bother with proof. By tomorrow the whole coast will know what you planned

for Shaykh Ismail. So if you don't leave town in a hurry, there'll be arsenic in your groceries, or a knife in your ribs."

Baylor stopped and smiled.

Poulain's jaw sagged as he began to realize the full significances of the night's upsets. Baylor went on, "All you have to do is tell your buddies of the syndicate that I'm taking your place. That I'm hiring *nakhodas* to make deliveries to caravans instead of doing that myself. In other words, since I don't care to go entirely native, I'll go ethical, as you fellows always wanted me to."

That clinched it. And when the lights of Djibouti began to wink from the southern shore of the gulf, Baylor settled back to tally up the score. Now that he had proved himself, he could make peace with his former competitors, and there woud be more guns than ever for Ethiopia. To dress for dinner, and laugh at the Governor's stale jokes would now be amiability, not surrender.

Eight—Ball

KEEP the flies off your cue-ball, stranger. They're sure death.

Take the case of Louis Fox, who was pretty close to being top man in billiards back in 1865. Joint holder of the world's championship with John Deery, he was all prepared to clinch the title for himself on the fateful September seventh of that year.

The busy W. P. A. researchers have dug up the sad tale of what followed. Surrounded by happy, enthusiastic fans in Washington Hall, Rochester, Fox was in sight of victory when suddenly a fly lighted on his cue-ball. He chased it off; but as he was about to shoot, the fly was there again. Same business: but by this time he was nervous, mis-cued, and lost his shot. Taking advantage of the break, Deery rallied and won the championship.

Then the tragedy. Fox went completely jittery, rushed out of the hall, ran down to the river, jumped in and drowned.

Tarbell Mullally

Again the Kid saw Pop's contorted face instead of the ball —growing huge as it neared him

Ghost Ball

The story of a big-league heavy hitter who struck out because he saw the face of a dead man on each slow pitch—until he learned to swing at specters

By JAMES A. KIRCH

IT WAS the Kid's spot, all right. First and third loaded, two gone, and the Corsairs a pair of runs down to the Macons, closing the ninth. This was the one that would break the triple tie for first—the Corsairs, the Macons, and the Bengals. There'd be only two of them up there tomorrow. And it was up to Kid Weyman to decide which. He was in the hot seat, on this one.

And he loved it.

He grinned at Ace Hudman, hugging third. You didn't pull off the bag with Slacker out there heaving; not if you were smart, you didn't. You stayed on first, the way Teller was doing, or glued yourself to third, like Hudman. You just stood out there and waited for Kid Weyman to sock you home.

And the Kid shuffled his feet in the dirt, finding his stance. He heard, dimly, the roar of twenty thousand voices. Without thinking of it, without realizing what it meant, or was going to mean, he heard twenty thousand people shout, their hearts in their mouths.

He saw the motion of Slacker's arm on the first one; that was all. Just the swift, easy motion, with the follow through at the end that meant this one had hair on it. The old boy was fogging them through. Even now, in the ninth inning, he could sock them over the plate too fast to see.

The Kid let it go by, heard it crack into Willard's mitt, heard the umpire's "Strike one!" and grinned again. Hell, he'd known it was coming across the plate. He just couldn't find the damn thing.

He shrugged his shoulders, letting the muscles ripple down his broad back, watched Willard float the ball back to Slacker.

The next one missed the plate by inches, curving out. It was a "bite" ball, but Weyman didn't bite at it. One all.

He saw the curve on the next just a second too late to check the swing, and he hooked savagely, driving it foul into the stands. A white-haired figure pushed forward from his seat, his right snaking up like a flash to snare the ball, holding it. The crowd cheered again, and Weyman tipped his cap to the old man, grinning broadly.

Pop Davis could still snare them. Pop could still get a roar from the crowd, too. They hadn't forgotten the old boy who'd managed the Corsairs for twelve years, through seven pennants, before he'd retired. And the Kid hadn't forgotten the nervous little manager who'd given him his start and taught him half of what he knew about playing third.

He tipped his hat again, smiling to the old man, and then swung back to the batter's box. He whispered it to himself, so that even Willard, crouched behind the plate, missed it.

"Here's one for *you,* Pop." He was to remember that, later on.

Slacker played it wrong. Right at that spot, the old boy who'd been outsmarting the Corsairs all afternoon, outsmarted himself. One-and-two, he figured. The Kid'll be looking for a ball. He slipped the next one in, shoulder high, clipping the outside corner.

That is, he tried to slip it in.

The Kid saw it coming. The money ball. Right where he liked 'em. He loosened the dynamite in his shoulders, rolled it forward, slammed it against the whirling pill. He took it that way, hard, and felt the shock up to his forearms.

It was the ball game.

It cracked off his bat like a cannonball and zoomed over third. It cleared the left field stands before the outfielder had taken two steps. Not only that, it cleared them by a good six feet.

And the crowd went nuts.

The Kid said, aloud, jogging toward first, "How'd you like that one, Pop?" and high in the stands a white-haired old man suddenly stopped dancing, jerked his hands to his mouth, gasping in agony. His body twisted with the gasps, and then fell out flat across the stone flagging. A young man in a dark suit pushed through the crowd, forcing them back. He leaned over the old manager, then shook his head.

Just as the Kid crossed third, heading for home, Pop Davis stopped choking and lay very still.

THEY didn't tell him about it, right off. They let him grin his way through the crowd, toward his locker. They gave him a cheer in a clubhouse, and the Kid was too excited to notice there was anything tense about them. He got a glimpse of Fat Jim Teller standing alone in a corner of the locker room, his eyes dull and lifeless, but it didn't register, at first. None of it registered with the Kid until later. At first, he just laughed his way around the locker room, not knowing.

He never gussed he'd just killed Pop Davis.

Dick Manton told him, finally. Dick Manton, with the wise old eyes and the young face, who Pop himself had picked to handle the team, took him aside and let him have it. He tried to break it gently, but that was out of his line.

He said: "Pop Davis died this afternoon, Kid."

The Kid stood there staring at him, not getting it.

"His pumper was weak, you know, Kid. He was supposed to take it easy. He got sort of excited out there. And his heart blew apart on him."

The Kid felt the chill shoot up the middle of his back, burning like ice through the heat. He tried to speak and his lips froze up on him, not moving. He stood there, his lips tight, not saying anything. He got a mental picture of the old man snaring his foul in the stands, and then he knew it was a gag.

His voice was ugly. "A nice joke, Manton," he told the little manager. "A nice joke, that. Only it happens I saw Pop

Davis snake a foul of mine out of the air today." Even as he said it, he realized Manton wasn't kidding. Manton wouldn't rag about a thing like that.

The manager said, quietly, "He'd probably been working himself up to it all day, Kid. Straining his heart, out there on the field making every play himself, mentally. And then . . ." The Kid got it, this time.

He said it very softly "You mean when I pounded that last one out, you mean that's when he—" and Manton nodded. "You'd have seen the papers, anyhow, Kid," he said. "I figured I'd better tell you. We all feel badly about the old man, but it—"

The Kid wasn't listening to him. The fingers of his right hand were clenching and unclenching, the palms wet with sweat. His face was a dead mask. He looked at Manton as he said it, but he wasn't seeing Manton. He said:

"That means I killed him!"

He turned on his heel and walked out of the clubhouse, and they let him go. They knew how he felt; or thought they did. Nobody could have known, actually. Even Kid Weyman didn't realize it, then. He found out, later.

THE Corsairs had a two-day rest before their three-game final with the Bengals. Manton had arranged that early in the spring, and kept holding the dates open even when it meant playing doubleheaders in July and August. He'd figured the Bengals would be the team to beat, and that if he could bring his boys up to that series with the tenseness eased off, they'd be in. He'd figured right.

The Macons collapsed, losing two in a row, their morale shot by the loss to the Corsairs. That left Manton where he'd hoped to be, in a clean tie for first with the Bengals, and a three-game series to decide it in. He'd figured the boys would spend the two days resting, easing up, relaxing.

He'd never figured they'd spend it waiting for a funeral.

Fat Jim Teller was usually a life-of-the-party boy—a guy who could be counted on to shake the team out of the worst case of doldrums. But Fat Jim had been Pop's first-string catcher for five seasons. He sat in a chair in the hotel lobby, staring into space. Boyle, the first sacker, had come up in Pop's last year; but he looked as if he'd lost his best friend. Kane and Witter, two of the outfielders, were newcomers. They felt the tense shock of their teammates and did the only thing they could—kept away from them. But the rest of the team, right down the line, was shot.

Manton let them stay that way. He let them go through the funeral without trying to jab them out of it. Right up to the opening game of the Bengal series, he laid off. Then he gave them the works.

He aimed most of it at the Kid. He told them how he felt about Pop, and what his death meant to him. He told them how he'd feel if his brother were to drop dead tomorrow. He laid it on heavy, building it up. Then he paused, watching them.

"If it had been my brother, or anyone else, I'd be out there running this team today. And I'd be running it right, the way Pop would've expected me to. There was no sloppy baseball on Pop's teams. Let's not have any on this one."

They knew what he was doing, then. He was giving his team to Pop, giving the old man credit for it. And they came through.

Fat Jim pushed his heavy bulk from the locker bench and started talking, normally. He led off on the pre-game discussion of the Bengals' lineup. Barrows, the leadoff man for the Bengals, pulled them toward left. That meant Kane would have to be on his toes out there every time the little guy swung. If Witter pulled over a bit from center, that would give Kane a chance to play his man almost on the spot.

The young outfielders nodded. They'd remember it.

The discussion went on. Mel Dillard,

the Corsairs' twenty-game winner, was going to be in there heaving them across for number twenty-one. A long beanpole of a pitcher, whose fast ball had less smoke on it than Gomez at his peak, but could still ring the gong. And he had a change-of-pace ball that left the best of them standing at the plate, waiting for it. They didn't have to worry about Mel's pitching. Or Teller's catching.

With Boyle at first, Sandy Decker at second, Ace Hudman peppering up the short-stop spot, and Kid Weyman at third, they had the best defensive infield in the league.

And with Kane, Witter, and the big Southerner, Cal Trimmer, filling the outfield, the lineup had enough dynamite at the plate. Teller and the Kid for the heavy hitters, and the outfield averaging .284. The team had what it takes.

Manton was praying that they'd use it.

IT was cloudy for the opening game. A break for the Corsairs. With Dillard's fireball whizzing through against a dull background, they gave themselves the edge.

They'd forgotten, though, that the Bengals were hot; really hot. They'd pushed themselves into a tie for first with a nine-game winning streak, and they weren't cracking now. They played a sweet defensive game when they were hot.

They were pitching Steve Hansen, the big Swede with the fast ball and a tricky curve. And Steve was really smoking them over. He took four pitches to fan Ace Hudman, leadoff man for the Corsairs, in the last half of the first. The little shortstop trotted back to the dugout, his eyes wide.

"They've been feeding the guy heroin," he insisted. "They've been doping the guy, or something. You can't see the damn ball."

Trimmer saw it, though. He caught a slow one, with the count two and one, and belted it high into the air. Hansen came in himself and made the catch. That put Teller up.

The big catcher took his time getting into the batter's box. He took his time getting out of it, too. He argued for three minutes with Umpire Feltman about the third strike.

Three men up, three away. That was the first inning. It was the same dose Dillard had handed out in the top half. And Mel kept it up in the second.

In the Corsairs' half of the second frame, the Kid started off with a walk, without taking his bat from his shoulder. And the crowd began shifting restlessly, looking for excitement.

Kane gave it to them. He put one in the left field stands, not more than three inches past the foul line, on the wrong side. He sent another after it, in a straight line, a terrific wallop that had "hit" labeled all over it. And little Dink Alconi, the Bengals' center fielder, started running the minute it left the bat. He virtually pulled it out of the bleachers for the out.

That put the Kid on second. And he stayed there. Witter looked at two fast ones and ground the next to short. Boyle, the big first baseman, went down swinging. And slender Mel Dillard shook his head, grinning, and set the Bengals back on their heels without a good look at the ball in the third.

They went through the last half the same way, with Steve Hansen matching Mel ball for ball. But in the last of the fourth, the Corsairs snapped out of it.

Cal Trimmer, the lanky Southerner grinned as he picked up his heavy club. "Ah think ah'll belt one out theah," he told them. He moved toward the plate still grinning, walking with that swinging stride of his. And he parked the second pitch over second for a screaming single.

The infield drew in close, hoping for a double play, and Fat Jim Teller lumbered into the box.

He let the first pitch burn across, fast. He let the second one follow, cutting the corner at terrific speed. And he parked the third one over second, in the spot Trimmer had hit.

They were off.

The crowd knew they were off. This was the big inning, the traditional Corsairs' inning. None out, first and third filled. This was the spot. This was where the ball game started.

KID WEYMAN came up swinging two bats, tossing the light one aside, tipping his hat to the crowd.

Hansen caught him on the first one, an inside curve that got him just under the fingers. He was afraid of the Kid, but not too scared. Not enough to walk him, with Kane coming up next, followed by Witter. He wanted to get him, if possible.

The Kid didn't figure he would.

The second pitch was low, under the knees, almost biting into the dirt. The third clipped the inside corner, close. The Kid didn't like the umpire's "Strike!"

Then Miller, the Bengals' catcher, got smart. He figured the Kid would be waiting for a ball. And he tried to cross him. That had been tried before. The Kid saw it coming before it left Hansen's glove. The old money ball. Shoulder high, on the outside corner. He set himself for it, letting his muscles relax.

It came in that way, shoulder high, on the outside. The one the Kid had hammered over the fence three days before. The same one he'd belted when Pop Davis keeled over in the stands.

The Kid saw that, then. The same spot, the same ball—the ball that had killed Pop. He saw it even as he started to swing, ready to push it out.

And his nerves fell apart on him.

The ball seemed to come in like a balloon, swelling. And then the Kid didn't see a ball any more; he saw Pop's head coming toward him, growing so huge that he could see nothing else, the face contorted the way it must have looked the moment that Pop had died. That twisted face came on for an instant that lasted forever.

The Kid just stood there and let the ball go by. The palms of his hands were wet, cold, and the back of his knees felt as if someone had clipped them, hard.

He didn't hear Umpire Feltman's "Stri—ke Three—ee!" All he could think of was the look of Pop Davis' face, with the gasping mouth and the wide staring eyes.

The Kid was through.

He didn't realize it, right at first. He stood there at the plate, not moving, trying to wash that picture of Pop's face out of his mind, until Kane shoved him aside lightly, digging in at the plate. "I'll make up for it, Kid," the young outfielder told him.

And he did, in a way. He lifted one into deep center, a sacrifice fly, sending Trimmer across with the run, Teller holding first on the play. So the Corsairs were on the right end of a one-nothing score, going into the fifth inning.

They were still that way coming up for the seventh. With the Kid as leadoff man. The Kid trotted in from third, walking a little stiffly, a little tense. Manton caught him on the way to the plate. He was one wise lad, Manton was.

"It's like buck fever, Kid," he said, slowly. "You got to shake it, now. You got to shake it now, or you'll never shake it. Get in there and knock hell out of the damn thing."

The Kid said: "I guess you couldn't understand, even if I could explain it. It was like Pop was—" and Manton nodded. "Sure, Kid," he agreed, "Sure. Only you got to shake it, son."

The Kid stood there at the plate, feeling the tenseness in his muscles, trying to throw them loose. He heard Miller say, ribbing, "We got your number, Kid," and he stepped away from the plate, picked up a little dirt, rubbed his hands on his uniform, moved back in. His throat was dry, parched.

Hansen pumped his arm a few times, came right down with his fast one. Strike. The Kid was worried about that. He dug in at the plate, crouching a little. He took the next, an inside slant that drove him back from the box. The third one came in low, just above the knees, and he lashed

at it savagely, fouling it into the upper deck, behind the Bengal's dugout. One-and-two.

He heard Miller say, coldly, "This is it, Kid," and the ball floated in on him. It was a change of pace this time, a slow one that dragged its way through the air. Shoulder high, on the outside.

And he got the picture again. Pop Davis, floating in with the ball, gasping for breath. It floated past him, finishing him.

MANTON took him out in the eighth. When Miller, the Bengals' catcher, lashed a hard liner toward third and the Kid dove for it but didn't come up with it, the little manager knew it was no go. He slapped Pitlow, the utility infielder, in at third, and said his prayers.

And they took the game. It was Mel Dillard who took the game, wearing his arm out doing it. He fanned five in a row in the last two innings, and caught the third on a low rolling bunt toward first. He won the game, one-to-nothing, throwing his arm out.

The Kid said, once, to Manton on the bench, "Mel's killing himself out there, bearing down on every pitch. We can't use him for the final. He's working too hard." And Manton, without thinking, agreed. "He's afraid to let them hit it," he said slowly, as if to himself. "Mel's a smart boy. And the team's shot to hell. You can't have one of the key men in the infield blow apart without the other boys feeling it."

Manton hadn't meant to say it to the Kid, that way. But he went on with it, then. "You've got to shake it, Kid. Or you'll be licked in baseball."

The Kid nodded, not saying anything.

"You didn't kill the old man, Kid. You're not dumb enough to believe that. He had a heart attack when you smacked that homer. Okay, so Pop had a bad heart. The fact that he got excited when you delivered in the clutch doesn't mean that you killed him."

Weyman shook his head, scowling. "I know, Manton. But I can't forget it. Seems like everytime I get in that spot, every time they shoot a ball like that over to me, I see the old man again. I can't even swing at the damn thing. Maybe you're right—maybe I'm through in baseball."

He sat there, staring at the little manager, his face death-white. He said again, torturing himself with the thought, "Maybe I'm through in baseball." But it meant more to him than that. If Weyman was through in baseball, he was through in everything. You can make insurance men out of some of them, auto salesmen out of others—but you can't keep Tony Lazzeri from looking for a playing berth as long as he can stand on two feet and field on a dime. And you couldn't take Kid Weyman out of baseball and expect him to live. Some of them are built that way.

Connie Mack, Tony Lazzeri, Pop Davis. And the Kid.

Manton said, slowly, "When this game's over, Kid, you do me a favor. You're on wires now, high-tension wires. You go out and get plastered. Not just high—plastered. You won't play tomorrow. But, maybe, in the final game—" He stopped, not believing it himself.

They sat there watching Dillard tear his arm off the hinges, winning a three-hitter, one-to-nothing, not letting a man connect solidly with the apple.

And then the Kid went out and got plastered.

It wasn't any use. He'd known it wasn't going to work when he started. But Manton had suggested it, Manton had felt it might loosen the tension, snap him out of it. It didn't. It raised hell.

He met three sportswriters in the lobby of the hotel, weaving his way between the chairs. Little Joey Spellman, crack man on the Blade, took one look at him and dove for a phone

THE papers headlined it the next day Kid Weyman drunk in the middle of the crucial series. Kid Weyman, letting his team down in the clutch. The ugly stories

started. There were a dozen publicity hunters who swore it had happened before; that it was a regular habit with the Corsairs' third baseman. That explained his lousy showing in the game the day before, his being yanked in the eighth.

It went over big.

Manton might've killed it, if the sportswriters had trusted his motives. He did his best, but it wasn't enough. They knew Kid Weyman was big trade material, even if he was drinking himself out of the league, so long as the manager could keep it quiet. Nobody paid much attention to Manton.

And the Kid didn't say anything. He sat on the bench, next to Manton, through that second day, and watched the manager send out four pitchers to wind up on the short end of a twelve-eight scramble. Four pitchers. That was fine. That left nobody for the next day, unless Big Carl Hutter could pace himself over the last few innings. Carl took a slashing ground on his elbow in the top half of the ninth, and that was that. That was the pennant.

The boys knew it when they trooped back into the clubhouse, hot and discouraged. Witter, the young outfielder, stared at Weyman, his black eyes dark with anger. He was the one who said it, but they were all thinking it:

"A hell of a time you picked," he said, evenly. "A hell of a time to throw us down." He moved toward the Kid, his fingers curling in. And the Kid stood there taking it, not answering.

Manton moved into the doorway, getting the picture. He walked down the aisle slowly, his bright little eyes darting from one to another of the sullen figures. His voice was flat, cold:

"You read too many papers," he told them. "I'm running this team. Me. Dick Manton. And Weyman was following my orders. Get it? Following my orders."

They didn't believe him, of course. They weren't suckers. And they knew Manton had to keep the Kid's value up, to trade him off. It was a song-and-dance act, the old "his arm ain't sore" gag.

Witter said: "How about giving *me* some orders, Chief?" Manton glared.

"One more crack," the manager said softly, "and I'll bench you. I'll bench you tomorrow if I have to play the whole damn outfield myself." The funny part was, he meant it. And they shut up.

The Kid went up to his room and sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall. He heard a knock on the door, and Manton's low voice calling to him, but he didn't answer. He sat there on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall, not moving, not saying anything. At four a. m. he lay down on the bed, his clothes still on, and went to sleep. He dreamed of getting up there in the clutch with the bases loaded and his muscles freezing up on him, leaving him cold at the plate. "Strike three!" He heard that thirty times during the night. "Strike three!" Each time his bat rested on his shoulder, his muscles refusing to kick through on the pay ball. And Pop Davis' face sailed past him.

The picture stayed with him the next day. Right up to game time. Up to the locker room conference, when Mel Dillard, slim Mel Dillard who'd pitched his arm out two days before, asked Manton for the assignment.

"Hutter is out," the fireballer argued. "And the rest of the boys can't stop this crowd. They fattened 'em too much yesterday. When a tough bunch like the Bengals lick you all over the place one day, they don't have much respect for you the next. But I'll sit 'em back on their heels."

It was talk, and everybody knew it was talk. Dillard wouldn't sit anybody back on their heels. Maybe five or six innings of the game, sure. By pitching his heart out. But the rest of the time, they'd be getting to him. Still, it was the only gamble.

Manton nodded, forcing a grin. "You'll sit 'em back, all right, Mel." He ran through the lineup, stopping at third base, letting his sharp eyes jump toward Weyman.

The Kid sat on the edge of the bench, his eyes turned away.

Pitlow went in at third, batting in the eighth slot, the rest of the team moving up one, like the day before.

THE Kid stayed on the edge of the bench, away from Manton, and sweltered through the early innings. He saw the Corsairs pick up a one-run lead in the second, getting to a couple of Dugan's sinkers, and blow it in the fourth when Pitlow muffed a double-play ball. They scored again in the last of the fourth on a double by Fat Jim Teller and a clean single by Witter, but it wasn't enough.

Mel was tiring. His fireball was still coming in there about every sixth pitch, but the rest of them were change of pace balls and a wide curve. The fast one had lost its zip. And the Bengals were getting to him. They tied the game up in the first half of the fifth and pushed over two more runs in the sixth. Four to two.

The Kid saw how the infield was pulled over, favoring Pitlow, trying to cover his territory. That was the hole he'd left. He sat there, hating the game, knowing how it would go, but not able to walk out on it. He had to watch it. And he watched so closely he didn't see the girl until she moved in next to him on the bench.

He heard her say, "How does it feel to be out of baseball?" and he turned around and saw her dark eyes and soft black hair.

This was one time he could've done without Pop Davis' grand-daughter. He stared at her a minute, remembering. She'd been the team mascot, under Pop. The girl who knew more baseball than some of the players. But, more important, she knew people. He wouldn't have expected a riding like this—not from her.

He drew his eyes away from her, looking out over the diamond, and he heard her say, again, "How does it feel to be out of baseball?" Nice, that.

He said, savagely, "Like hell!" and hoped she'd get sore and move on. He could see the shadow as she nodded her head. He wasn't watching her, but the shadow fell out on the ground before him and he could see her head bob up and down. Her voice was quiet.

"That's how Pop felt," she said.

He swiveled in the seat, turning toward her, his eyes hard. She was half-smiling at him, but her smile wasn't the kidding sort.

He sat there, watching her.

Her cool voice cut through the dry air. "He should have been in bed, in the hospital. His heart was too bad for him to walk around with, much less see baseball games. They told him that. And he said they could take him away from baseball, all right—when they buried him. That's how Pop felt about it." She hesitated, waiting, but he didn't say anything.

"You've been blaming yourself for Pop's death," she told him, flatly, and when he shook his head she went on, insisting. "Every time you get in a tough spot, you remember that it was your homer that over-strained him. You keep worrying about that. You're a jackass." She said the last part very calmly.

The Kid was beginning to get it. He was still tense, keyed up, but he was getting it, now. He said, "It's just that I keep seeing him that way, when the ball comes over the plate. I can't forget that."

The girl nodded. "That's right," she told him. "You can't forget that. You can't forget that Pop went out watching the game he loved best, when his team had come through in the clutch. And one of his own boys had done it." Her voice grew almost bitter. "I suppose," she suggested, "you'd rather he'd spent weeks in the hospital, dying slowly, wondering whether they were still playing ball, with nobody to give him the scores because the doctors would be afraid of the excitement. I suppose that's what you'd rather have happen to *you.*"

"No," the Kid said softly. "No. I wouldn't want that." He was watching the girl, his eyes on her, away from the game. He didn't even realize that Mel had held them, or that it was the top half of the ninth. But the game was going on, without him.

FATS TELLER was leading off, digging in at the plate. And Dugan was slipping. Not much, not enough to throw the game, but a little. He came down with his fast one across the inside corner, for a strike. He came down again with one, tight inside, and Fats danced away from it. One-and-one. The next one started nicely, right over the center of the plate with a short curve. It landed in short right field, Teller pulling up at first.

And the crowd started shifting around in their seats. This was the game. The chips were down. And Dugan knew it.

Teller was leading off first, the first baseman holding the inside corner. And Kane came up slowly, moving into the batter's box. He stepped out again, stood there whaling that bat around, waiting for Dugan to rub up the ball a bit. Then he stepped back in.

Dugan pumped once, twice, shot the ball in there. Strike.

He was working harder, now. This was his game, and he wanted it. A two-run lead and only three men to go. He cut the inside corner with a curve ball, just under the fingers, for strike two. And Kane parked the next one over first for a clean single, Teller puffing his way to third.

That put it up to Boyle, the big first sacker.

The crowd roared as the big fellow moved toward the plate, hunching his shoulders forward, ready for his crouch. And then they stopped roaring.

Dugan was leaving the game, waved to the showers. And Steve Hansen, the speedballer, was coming in from the bullpen.

Hansen threw a few pitches, getting the feel of the mound, and then nodded. And Boyle didn't even see the first two. They smoked past him like bullets. He caught the third, a change-of-pace ball, and fouled it high into the net. And he took the third strike standing there, not swinging.

The crowd was shouting now, giving Steve a hand one minute and begging Decker to "Murder one" the next. And the little second baseman did his best. He sent a bounding ball down to third, the crowd holding its breath. The third sacker went to his left, came up with it, snapped it to second for the force. Teller held third.

It was the ball game. Teller on third, Decker on first with the tying run. And Pitlow, a .212 hitter, coming up. Manton waved him away, called down the bench, throwing Bob Lurcot in to pinch hit. Only Lurcot was a rookie.

The girl said, "Pop would've wanted to win this one. I'm glad he didn't live to see it," and the Kid tore his eyes from her, looking out over the field.

The tying runs on, two gone, the last half of the ninth. This was his spot. And Bob Lurcot was going out to try his luck.

The Kid said, "Pop wouldn't have liked it, would he?" and pushed himself to his feet, forcing himself down toward Manton. He cut forward, in front of Lurcot, reached out to take the bat.

The Kid didn't say anything. He just stood there, holding the bat in his hands, his eyes on the manager. He had to have this one.

Manton stared at him, looked down toward the girl, then back at the Kid. His eyes were suddenly bright. He nodded.

"Knock the holy hell out of it, Kid."

THE crowd didn't like it. They didn't like anything about a man who got plastered the night before a deciding game and threw his team to the dogs. And they let the Kid know it. They gave him the works, everything they had. And that baseball mob had plenty.

Miller, straightening his mask, grinned through it at Weyman. "You'll hear more of that, Kid. Plenty more. What you need is a drink." He settled down, into his stance, keeping up the ribbing. "We've got your number, Kid," he told him.

The Kid moved into the batter's box, not answering. He heard the crowd's razzing dimly, as though from a distance. He wasn't worried about the crowd. He was worried about himself.

The first one came in with hair on it,

snapping across the plate. The crowd booed the Kid for not swinging. A called strike.

Hansen was working easily, taking his time. He drove the Kid back, fast, with an inside slant, and the crowd laughed as Weyman danced away from it. He heard a husky voice shout from behind third, "Give him a shot of rye," and then the third one was coming over, barely cutting the inside corner.

One-and-two. The Kid's spot. And Miller knowing it.

The catcher said, loudly, tossing the ball back to Hansen, "We've been waiting all day for you, buddy," and the Kid could feel the confidence in his voice.

He saw the next one coming. He knew it by this time. The only money ball. Shoulder high, on the outside, burning across the corner of the plate. This was it.

It came in that way, smoking toward the plate, shoulder high, with "Strike three" labeled all over it.

It went out, fast.

With his bat swinging out from his shoulder, the Kid got a flash of Pop Davis' face, jabbing at his nerves. And he followed the swing through and around, giving it everything he had.

It was enough. Little Dink Alconi took five steps backward, and then froze. There was no sense chasing that ball. It landed deep in the center field bleachers, bounded once, high in the air, and then came down near the outside fence.

It was the pennant.

A husky voice shouted from behind third, "Give him a *bottle* of rye," and the Kid was off, shooting around the bases. Not trotting, not taking his time with a bow at each base for the wildly cheering crowd. Running. And he came in that way with the winning run, not stopping at the plate, heading for the dugout.

He saw her standing on the steps near Manton, her eyes bright. She said, "Well Kid?" and the Kid moved toward her.

"The funny thing," he said, seriously, "the funny thing is, he was out there again, this time. Just like before. Only when I smacked that ball, I could have sworn I heard the old man laugh out loud."

"We all did," the girl told him. "Even here in the dugout, we could hear him laughing the way he used to when the boys put one over." She turned to the manager, her eyes begging, "Isn't that right, Manton?"

The little manager opened his mouth, closed it again, staring at her. He started to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. He nodded his head quickly, up and down, then turned away, whispered to himself.

"Somebody," he said seriously, "is just plain nuts. But we just won the pennant. So maybe I'm the one. I'd rather be nuts than have lost that pennant. Maybe the Kid won it, or maybe it was the tenth man. I wouldn't know."

He left it at that.

MEN of DARING

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Here's a picture o' me a-paintin' the Rhine castle on that saloon-door, and a-listenin' to them plottin' to kill Al

River Rogues

By FRED MACISAAC and C. W. HARKINS

Start now this most exciting and colorful novel of the Mississippi since Mark Twain created Huck Finn

NOW that Al and Bellvee air married, and I wear shoes regular and air goin' to Chicago to get my teeth fixed and will be in school mebbe come Fall, Al and Bellvee said I should write down how us three met and whut happened to us on the Mississippi, and about Doc Biglow, who war the orn'riest, meanest crittur you ever did see. They said I should write it my own way, and they on'y fixed up the parts where they is supposed to be talkin', as they said they didn't want nobody to think they couldn't talk no better 'n 'at.

My name is Joe Tolliver. I'm fifteen, headin' fer sixteen, and big fer my age. When Paw died, my stepmaw married the worst jug-lifter on the River, and since they was nowise my kin, I lit out fer myself. I met up with Al—that's Al Westcott, and right away I could see he's a different kind o' cat than folks I'd known around the Duck's Nest. He's real clean-cut lookin' and talks with big words. He tole me his paw had lots o' money; but he didn' intend to go back home 'til he's made su'thin' of hisself.

AL AND me decide to jine up together; and Al talks a feller into lettin' him have an ole shanty-boat, which ain't nowise worth nothin' a-tall, on his note. We fix the boat up real neat and pretty and head up-

This story began in last week's Argosy

river. It's when we come to a town called Burlington that we commence to git into trouble with this here Doc Biglow. Al got into a fight with him on account Biglow was slappin' a girl around; and Al woulda licked the tar outa him, 'ceptin' Biglow's pug-uglies smacked Al down by usin' brass knucks.

We don't aim to hang 'round much after that, as they warn us Biglow is the king-doodle around Burlington, runnin' a theater and a hotel and most ever' thin' else in town. We hadn't got very far when I caught Bellvee hidin' on board the *Puddle Duck*—which is the name Al thought up to call our boat, though it don't sound sensible to me. She is young (Bellvee, that is) and pretty and nice, and right away I can see Al has fell for her hard.

She tells us she is runnin' away from Biglow and she is powerful afraid of him. Al invites her to stay with us, and that makes me sort of unhappy on 'count of I don't want no ole yaller-haired gals on board, but she leaves us at Fort Madison; and I can see Al is sunk fer fair.

ONE day the biggest, most-entertainin', argufyin' black boy you ever did see attaches hisself to us. His name is Hoss; he is lazy and no-'count but he sure can play a mouth-organ. It's Hoss who saves us both when Doc Biglow catches up with us, and comes aboard wavin' a big gun and threatenin' to murder us both if we don't tell him where Bellvee is. Bellvee, he says, is his legal wife. That makes Al want to kill him, gun or no gun; and if it hadn't been for Hoss comin' into the cabin like an express train and knockin' Biglow on his ear, we'da been goners.

Al is more set on findin' Bellvee and helpin' her than ever. He finds out what town she's in, doin' her whistlin' act in the theater, and we start to go after her. But some night-riders get hold of Hoss and beat up on him, and he jest manages to git off with his skin. Al tells him not be scared. Them night-riders, he says, is Biglow's men. "And Joe and me kin take care o' them all right," he adds, real confident-like. Me, I ain't so dang sure. . . .

CHAPTER VI

NIGHT RAID

IT WERE so dark in midstream a feller couldn' see his hand afore his face. The water was black as ink. I lit the red lantern; Al yanked it out of my hand and blew it out.

"Don't do that. We'll get on the roof and keep our eyes peeled while we talk this thing over. I'm going to take the shotgun with me. Hoss, you go to bed. They're looking for us right now. Keep your eyes skinned, but we can hear them long before they come in sight; gasoline motors make plenty of racket."

Water lappin' against a scow makes a person sleepy. Al were sprawled on the roof with old Betsy loaded to the muzzle. A New Orleans tow goin' up-river on the t'other side lit up the bank from time to time as the fireman opened the furnace door. Her engine were a-workin' hard and throwin' sparks.

"Listen." Al riz up.

Strainin' my ears I could hear a low hum a comin' down stream.

"I'll bet that's them. You pop into the cabin with Hoss."

"I won' do no such thing," I says when a finger of light lit up the west bank.

"If that's them we don't stand a show," Al whispered excitedly. "They've got a searchlight."

The beam crossed the river and rested a minute on the up-river tow and then it were shut off sudden. Pretty soon a motor boat roared by on the far side, the noise disappearin' south.

"If it's them do you reckon they'll be back?" I nudged Al.

"Hope not, but you can't tell."

Hoss were snorin' in the cabin. It were right pow'ful corn. At midnight Al made me slip down and heat up a pot of coffee. Back on the roof he told me to lay down; said he reckoned they'd give up, and he'd watch out for packets.

A bump against the scow woke me with a jerk. Al were a settin' with his head on his knees sound alseep. Givin' him a poke I crept to the edge of the roof and looked over. A boat were dim alongside, but I could see a feller crawlin' on board with a rope in his hand. I let out a yell fit to wake the dead. Al jumped up befuddled and hollered, "Where? What?"

Grabbin' him by the arm I pointed to the boat.

"Beat it, you warts," yelled Al, lettin' go the right barrel in the air.

Hoss on his belly crawled out the door to the far side of the cabin and shinned up onto the roof in back of us. At the roar of the gun he let out a horrible whoop and without lookin' dived head first from the roof. As Hoss dove the wart who was still in the motorboat riz up to come aboard too. Hoss landed on him and all spraddled out they went overboard together, squallin' like cats a-fittin'.

THE boat drifted away. The man on the deck drapped to his knees and fired two shots faster'n I could count.

The red flame a-streamin' through the dark at Al finished what little nerve I had. When Al's hat flew off I rolled over the back of the roof and hit the deck with a thump. Al ketched the gunman with the other barrel as he leaped to his feet and made a dash for the cabin door.

Squealin' like a panther he staggered back a few steps, waved his arms and plunged into the river. The air were all choked up with the smell of gunpowder.

After firin' Al dropped to the deck, dodged into the cabin and started loadin' Betsy Ann in a hurry. I were a shakin' like I had chills and fever. Hoss and the gunman had plumb disappeared. Crawlin' to a winder I stuckin my head and whispered, "Air you all right, Al?"

I could hear the ramrod a-workin'. "Outside of losin' my hat I am. Did they get you?"

"They'd sure have to be able to hit quail on the wing to ketch me the way I fell offen the roof." My teeth were still a-chatterin'.

We met on the for'ard deck. "Where's Hoss?"

"When the fight started he dove off the roof, were aimin' for the river but landed on t'other feller, they went overboard a-fittin. You goin' to look for him, ain't you?"

"You're darn tootin' I am. They're licked for tonight. The one I hit sunk like a rock."

Now I sure were worried. See what come of gettin' mixed up with show wimmen? Al told me to light the red lantern and stay awake as he were gonna take the skiff and look for Hoss. Figgered he'd made for the nearest shore.

"Is you all a lookin' fo' me?"

I'll be dad-burned if the top of Hoss' head didn' show over the edge of the scow.

"Air they all done gone?" he whispered.

"Yes, come on board," said Al, "and it's dead sure they won't be back."

Hoss scrambles up as naked as a new born babe. He shucked his clothes under water.

"Man," says Hoss a squattin' down against the cabin wall all of a shiver, "let's us'n get south of Memphis. This is plumb too excitin' for me."

We spent the few remainin' hours of darkness tryin' to figger it out. I were sure we'd get mixed up with the law. Blowin' the top of a man's head off with a shotgun is might' serious up North.

"Don't worry,' says Al. "It was self-defense. They jumped us; we were tryin' to avoid trouble, but I'm no quitter. From now on we play a hand. I'm going to take the train to Alton first thing tomorrow, and ask Miss Patterson a few questions."

"Boss, I wanna go to Memphis," groaned Hoss.

"You getting cold feet?" asked Al.

"My feet air so cold you all could use 'em to make free ice water fo' a excursion."

"Why stick to the *Puddle Duck* then?"

"Well sir, Mr. Al, I likes dis here cat fishin', and you all and Joe done treated me fine, and I'se bankin' on dis here upheaval to quiet down once we all air past Cairo."

CHAPTER VII

LOST LADY

AT THE turn of day we landed below a small river town by the name of Gaintown. Shanty-boaters land at the down-stream end of a village; sometimes

they has to leave sudden and no river rat wants to float by a town while a marshal takes pot-shots at him with a squirrel rifle.

We nested the boat in a thicket might' nigh out of sight. Al spent five minutes tryin' to argue Hoss into keepin' watch.

"No siree, we all done passed a crick aways back. I aim to take me a hook and line, amble up dere and ketch a mess of perch."

"Take a squint at the shanty-boat once in a while. If anybody molests it, yell like a son-of-a-gun and light out for town."

"Yes, sir," promised Hoss, but he'd have to see through half a mile of brush to do it.

Through the rain we plowed along a river path. Al found he could get a train in thirty minutes and be back by nine o'clock.

"You hang around town a spell and keep your eyes open for these river thugs. If things don't look good, cast off, drift down a ways and meet me at the depot tonight if possible. If not, I'll scout down stream until I find you."

"Al," says I, sorter hesitatin', "I'd like it right smart if we all could get goin'. For a long time I ain't had a chance to paint airy Indian or barber pole. After all, we were aimin' to take it easy and have a good time. Shotguns and klucksters a-chasin' us this way and that is powerful wearin'. You hustle back and let's float down stream a mite."

"When I return we'll do that little thing," Al smiled as he patted me on the back.

After the train had shook and rattled itself around a curve I moseyed up to the general store to get me some chawin'. Bein' too wet for the farmers to work the fields there were a heap of loafers a-settin' and swappin' yarns. The sheriff with a nickel-plated star pinned to his suspender were a-leanin' on the counter eatin' crackers and cheese.

A dried-up feller with straggly whiskers owned the store and were a-wranglin' with a nigger mammy in a bandanna 'bout the price of eggs in trade. He offered her twelve cents a dozen, and she 'lowed she ought to have fourteen. Then the talk switched to some butter she had took in the week afore.

"Mandy," said the grocery man spittin' into a box of sawdust, "your butter smells of onion and is full of hairs."

"Lawsy, lawsy." Her big bosom bounced up and down as she laughed. "There air some people what strains their milk and some what hairs their butter. My folks al'as haired their butter."

The spittin' feller says:

"Well, if you expect me to buy any more you get yourself a strainer. Customers air kickin'."

A fellow in a pair of rubber boots with a buggy whip in his hand were a-talkin' to the sheriff. He were a-kickin' about a passel of hogs what had broken into his cornfield.

"I know," said the sheriff soothingly. "Them hogs air so danged lean a feller would have to tie a knot in their tails to keep 'em from crawlin' through a palin' fence. They air the rootin'est hogs in Clay County. It's right embarrassin' when drummers air in town to have pigs a-gruntin' and a-wallerin' along Main Street."

"Well," replied the farmer, "I aims to buy myself a box of number four shells. That's all."

"Razorbacks ain't what's worryin' me." The sheriff cut off another slice of cheese. "Seems like all the thieves in creation air a-driftin' down river this summer, aimin' for the shell beds. Papers have been full of shellers a-findin' valuable pearls. They air a-busted, thievin', fightin' gang. I aims to run the next shanty-boater what ties up here plumb outa the county. They jest keep a person in turmoil all the time."

Hearin' the sheriff go on that way, I figgered it would be a likely idea to ease the *Puddle Duck* down a-ways.

As I headed out of town it were just a pourin', with big, black clouds a-chasin' themselves across the sky. Upstream a low hangin' blue-gray cloud came a-rollin' and a-tumblin' toward me. As I passed the last shack, lightnin' hit a tree across the river, and a roll of thunder fairly shook the ground. I lit into a run.

WHERE the path forked, bein' a natural born fool, I took the wrong turn 'cause when the wind hit and branches started sailin' through the air I were all tangled up in a swamp. It grew darker and darker.

I fell over a hundred logs. Finally crawlin' through a briar patch, I broke into a clearin' where they were a tumbledown shack. The saggin' porch were like a sieve, but the door were wide open, so I found me a place where the roof didn' leak very bad.

Squattin' on the floor, shakin' water offen myself, I could hear the wind a-roarin' through the timber.

It rained so hard it put me in mind of a story Pappy used to tell about once when he lived in Missouri where it rained harder into the bunghole of a barrel than it could pour out at each end.

After a long time the rain let up, and I skedaddled out of there and made for the river hell-bent for leather. Musta been closer to the *Puddle Duck* than I reckoned 'cause I come on it real sudden.

As I were a-squattin' in the brush watchin', somebody touched me on the shoulder. I made a leap what would have carried me ten feet if I hadn't hit a tree and landed on my back in the mud. It were only Hosstetter.

"Joe," says he, "I am a layin' out here and two fellers come along—the ones what kluckstered me. Yes, sir. I heard them talkin'. They aims to set fire to the *Puddle Duck.*"

"What for?"

"I dunno. And they is out to ketch this woman Al is anxious 'bout."

"Why didn't they go 'board the *Puddle Duck?*"

"They seen smoke comin' out of the chamley."

"Smoke? Why nobody's aboard."

Hoss looked peculiar. "Yes, they is," he tells me. "Yes, sir."

"Who is it?" I asked excited.

"They left before they seen anything," he said. "I heard their names. It's Tony and Dingo. But I seen somefing."

I grinned. "What?"

"What I seen is a naked woman," says Hoss, twistin' 'round and frightened like.

"Hoss, you air crazy! A naked woman?"

"I'se tellin' you it's Mother Eve, that's who," he tells me, rollin' his eyes 'til I only sees the whites of them, "a-prancin' 'round and her hair all hangin' down her back. Bo—look—"

Hoss points through a gap in the trees. I'll be a John Brown if I don't see this Bellvee Patterson paradin' on the deck as bare as a jaybird.

"I knowed it," moans Hoss. "We've gone and done been hoodooed. Right now I starts walkin' south where no naked wimmen goes a-ramblin' all over other peoples' boats."

I didn' blame Hoss. I was shamed for her myself. "Miss Patterson," I yelled, low-like. She looked in our direction. "It's me—Joe and Hoss. You all go inside and wrap a blanket around yourself; we want to come aboard."

"Come on," she called back, laughin'. "I won't bite." She ducked through the door.

I had might' nigh to take a club to Hoss. If this keeps on that nigger's constitution will be plumb ruined.

"They know where we air, you black jackass," I said, proddin' him up the gang plank. "Turn loose them ropes."

Feelin' safer aboard than ashore, Hoss didn't lose no time. 'Afore I could say, "Scat" we were goin' down stream.

"You all put somethin' on?" I yelled through the winder to Bellvee.

"Sure, come on in." She's still laughin'.

I STEPPED through the door and stepped right back again. She hadn't done no such thing. She followed me on deck and then I seen she had a skimpy somethin', sorter pink and skin tight, coverin' her middle and a bib up to her neck, but no back.

"Don't you like girls in bathing suits?" she teased. She spun 'round so I could take a good look.

I swallowed my cud.

She stepped back indoors to reappear in a moment dressed in a flowered thing with big sleeves.

"I'll bet you're pleased to see me," she remarks. "Or are you?"

"I were," I replied sickly-like, "but you'll be surprised when Tony and Dingo catch up. They're aimin' to set fire to this boat. They got a motorboat, too. Notice how the current swings to the left of yonder towhead? If you and that bathin' suit air good swimmers, you better dive in. There's gonna be trouble."

"Where's Al?"

"He's took the train to Alton a-lookin' for you."

"Come in here quick." She tore back into the cabin and started throwin' dresses into a valise. "A kid and a black won't stand a chance against those men. They're bad. Pack your clothes; we'll row ashore in the skiff."

"That's what you gotter do, but I aims to stick. Al told me to watch the *Puddle Duck* 'till he gets back."

Glancin' through the window I see we were out of sight of town.

"I've got to be back at the depot tonight to meet Al. Hoss," I yelled, "get out the sweep."

Takin' down Al's shotgun I run the ramrod down the barrels. They were both loaded. Goin' outside I laid it on the roof with both barrels cocked. Bird shot may be small, but two loads of it from a ten-bore scatter-gun will make a man might' sick.

"Is Eve got her clothes on yet?" whispered Hoss, stickin' his head over the edge of the roof.

"Get busy with that sweep if you don't want to be chased nine miles through the woods by the kluckster's."

At the word "kluckster's," Hoss forgot Miss Patterson and threw more water astern than a mail packet foggin' up-river. Climbin' up beside Hoss I told him about sendin' the girl a-shore and hidin' the boat.

"Boy," he said, "you hold this here sweep. I'm gettin' in the skiff and pullin' out ahead. I'll find a creek, come back and give you a tow. We can make better time that way."

Hoss lit out with the water just a b'ilin' out behind. Miss Patterson in her regular clothes made out to grab hold of the sweep and help me.

"You air too spindlin' and you don't know how," I tells her. "Just keep your eyes peeled up-river and yell if you see or hear a motorboat."

In no time a-tall, Hoss came a-sailin' back up-stream. A nigger'll hurry when he's skeered green.

"I got it." He bumped alongside. "Toss over that air tow rope."

MAKIN' it fast to the skiff, he plowed out ahead. The oars bent double. What with sweat a-streamin' down his face and the drizzle, he were wetter than if he'd fell in the river.

The row boat squatted into the water as Hoss settled down in real earnest. Within a quarter of a mile he turned the *Puddle Duck* in shore and snaked us into the mouth of a creek all of a hundred feet wide. Droppin' the skiff astern, Hoss climbed aboard and me an' him poled her up stream 'round a bend, and made fast under the overhangin' branches of a big swamp oak.

We took the axe and cut down four or five bushy saplin's which we stuck butt-end into the mud at each end of the boat. It would take a keen eye to spot the scow. I told Hoss to crawl back through the brush to the river and watch for the motorboat.

On board I found the girl who was might' nervous. "What will we do next?" she whispered.

I 'lowed there were no cause for whisperin' as them toughs couldn' be within miles and Hoss could spot them long afore they reached the mouth of the creek. Of course I were a wonderin' how she comes to be on the *Puddle Duck*.

"Miss Bellvee," I said polite-like, "you air plumb welcome on board this here shanty-boat, but how come you got here and for why? Al ain't goin' to have no truck with a married woman."

"Oh!" she exclaims. "You know that?"

"I hear as how you're this Doc Biglow's woman. Now look, there ain't no call to go blubberin'."

"I won't," she said and she smiled at me. "You don't like me, do you, Joe?"

"I air right sorry for anybody that's married to Biglow," I says. "But we helped you out once. You were in Alton gettin' along all right. Al and me plans to float downriver peaceful-like."

"I'll come, too, Joe, if you'll let me. I—I don't care what becomes of me."

I sort of relented, but I had got to get rid of her before Al come back on account of him being soft over her. "Looks like those bummers of Doc Biglow would have something to say 'bout that," I warns her.

"Joe," she says, "I'm going to tell you everything. Six months ago I ran away from my home in Peoria. I have a brother a year older. He ran away a few months before that. We had to. My father—well—he made life impossible for both of us."

"You were goin' to tell me 'bout Doc Biglow," I reminds her.

I hadn't never talked with her kind of girl; mostly I kept away from girls. This one were so pretty I were glad she were after Al, not me.

"I got a job whistling in a chain of little theaters, small-time vaudeville and pictures, and a few weeks ago I came to Arniter, outside Burlington. Doc Biglow isn't a doctor at all but a county political boss and a saloonkeeper and the owner of the theater. I despised him as soon as I saw him, but he was interested in a dancer in the show and didn't bother me.

"Well, a couple of nights after my opening, I saw my brother in the theater. I was shocked—he looked so dissipated. He was drunk, but he recognized me. It seems he does some kind of work for Biglow. I doubt if it's honest work. I was using a stage name, Nellie Norton, but my brother told the Doc I was his sister.

"BIGLOW right away said he was going to give a party for me. I refused to go and he said he'd fire me. He said he owned a big interest in the theater chain I was working for. Well, I had to go."

Bellvee choked up and started cryin' again and wiped her eyes and said:

"When I got there he told me it was a wedding party. He was going to marry me. I slapped his face and tried to leave. He grabbed me and took me up to a room and brought in a man he said was a minister and two dreadful looking men as witnesses and they read a ceremony. I fainted.

"When I came to they had taken away my clothes and locked me in. I found a suit of Doc's clothes in the closet, and put them on. Just then there was a riot below. This other girl had come and made a fuss about his marrying me, and then Al came along and hit Biglow. I got out the window—well, I told you and Al that."

"How come you didn't let on you were a married woman?" I asked.

"I was afraid you'd put me off the boat."

I was pretty sorry for Bellvee by this time, and I reckoned she were tellin' the truth all right.

"Well, I—I found some money in his clothes. I took the train out of town. I worked in cafés, whistling, and got a job at a theater in Alton that wasn't in Biglow's chain, but last night a detective called on me and said I could take my choice of going back to Biglow or getting arrested for stealing money from him.

"I told him the whole story. I guess he likes me for he said there was nothing in it for him to arrest me, but if I had anything valuable to give it to him and get out of town. I had a ring and he took it.

"I took the only train out at that hour of the night, and it landed me in Gaintown. And, Joe, I was at the depot this morning when I saw the *Puddle Duck* coming down stream. I followed the river and saw the boat tie up. I went into a lunchroom and had breakfast and then followed the river to the boat and found nobody on board. So—" She paused, then went on, "Al went to Alton to look for me. Does he know—?"

I grinned. "Doc Biglow paid us a visit. Al knocked him into the river. I reckon Al

and me got to do what we can for you, Bellvee. You sure had a tough time. Here!" I yelled, indignant. "None of that!" She had leaned over and kissed me.

"In a few years you'll like to have a girl kiss you," she said, smiling. "Are we safe here?"

"We air, unless they come up this creek, but it's too shallow for a power boat."

CHAPTER VIII

RETURN TO THE RIVER

LEAVIN' Bellvee in the grass, hid from the creek by trees I snuck through the woods and located Hoss. "Seen anythin'?" says I, wormin' myself alongside him.

"Narry a thing," says Hoss, a chawin' a piece of sassafras root, "and boy, I'm a pow'ful hungry nigger. You watch a spell and I'll go get myself a snack."

"Miss Patterson don't want no slab-footed nigger messin' around; you stay here. I'll go fix somethin' and bring it out to you."

Hoss wanted somethin' to drink too, so I promised him a gourd of water and a jerk of forty rod.

When I returned to the shanty-boat, Miss Patterson had tidied up the cabin. Wimmen air better housekeepers than men.

"I'll get some real dry wood that won't smoke," I says, "and stir up somethin' to eat. Air you all hungry, Miss Patterson?"

"Very. You start the fire, tell me what you want, show me where it is, and I'll get dinner."

Hoss had a mess of fish ready to cook and there were plenty of cold biscuits. I showed her where things were, and from a gunny sack tied to a rope lowered down the forward hatch, give her some tomatoes and green corn.

"As we don't run much to pie or cake and you wimmen like that sort of truck, you'll find a jug of sorghum sweetnin' under Al's bunk."

Sortin' out powder-dry oak, I soon had a red hot fire in the stove. The water in the barrel bein' kinder ancient, I dipped the bucket from the creek. It were cold and sweet tastin'. While she were a gettin' the fixin's together I toted three fingers out to Hoss. There were narry a boat in sight. Doggone I wished Al were back. It were too much for a boy.

Takin' a clean piece of white canvas Al and me had figgered on makin' an awnin' out of, Miss Patterson spread the table. There were dogwood blossoms in a pickle jar in the center. The fish were fried better'n I could have done it. Somehow the coffee tasted different.

After dinner I told her to leave the dishes 'til I got back from feedin' Hoss. She filled the water bucket with fried fish and truck for him. I found that dad-burned nigger sound asleep. He 'lowed he were thinkin' with his eyes shut. I told Hoss if he were to drap off to sleep in the next two hours I'd hogtie him and turn him over to the klucksters. Rollin' his eyes 'til they were all white, he promised he'd sure stay awake.

Back on the boat I seen Miss Patterson had everythin' clean and shiny, and were a-washin' the winder curtains in the dish-pan. As the sun had come out, we sat in the shade to figger out how I were to meet Al. It would be a long hard row upstream, and I'd have to start early. If I put out through the woods, chances were I'd get lost, and once in town it would be hard to find my way back.

"What are you going to tell Al when you meet him tonight?" she asked me.

"I don't know. He'll be surprised. Miss Patterson"—I bet my doggone face got red—"I don't in no ways aim to let on to Al 'bout you all prancin' around without a dress, and I'll see Hosstetter keeps his trap closed."

She burst out a-laughin'. "That's nothing, Joe. Where Al came from all the girls go bathing dressed as I was, and some wearing even less."

"Well," says I, "down the river a-ways where I live, wimmen go swimmin' after dark and then in calico wrappers."

After that I rambled out to see how Hoss

were a gettin' along. He were settin' under a tree most peaceful.

"Seen anythin' of 'em?" I squatted down beside him.

"There were a motorboat a rippin' and a tearin' down stream nigh the off shore two hours ago. Outside of that and a Memphis packet, ole river have been plumb lonesome."

"Listen, Hoss," says I, "that girl of Al's is gonna stay all night. You'll have to turn out of the cabin. We'll sleep outside tonight."

MISS PATTERSON got supper. Her and Hoss had a wrangle over dishwashin'. She said his "act" were to sketchy. After supper I rowed up stream a huggin' the Illinois bank. Tyin' up below town, I went up to the depot and hid behind a string of box cars.

When the bus from the Astor House drove up, I knew the train were nigh due. Two drummers climbed out and had a wrangle with the station agent over excess baggage. The agent were a small, pot-gutted feller smokin' a corncob pipe.

I always like the smell around a depot, a mixture of cinders, coal smoke, peanut shells, and ham sandwiches. It's the only place a feller can get free ice water, too.

The loafers turned up to see the local come in. They were a-settin' on the edge of the platform spittin' and arguin' politics. I could hear milk cans rattlin' as an express wagon come trottin' down the street, but narry one of Doc's plug-uglies showed up.

"She's whistlin' for Ballards Crossin'," yelled a loafer, scramblin' to his feet.

I hustled across the track and stood in the baggage-room door. A headlight come a-weavin' down the track, as the local pulled in with the engineer a-leanin' out of the cab, dignified and important. If I couldn't be a steamboat captain, I'd like to be an engineer.

When she stopped, he hopped out of the cab with a long-spouted oil can and a ball of waste. The last man to leave the smoker were Al.

"Al," I whispered, steppin' to the edge of the platform. He didn't hear me as the fireman were whangin' the tar out the bell. I grabbed him by the coat.

"Hello, Joe."

"Be still," says I. "Come quick. Let's get on t'other side of them box cars."

"What—more trouble?" he asks as he chased me around the end of the string.

I legged it down the tracks with Al a-followin'. After crossin' the cattle-guard, I jumped up the bank behind a clump of hazel brush.

"Wait a minute," panted Al. "What's it all about, anyway?"

Haulin' him down beside me I wrastled a while gettin' back my breath. "Listen, Al, a heap has happened since you air been gone."

"Don't tell me that gang turned up again?"

"They sure did and worse."

"Take your time and get your wind back. Is the *Puddle Duck* safe?"

"YES, and Hosstetter, too. Now listen." I were schemin' around tryin' to get the thing straightened out. "Goin' back to the *Puddle Duck* this mornin' I got caught in a storm and all tangled up in a swamp. Finally stumbled onto a shack in a clearin' and hung out there 'til the rain stopped.

"Been away from the boat hours when I bumps into Hoss, and he says them fellers of Doc Biglow were a-watchin' the *Puddle Duck* from right close to where Hoss were squattin'. They were a-plottin' to burn the *Puddle Duck*. Hoss says their names are Tony and Dingo.

Al laughed. "They missed their chance to burn the boat. There was nobody on board right then."

"Yes, there was," I tells him. "Bellvee Patterson were on board."

"She is?" he shouted like he were yelling "Hallelujah!" He jumps up. "Is the boat where I left it this morning?"

"Your darn tootin' it ain't. Hoss and me poled her up a creek and hid her under a tree around a bend."

Al were a-heavin' along so fast I could hardly keep up with him.

"The skiff is right below here," I tells him. "Hoss is goin' to tie a white dishcloth to a bush at the mouth of the creek so we won't miss it."

Al made the water bile. Were no time a-tall makin' the creek. The *Puddle Duck* were hid so well it puzzled me to find her. There weren't a sound or a light.

"Bellvee," Al cried, sort soft-like.

"Is that you, Al?" she whispered, steppin' to the end of the gang plank.

"You bet." Al's voice sounded happy-like.

There were a candle a-burnin' in the bottom of a bucket a-settin' in the middle of the deck. Bellvee and Al stood lookin' at each other.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "It's been scary since Joe left."

"Has anyone bothered you?"

"No. . . . Have you had your supper?"

"I have," replied Al. "Where's Hoss?"

"Hid in the brush." Bellvee were a helpin' Al off with his coat.

"Joe, go find him. Tell him we're going to hold a council of war."

"Will you please tell me how I'm gonna find a coal-black nigger in the dark?"

"Get going!" he orders.

Wanted to talk to her alone, I guess.

CHAPTER IX

SIEGE TO COME

FALLIN' over roots and stumps I finally found Hoss asleep with his head down hill. "Al's back," I whispered.

"I ain't done nothin'," yelled Hoss, a-leapin' to his feet. A branch catchin' him under the chin knocked him over backward.

"Shut up, you fool. Al's back and wants to see you."

"Is anybody with him?" whispered Hoss.

"Narry a one."

"Is he gonna take that air female back to town? She's way too particular for a houseboat. Made me throw away that piece of shirt I were usin' for a dish rag."

"Come on."

Hustlin' aboard I could hear Hoss's bare feet slappin' the gangplank right behind me. Al and Bellvee were a-sittin' side by side on a bunk.

"Take a chair, Joe. Hoss, you sit in the doorway. Bellvee has told me what she told you, Joe," Al said. "It's a weird business. Believe, you should have no trouble getting that marriage annulled; that is why Doc is so anxious to get you in his clutches. But why his sudden urge to marry you? You say he paid no particular attention to you until your brother told him you were his sister. Then a forced marriage—but unconsummated. Bellvee, it was, wasn't it?" His voice kind of quivered.

"Oh, yes," she said, turning very red. "He went right downstairs to the party."

"Of course he has a minister and witnesses willing to perjure themselves, but their characters can be shown up. I'm just a shanty-boat man."

"Not an ordinary shanty-boat man," she tells him, looking right into his face.

Al gets very red. "Thanks," he says. "I'm doing this for a lark. I left home with a lot of money and lost it very quick. Hated to crawl back within a few days and get laughed at by the folks."

"I know just the sort of person you are, Al," she told him. "You are nice."

"Well, what we must get is the motive. With that sort of man it would be money. But your father isn't rich, is he?"

"Just comfortable. We have a nice house in Peoria. Since Mother died he has been hard and queer and pretty rotten to Bill, my brother, and myself. Of course Bill drank too much and I was crazy to go on the stage. Poor Dad!"

"Biglow has your brother under his thumb and forced you into a marriage. What's your father's name and address?"

"John P. Patterson, 0016 Harold Street, Peoria. But, Al, I won't let you communicate with him. His last words were to me, 'You've made your bed. Lie on it.' I—I wrote him when things were bad a few months ago."

"Nice fella," said Al. "I know some people in Peoria. I'll send them wires. Of course you can't drift down river with us. It would ruin your case against Biglow.

But you've got to stay main tonight, and we may have trouble." He turned to me "Joe, from the car window I noticed a towhead at least two miles long and not over six miles from here. We'll leave the creek and tie up on the off side of that island. Use it for a base. I'm going to get busy on this Biglow business tomorrow."

"I—I suppose I'm the luckiest girl in the world to've found you, Al," Bellvee says very soft. "But I'm making you trouble. You started on this trip for fun."

"And I'm having it," he tells her. "Adventure, river pirates, lovely maiden in distress—and how about Hoss's mouth organ and Joe's ingenuity in the pinches?"

PROBABLY you notice that when I'm tellin' things Bellvee writes down the way I talk, but when Al or her is speaking she writes like they talk.

The moon come from under a cloud as we cleared the creek. It were nigh bright as day. Hoss were at the sweep and Bellvee asleep on Al's bunk.

"Al," says I, "them thugs air gonna search that towhead. It would be a heap better to tie up next some wharf boat in town and get the sheriff."

"I know, Joe. We can't carry on this way, but we'll keep her hid a day or so. Maybe they'll move down river or give up and return to Burlington. Lots can happen in a few days."

Al didn't know it then, but a lot did.

"You turn in and get some sleep. I'll keep Hoss awake and watch for the towhead, but you'll have to help us land."

The towhead were a humdinger. I hadn't been asleep no time a-tall when Hoss woke me up. For a while I were plumb drugged.

Takin' the skiff, Al and Hoss put out, lookin' for a landin'. The island were covered with timber, with hazel brush higher than a feller's head. They found a place behind a sandpit overgrown with willers.

We poled the *Puddle Duck* in behind the bar. When we tied up it couldn't be seen from the river. It were shallow, too, so Hoss and Al jumped overboard and worked us under the brush.

"I think it will be safe for us all to turn in for the rest of the night," said Al.

Hosstetter 'lowed he'd take to the woods. I snuggled on the roof alongside of Al.

It were a way after sunup when I woke next mornin'. I heard Al and Bellvee laughin'.

Lookin' over the edge of the boat, I seen Bellvee in that skin-tight pink thing, and Al in blue underwear that fitted him tigher than a glove—a bathin' suit, he called it—a-swimmin' and a-divin' in the lagoon. Hoss were a-standin' on the bank with his mouth open.

"Come on in! The water's fine!" Al hollered, seein' me a peerin' over the edge.

Just to be sociable, I kicked off my shoes and dove in, pants and all. Hoss put his mouth organ in the crotch of a tree, threw his ragged straw hat on the ground, and made a dive that carried him clean across to the *Puddle Duck*.

We had a might' good time a-splashin' and a-swimmin' around. Bellvee's eyes were as bright as hickory coals. Her cheeks were rosy. I didn't blame Al so much for wantin' her around.

With a lot of gabbin' and a rattlin' of dishes, her and Al got breakfast. They fed Hoss on deck, but made me set right down at the table.

"What's the first move?" Bellvee asks Al as she were a-pourin' coffee.

"I'm going to send Joe down stream to the nearest town to send a wire to a friend in Chicago. I'm asking this friend to go to Burlington. He's a pal of mine from college, and his father operates a private detective agency. I'm going to write a letter with complete details so it will be waiting for him at Burlington.

"Joe can mail it. Tonight after dark I'm returning to Gaintown to see if there is any trace of Dingo and his good companions." Al pointed his fork at Bellvee. "You write your father. No, on second thought, I'm insisting you return to Peoria."

"AL," she said kind of pitiful. "It's no use. Father's cast me off. And, after all, I love my brother. The Doc must have

some kind of a hold on him. My brother must have known I was being forced to marry Biglow. Something's got to be done about him."

"I'll do it. I'm going to put my pride in my pocket and wire my father for funds. He'll send them and then I'll put you on a train for St. Louis. You can stay at a hotel out of reach of Biglow."

"Al, please. I won't have you humbling yourself."

"Bellvee," he says, awful low, "I'd do more than that." Then, in a different tone of voice:

"This brother of yours, now. What does he look like?"

"Well, he's small, not much taller than me, thin, has brown hair, and wears a little brown mustache and he—he shows evidence of being a heavy drinker."

"I'll get him out of Biglow's hands," he tells her.

I didn' see how he were goin' to do that. I went out of the cabin as they were both gettin' kind of mushy.

While Bellvee tidied up the cabin, Al were busy writin' telegrams and letters.

"How you all gonna get me on t'other side?" I asked Al.

"Have Hosstetter row you around the lower end of the island and then across the river. There's a good-sized town a few miles below. He can hide himself and the skiff, and wait until you get back. What size shoes do you wear?" he asked, turning to Bellvee.

"Four AA. Why?"

Ignoring her question, he said to me, "Joe, if I gave you a five-dollar bill could you pick out a pair of heavy shoes for the lady?"

"Five dollars? You're darn tottin'. Could get three pairs for that."

"You had better just get one. And here's a grocery list. If they haven't olives get sweet pickles instead. You know what olives are, don't you Joe?"

"No, sir. What air they?"

"You'll learn. Bellvee will you please sit down here at this table and write out the specifications of a pair of overalls for you? A blue shirt, too. Anything else you need?"

"Well, as long as you're fitting me for heavy going, a pair of service stockings would come in handy. But I'm paying," she said, digging into her pocket book."

"Okay. Add stockings to the list," says Al.

They fussed a while over who should pay.

"But I'm not going to let—"

"Hush," says Al, "you'll wake the baby."

Al's loony. There werent no baby. He talks foolish at times. But he lost out. Bellvee paid.

"All right, Joe. Yell for Hoss and get going." He hands me a mess of telegrams and letters. Then he whispers, "There's a wire for Bellvee's father. Don't let on I'm sending it."

CHAPTER X

BELLVEE'S KIN

I LEFT Hoss, lookin' mournful-like, settin' in the stern of the boat tied to the Illinois bank. It warn't no ways into Brookfield which were the biggest town we'd hit since leavin' Burlington. Paved streets, electric lights, and trolley cars.

Al didn' know, but I'd hid the black box under the seat of the rowboat, and were a carryin' it into town. I sure love to ride on trolley cars, swayin' along, lookin' at the pretty houses painted up white with green shutters, trees archin' over the street, lawns smooth and fresh with posy beds, white picket-fences, ladies in swell dresses a-paradin' up and down.

Arrivin' at the town square I hunted up the telegraph office, then mailed the letters.

Buyin' pants and shoes for Bellvee worried me a bit, but I did the best I could. Leavin' the bundle with the storekeeper, I figgered I might as well hunt me up a job of paintin'.

Walked clean around the square without seein' a wooden Indian. Musta been twenty saloons. Many times I'd helped French Louie paint Rhine Castles on swingin' saloon doors, and as there were a saloon on the far corner with just plain screen doors,

I goes in and speaks to the saloonkeeper, a little fat German smokin' a long stem pipe with a bowl like a china salt seller.

He had on a pair of carpet slippers and a white apron, and were a-settin' in an armchair with his feet on a round table, readin' a paper. There were clean sawdust on the floor, and the place smelled cool and real nice.

"Vat is it, Bud?" the German asked, lowerin' his paper.

"Would you like to have a Rhine Castle painted on them screen doors?" says I, takin' off my hat.

"A vat?" He lowered his feet to the floor, lookin' at me over thick glasses.

"A Rhine Castle with green trees and birds and blue sky."

"Gretchen," he bellered.

A huge German woman, her head in a towel, waddled through the back door, carryin' a dish pan of potato salad.

"Yah, Louie," she answered. She stopped at a long counter with free lunch under wire screens, and ladled salad into a brown bowl.

"This poy vants that he should paint a Rhine Castle on the doors. What you think, eh?"

"Are you hungry?" Gretchen ambled toward me.

"No, ma'am," says I, bowin' polite-like, "but I'm an artist in oil, lamp black, and white wash. French Louie, who I used to work for, showed me how to paint saloon doors."

The little German roared with laughter. "How much?"

"Fifty cents."

"Mama, we'll have castles on the doors."

She stood with hands on her hips beamin', with beads of sweat on her face. "First, a cup of coffee." She waddled out of sight.

"Yah," says the saloonkeeper. "I give you fifty cents. You drink beer?"

"Yes, sir, once in a while," says I.

"All right," says he. "Fifty cents, a can of beer, and all the free lunch you can eat. But mind"—he shook his finger at me—"the Rhine Castles must be real—so."

"Mamma" returned with a cup of coffee and sweet-like bread on a plate. I warn't hungry, but 'et it to be polite. It were larapin' coffee.

SWINGIN' one on the doors back against the wall I propped it with a brick, went to the alley and rustled up a box to set on. Then I opened up the black box and lit into paintin'. It were good to be at work again. A slim man bothered me by standin' behind me breathin' through his nose.

"Paint 'em gud, poy," the German said as he left to wait on a teamster who entered through the back door.

I took my time. Wanted it to be a real pretty castle. I were so busy I paid no manner of attention to the customers enterin' and leavin'. Most of 'em used the alley door. Guess they didn' want people to see 'em. Finishin' the one door, I stepped back to admire it. It were swell. There were a castle with green trees in back, and clouds and birds a-flyin'.

The little German patted me on the back and says, "Poy, I make it seventy-five cents and *zwei* cans beer."

After eleven, the place filled up. Men buying cans of beer and eatin' free lunch. There were a table near me where a feller in a blue suit with a straw hat on the back of his head were a-sittin' and talkin' to a big red-headed man in a faded black shirt. The little feller were talkin' loud. I hear him say something 'bout Biglow. I edge up to listen, but don't hear no more.

Next minute in come them plug-uglies from East Burlington, the ones that been follerin' the *Puddle Duck* and that Hoss heard tell they were a-goin' to burn her up. Tony and Dingo, Hoss said they called themselves.

I placed them by their names on account of the red-headed man callin' the bigger one with a busted nose and an awful big mouth Dingo. And I seen, then, that the young feller had a little mustache like Bellvee said her brother had. 'Count of the racket in the saloon from everybody talkin', couldn' ketch a word from that table.

The young man were a-gettin' drunker and drunker. Dingo were a-settin' next to him and done all the buyin'. When trade slacked, the saloon man come over to see how I was gettin' along.

"That air red-headed feller at the table looks like a man from down my way. Do you know him?"

"Yah, a *Dumbkopf*, a no-good. Boss of a shell camp. He's bad."

"Guess I don't know him, then."

"Pretty soon I *'raus mit* 'em. The young feller is drunk."

"Who is he?" says I.

"I know not," says the German.

A thirsty man pounded on the bar with his glass. The saloonkeeper hustled in back of the bar.

When I looked again, Dingo were coaxin' the drunk through the back way.

"I'll be back in a minute," says I to the German.

They were down the alley and turnin' into a street leadin' away from the river. The drunk were a-reelin' and a-staggerin' wth Dingo and Tony on each side, the red-head trailin' behind.

LETTIN' them get a piece ahead, I run across the road and followed, keepin' close to the picket fences. Once the young feller jerked away, and made a dash back to the saloon, but the red-head tripped him up. Dingo jerked him to his feet, slapped him a time or two, knockin' his straw hat into the dust.

I trailed 'em up the road to the bank of a creek. They left the street, climbed a wire fence, and disappeared under a wooden bridge. Crossin' the bridge on tiptoe, I clumb through a fence on 'tother side and wormed my way into some bushes.

I could see 'em plain on 'tother side of the stream. There were a fire smolderin' between blackened stones, like in the hobo jungles in Burlington.

Tony and Dingo had their coats off and were a-settin' on the ground. The young feller were a-spread-eagled on the grass, a-rollin' his head from side to side. Staggerin' to his feet, he reeled to the bank of the creek, and were the sickest man in all creation.

After that, he set down on a log as far away from Dingo and Tony as he could. The redhead were a-cookin' somethin' in a five-gallon oil can. There were a bundle of dirty blankets tied with a clothes line a-leanin' against the buttress of the bridge.

Squattin' in the bushes I could hear Dingo and Tony a wranglin' low-like. Couldn' make out a word. After fussin' a while, Dingo went over and grabbed the young feller by the collar, jerked him to his feet, and shook him like a rat. Then he yelled so loud I could hear plain.

"Are you goin' to cough up?"

The young feller mumbled somethin' I couldn' hear.

Dingo hollered, "Smack him in the jaw. That'll make him speak up."

I crawled up on the bridge, tiptoed to their end, sidled down along the rock wall, and crawled into a patch of elderberries.

"Listen, Bo," says Tony, "you know where your sister is and you're gonna tell or we'll take you to the shell camp and work on you. Red here is the boss of the hardest bunch of yeggs on the Mississippi. He knows how."

Then I *know* it's Bellvee's brother.

CHAPTER XI

ERRAND OF MERCY

"I DON'T know where she is," whined Bellvee's brother, "except she's some place between Quincy and Alton. I want to find her as bad as you do."

"How come you to get off at that way-station?" It were Dingo speakin'.

I heard a slap bounce offen a face.

"Don't hit me again."

"Well, loosen up," says Tony.

"I was drunk. All I remember is wanting a drink, and the next thing I knew I woke up in a wagon-shed behind a hardware store. Now be reasonable, fellers," he begged. "Don't you understand? She's doesn't know Father is dead. If I could only find her, she'd go back to Peoria. Then Doc could see her there."

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away," yelled the redhead.

"Come on, Tony. Let's eat," says Dingo.

For a time all I could hear were jaws a-workin' and tin dishes rattlin'. Tony heaved a sigh and said:

"We'll stick here 'til dark and then go back to the *put-put* and head for camp."

The rest of 'em agreed, and after that they just set around a-talkin' about nothin' in particular.

Figgerin' I'd learned all I could, I snuck back to the road and fairly sailed back to the square.

When I hauled up in front of the saloon, a-pantin' like a horse with the heaves, there were the German feller a-studyin' my art.

"Where you been, poy?" asked the German.

"I had to see a feller about another job," I lied.

I was might' nigh done with the last door anyway.

In ten minutes I were a-settin' at the table with a plate of free lunch in front of me. Gulpin' it down, I collected my seventy-five cents, thanked the saloonkeeper, hustled over to the store, got my bundle, and hopped the trolley. I made the skiff on a dog-trot.

Hoss were lyin' in the bottom of the boat asleep, with a string of cat trailin' over the side. He cussed me for steppin' on his face as I jumped into the boat.

Makin' the *Puddle Duck* in jig time, I run up the plank and hollered, "Al!" There warn't anyone in sight or hearin'. Throwin' the bundle on Al's bunk, I hid the box under mine. Hoss started to skin the cat fish.

"Al, oh, Al," I yelled, middlin' loud.

"What is it, Joe?" calls Al.

Over on the sandbar he had rigged up a hammock out of the piece of canvas. Bellvee were a-lyin' in it a-rockin', and Al were a-settin' on a upturned bucket readin' to her out of a book.

"Come over here," says he.

Time I got over there I were so frazzled I couldn't get the words out right away. Seein' me worked up like that, Al and Bellvee quit lookin' so much in peace and comfort. Al jumps up.

"What is it?" he says again.

"I done found him," I gulped, a-gaspin' for breath.

"Found who?" Bellvee leaped from the hammock.

"That air brother of yours."

"Well, don't stand there wabbling your jaw back and forth. Tell us about it quick," orders Al.

We were too excited to set down. As all three stood under the tree, I tole 'em 'bout what I'd seen and heard.

"AND listen," says I, "the main p'int is they air gonna stay under the bridge 'til dark, but remember there air Tony, Dingo and a gang boss from the shell beds, and I'll bet every one of 'em has a revolver."

"Good work, Joe," says Al. "I guess our best bet is the sheriff."

Bellvee, she busts into tears. That girl could cry awful easy.

"No, Al," she pleads. "I didn't tell you —I was so ashamed. There is a warrant out for my brother Bill for shooting a man when he was drunk. That's why he ran away from Peoria. He didn't kill the man, but they'd jail Bill for a long time. I think Biglow was holding that over him. If it weren't for that Bill would have helped me back in Burlington."

"He sounds like a no good so-and-so to me," says Al, sort of sullen.

But Bellvee is crying harder. "My poor father is dead—we ran away, both of us—he died alone—"

"But he treated you so badly," Al reminds her.

"I don't care now. He's d-dead."

"Well, you have friends in Peoria. You can go back now."

That were a good idea. But right away Bellvee, she sets to weepin' again. It weren't botherin' me so much now, though; I guess I were gettin' kind of used to girls.

"But I can't," she wails. "Those awful men are going to hurt Bill, maybe kill

him. Please, Al, help me. If we can get Bill away from them I'll take him back to Peoria."

"Okay," says Al, very stern. "I don't think much of your brother, but he's in a bad spot all right. They're going to wait under the bridge, Joe'"

"That's what they said."

"I'll go to Brookfield."

"I'm going," says Bellvee. "I won't stay here when my brother is in danger."

Al looks annoyed, but he nods. "We'll all go. I'll put you up at a hotel and Joe and I and Hoss will take after these three thugs. You'll show me the bridge, Joe. I'll sneak up on them and pull down on them with Betsy Ann. I'll hold them while Bill makes his getaway. Joe will meet him and take him to your hotel."

"Just fine," says I, sarcastic-like, "but how are you gonna get away? As soon as you turn your back they'll start shootin'. You can't stay there forever with them a holdin' their hands in the air. Got a better plan."

I had one, too. Come to me quick a couple minutes before, and I were in some hurry to tell 'em about it. This here looked good to me, if'n I did think it up myself.

I were so excited durned if I didn't spit on the floor and Al never said a word. "You hold 'em up, make 'em drap their guns. I'll sneak down behind 'em, gather up the guns, then throw all but one of 'em into the creek. With the other gun, I'll hold 'em 'til you come across and help me tie their hands behind 'em and gag 'em.

"We'll keep 'em there 'til dark. Late at night, after everyone is in bed, we'll trail 'em down town and tie 'em to a lamp post, pin a note on their coats sayin' they're desperados that murdered someone up river and air wanted. I'll bet when the town marshal finds 'em he'll be plumb startled."

Al stood and stared at me. "Joe," he says, "you are a most astonishing young man. Your plan is juvenile, but it has some merit."

"You gonna take Hoss with us?"

"Not so's you can notice it," replied Al. "What do you think of the scheme, Bellvee?"

"I don't like it," she said. "It's dangerous. I wouldn't have you hurt for anything."

Al didn't have no chance to answer. Because all of a sudden there were another voice askin' sorta plaintive-like:

"What air you all talkin' 'bout? Ain't we all gonna eat?"

It were Hoss, sloshin' skinned cat up and down in the water.

"We're grabbing a sandwich and leaving for Brookfield right now," replied Al. "You rustle up something to take along. We want you to stay behind and watch the skiff."

That's where Al were mistaken. Hoss did go along, and if it hadn't been for him, I would have been killed, sure as shootin'.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Mosquito

Incident at the War Games: Sham battle becomes genuine engagement, as underdog of Navy family tests his midget menace, and forces entire service, from the Admiral on down, to sing: "Little boat, what now?"

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "The Rogue," "Fish Ain't Got No Brains," etc.

I

JOHNNY KENT laid the valise on the bed, opened it and then started throwing shirts into it haphazardly. The lines around his mouth were tight and grim, and his face looked pretty bad. It was swollen in spots, and there was a small cut under the left eye, high on the cheekbone. The left eye was discolored. The whole contour looked out of shape.

Outside, he heard the front door open. He glanced up for a moment, then flushed and hurried with the stuff in his bureau drawer. Only one other person had the key to his thirty-a-month bungalow on the slopes of New Rochelle. Marsha Adams, who sometimes cleaned up the mess he made of the place. "A fine little spot," the renting agent had told Johnny. "View of the Sound and everything." Yes, including a marshy pond beneath him where, when the tide ebbed, the odor was rank and terrible.

"Johnny," said Marsha Adams from the doorway.

Johnny Kent did not look at her. He went on packing. But his mind could see her standing there in the doorway, her soft face and full lips. That mouth of hers, it would be quivering now for she knew the bad news.

"Johnny," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm pulling out," he said in a terrible voice. "That's all."

She said, "Oh, darling—your face."

He grimaced painfully. "I'm pulling out, I'm washed up," he said. "I can't take any more of this. I'm a human being, not a—" He turned and stared at her. "Why'd you come? How'd you know about it? Did Rick tell you? I'd kill him—"

"No," Marsha said slowly. "Sammy Brubaker called me from the boat works and—" She shut her eyes to his his face a moment. "Johnny, wait a moment, be sensible. Tell me about it."

Johnny Kent shook his head. "Not me. I'm through, I tell you. And I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me, not even you, understand? No, Marsha, you go ahead and marry Rick. He's all right, he's got a big future in the Navy. He'll have a command of his own some day. But stay away from mosquitoes like me."

"You have a right to be bitter," she said quietly. "But don't be."

"Bitter? I'm not bitter." He laughed harshly. "But it does seem kind of a joke on a guy to be born little. I didn't ask to be a little man. I'm sick to death of being a little man. It's plagued me all my life. And I'm throwing up everything now. I just—well—I just want to get away, I want to make a new start somewhere, make new friends—"

"Your boat—"

"It's not my boat. It's Apex's. It's Sammy's. He sunk the money in it. I don't care about that."

She crossed the room toward him and took him by the shoulders and pulled him away from the bureau. "Johnny, you listen to me. You're a fool."

"I know it."

"You're a fool, a big fool. You've—well, it's got to be an obsession with you. You'd think, because you're small, that you were being condemned to a living death."

"Don't," said Johnny Kent, "give me that stuff about Napoleon being a little man. And Horatio Nelson, and the rest of them. I've heard it for years. I'm sick of it. Listen, Marsha, I never meant for you and Rick to meet. When I came here from Baltimore, I had a clean slate. I was going to show them, show my Dad and Rick and my mother, I was going to show them that it doesn't take Annapolis to make a Navy man . . . And now everything's gone, all spoiled, even you—"

SHE held up his chin. "I'm going to tell you something," she said. "And then you've got to tell me something."

"Shoot."

"I love you. You—not Rick. You've got to believe that. I want to marry you, not Rick. You've never asked me, but I'll wait until you do. You're not a—a—mosquito to me. It's not a man's size, it's his heart. I love you, Johnny. Believe me."

Johnny stared at her, his chin shaking a little. "Don't make it any worse," he said. "It's no go. I'm not built right. I can't take it."

"Tell me what's wrong," she said slowly. "Not just now, tell me what's been wrong all along, all these months we've known each other, tell me what that little core of wormwood in you means. You never have."

He stared at her again, then sat down, facing her. "All right," he replied presently. "I'll tell you. Sit down."

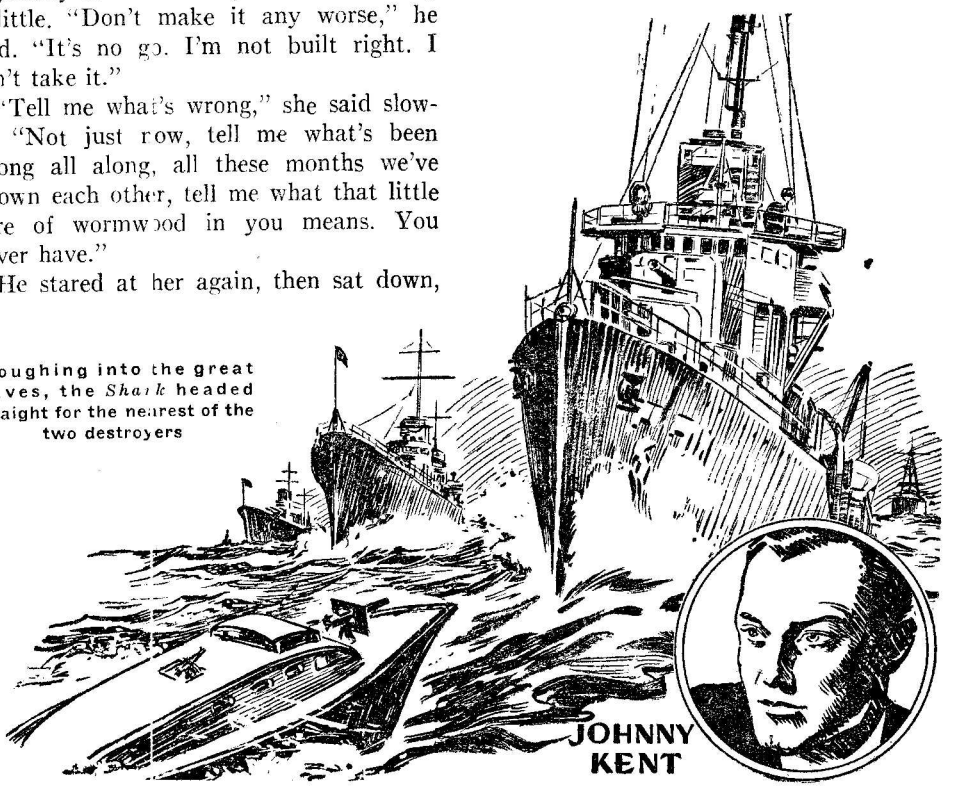
She sat down, facing him. Her face was shiny, and her eyes looked as though they were going to have tears in them.

"You know about my family now," he said. "My Navy family."

"Yes."

"Rick, my *big* brother, and the Old Man . . . They had great hopes for me. In three generations of my family, every man officered in the Navy. It was a tradition, and then I came along. Me. The mosquito. I never grew up. A runt." He took a long deep breath. "It wasn't as if I didn't want to go into the Navy. Oh, I wanted that. Badly. I went to Annapolis. That's it, you see, I disgraced them. I got my chance and threw it away and they never forgave me, not Rick and the Old Man. I was the throwback of the family."

"What happened at Annapolis?" Marsha asked quietly.



Ploughing into the great waves, the *Shark* headed straight for the nearest of the two destroyers

"I struck a superior officer. Sounds terrible. He happened to be coach of the football team. I was light and fast—I liked football—I thought I could be a hot quarterback. I went out and he just laughed at me. If he'd been halfway nice—but he said, 'Nix, Johnny. We haven't any room on this squad for little mites with the rickets.' I hit him. I knocked him cold." He felt his face. "Sure, I know, it wasn't *big* of me. If I'd been a big little man, I'd have laughed it off. Well, I'm not a big little man."

"And your father and brother?"

"Out the window Johnny must go. Never darken the door again. The soul of a dwarf. The throwback. Broke tradition. No good. Black sheep. Little man, little heart, little body, little soul. Out you go, Johnny, and make your way in the cold, cruel world, when you should have been a Navy man."

"But why on earth did you change your name, Johnny?"

"Because Johnny Kent was a new name," he said sharply. "New name, new man. I was on my own, and Kent didn't have Navy in it. At first, I was sore, I wanted to get Navy out of my hair and that was a start. I got a job over in Bayonne with the Elco Works, building motor cruisers, and I did all right. Made good money. And then, it came back, that—damned feeling. I resented it, their tossing me out, I wanted to—to—"

"—to show them," Marsha said.

He smiled back at her and felt a little better. "Uh-huh. I guess that was it. I wanted to show them a little man could be Navy too. The best way—well, I designed the boat. The *Shark*. Funny, but I wanted to build a little boat, a mosquito like me. The kind of a mosquito that could sink a battleship in a fair fight. I'd be showing them that way—"

"Is that why you came out here to New Rochelle, to work with Apex?"

JOHNNY nodded. "Sammy was nice to me. He owned the place himself. He liked the designs. He was willing to gamble his money on the chance the Navy would accept the boat and let out lucrative contracts to him. He hired me. He couldn't pay me much. But it was my chance, and I took it."

"I guess that was when we first met," Marsha said. "Up by the Hen-and-Chickens reef when my catboat overturned."

"Right," said Johnny. 'I'd been on the job two days then. Marsha, I was going to tell you all this one day. I was going to tell you it the day the Navy accepted the *Shark* in commission. I never expected you to meet Rick, my own brother—"

She patted his arm. "I know, but perhaps that was my fault. I didn't expect him to fall in love with me. And that night he came out to the house—when you were there—I hadn't invited him. He just—"

"Yeah." Johnny rose to his feet.

"What happened this morning?" she said. "What happened to your face?"

Johnny smiled thinly and his abrupt laugh was harsh. "A little man can't win. If you fight a big man, and you win, it's a fluke. And when you lose, they always say, look at that runt. Isn't it like a runt to pick on a big man, who won't hit him back? Everything to win, nothing to lose. That's why big men don't like runts. Mosquitoes."

"Rick did that?"

"Oh, I asked for it. I swung on him first. But he was right. A guy like me hasn't the right to expect a girl like you to—at least not until I'd showed—but he shouldn't have called me down like he did. I couldn't stand to hear what he called me. He wanted me out of your life, said I had no right to go with a swell girl like you, he said— What's the difference? We had a fight. I lost. I always lose. I'm getting used to it. But he was right."

"No." She said it firmly. "He was wrong . . . My dad was a little man, Johnny. He used to laugh at big men. So big they got in their own way, he used to say. It's not the size of a man, he once told me. It's what he has here and here." She touched her head and heart. "A bomber is big, Johnny. But the little pursuit plane shoots

it down. Goliath was big. A tiny pebble downed him."

"Goliath was a pygmy beside how big Rick figures himself!" Johnny said harshly. His voice dropped. "But what's the difference? I'm tired of it, Marsha. I'm just sick of the whole thing. I've never had a word from my father since the day I left that house. I saw my mother once, when he was at sea. She—you'd think I'd come back from the dead . . . It was for her sake I wanted to be big—and yours too. That's why I didn't ask you to marry me."

Marsha's face was strained. "But why are you running away now, darling? Now's the time to burn your bridges behind you and stand. The boat is finished, isn't it? It's all ready, isn't it? I never told Rick about your boat. You never did. He couldn't queer that for you."

"Boat's been ready for three weeks," Johnny said dully. "We never had an answer from Washington. They *know*. They must know somehow. Rick might have found out—told Dad. Dad has influence—"

"They wouldn't do that."

"I didn't think so either—"

"You're running away from yourself, Johnny. Won't do you any good. Won't get you anywhere. You're afraid—"

"All right! I'm afraid! I'm scared stiff!" He trembled and then sank into a chair. "You're right, Marsha. I am afraid. I'm afraid they'll test it. I'm afraid—if anything went wrong—if anything happened to that boat—if they threw her out—"

"You'd still be a little man," she said. "With a big heart."

The telephone rang. Johnny went and answered it. When he came back, his face was set and his lips were working. "That was Lennie Hall, my mechanic, up at the Apex Works."

"Yes, Johnny?"

"Sammy Brubaker told him to call me. We've heard from Washington. They're going to test her." He clenched his fists. "Supposing my designs are wrong, supposing they won't work out in practice—"

"Johnny," Marsha replied, "are you going to stay and find out for yourself, or are you going to have Sammy wire you, somewhere in Timbuctu or Peoria?"

He breathed deeply and shook his head. "I don't deserve you," he said. "No man does . . . I'll stay. Unpack the bag with me, will you? I'll stay."

II

JOHNNY KENT came out of the Administration building of the Apex Shipbuilding Yard, and walked down to the landing dock where Lennie Hall, the chief Apex mechanic, stood waiting for him. Lennie wasn't a big man, but he looked large compared to Johnny. Around the plant, they called Lennie the shrimp. He was, himself, in a position to call Johnny the mite. But he didn't.

Johnny Kent was nervous. Lennie could see the tension in his face; the nervous working of his jaw muscles. Lennie thought the kid looked pale. Steps too tight. Looked like he was panting. Hands clenching. "Hey, Johnny," he said mildly. "Ease up. It's only a trial."

"Sure," Johnny said. "It's only a trial."

Lennie stared. "What's the matter, kid?"

"I'm scared," Johnny said quietly.

Hall was dark and rather sober, but his serious smile was very reassuring and he turned it on. "Sure. You've got your wind up. Maybe it means a lot to you. You put yourself into her, didn't you, kid? I think I know how you feel. She won't let you down. And if she did—well—you could take that."

Johnny shook his head. "I couldn't."

Lennie Hall looked at him soberly a moment. "Kid," he said, "maybe I understand more than I should. It's tough, eh? Fighting inside yourself for so long? Sure, I know. Me too. Maybe we all do it sometime in our lives. This is your chance to win that fight. But win, lose or draw, stay big." He hit Johnny's shoulder. "They're here. Sammy just gave me the high sign. We'd better go out and tune her up."

Johnny Kent nodded and ran his hand absently through his hair. "You row," he said absently. He turned and examined the slope behind him carefully. There she was. Up there. He waved self-consciously, and Marsha blew a kiss at him. Then he and Hall rowed out to the boat. Johnny didn't look back at Marsha again.

"Sammy said he'd give us ten minutes," Hall remarked. He rowed steadily and easily as they neared the craft. "They don't look like Navy men. They look more like detectives."

Johnny Kent smiled. "You wouldn't expect the Naval Department to advertise a trial run by sending them down in full-dress uniform, would you?"

"No," Hall said. "But they're so darn sharp-eyed, that you'd expect them to have flat feet." He stopped rowing as the dinghy's padded bow bumped the stern of the boat. Beside her transom, they could see her name in bold gold leaf. It was an ominous name. Just that one word —*Shark*. But then, she was an ominous boat.

No pleasure cruiser, this, to ply her way in sunlight up and down Long Island Sound, to carry spectators to the Yacht Races off Newport. No sportsman's sea skiff, fitted with glistening outriggers, for offshore big game fishing. The *Shark* had been built for one purpose: destruction.

THEY clambered aboard. Hall opened a steel hatch just abaft the cabin. He entered here and disappeared. Johnny Kent went forward and slacked off the bowline. The tide was on the ebb and he knew her head would hang east even without the line. Somewhere down in the hull, the twin Curtiss Conquerors opened their throats and roared.

They held six hundred horse power apiece within their cylinder blocks and they gulped gas at the rate of ninety gallons an hour. They were Hall's babies and he fondled them as though they were alive.

Johnny Kent returned aft again and entered the cabin through the same hatch which Hall had used. There was one other hatch forward, the only other exit and entrance. Hall revved up the engines until they were running smoothly. "Sounds sweet," he murmured. Johnny nodded.

"She looks it doesn't she?" Johnny Kent said, anxiously. "She looks 'Navy,' doesn't she?"

"Looks it?" Hall said with mild sarcasm. "Why this crate puts every battle tub the Navy owns to shame."

Johnny Kent didn't smile. "She's *got* to be right." *Little man—little boat—could they both be Navy?* Johnny's lips moved, wordlessly.

"Yeah, I know." Hall frowned.

Johnny Kent's mouth tightened and he busied himself with imaginary duties at the controls. Actually, there was nothing to do. Hall, satisfied with the performance of the engines, dropped the flush floor-hatches back into their places, and the sound of the engines dulled to a distant murmur. Hall moved forward to the chart table behind the weather break. "Listen, kid," he said slowly, "you and me have been working together for a long time, now, and I just wanted to tell you a few things. I know your name isn't really Kent. But that's your business. I don't know who you really are, and I don't care. That's all up to you. But from the day you first walked in here, a year ago, I've had the feeling that you've got something on your mind. I hate to see this, whatever it is, always with you."

Johnny Kent met his eyes. "Thanks, Lennie."

Lennie looked out through the weather-break, glad of the excuse to avoid the hot bitterness of Johnny's eyes. "There they come," he said. "Is that Marsha on the hill?"

"Yes," Johnny said. "Let's get under way."

. . . Over by the landing dock, Sammy Brubaker had led the two Naval men down from the Administration Building of the Apex Works. They were sharp, pleasant-looking men, dressed inconspicuously, and wearing their felt hats a trifle awkwardly,

as though they weren't used to them. They were set apart from land-locked men, and they looked it. Their faces were leathery and their eyes squinty. The taller one was Commander Wilbert Ashton, and his subordinate was Lieutenant Com. Arthur Parker.

Sammy Brubaker should have been awed by the whole thing, but Sammy wasn't the type. The demonstration meant as much to him as it did to Kent, for, into the experimental *Shark* he had poured fifty-eight thousand dollars.

"Out there, gentlemen," Sammy Brubaker said expansively, waving his hand, "that's the baby, dead ahead of you, the long, gray stick with the white *X* on her bow. *X* for experimental. The guy at the helm is Johnny Kent. He designed her. The other little monkey is the sweetest mechanic who ever sequestered a pair of engines. What do you think of her?"

Commander Ashton smiled cryptically. "I'm afraid we can't tell you what we think of her," he said pleasantly. "That opinion is reserved for Washington."

"She looks very small," Lieutenant Com. Parker said, politely. The truth of the matter was that Lieut. Com. Parker thought she was a trifle too long for her height. He reminded himself not to be prejudiced before he had even tried her, but he was quite sure she would break her back in any heavy sea.

HALL had cast off the stern line, and at the *Shark's* helm Johnny Kent engaged the gears and advanced the throttle. The *Shark* moved slowly away from her berth and eased quietly toward the landing dock.

"I want you gentlemen to know," Sammy Brubaker said, "that the speed limit within this anchorage is four miles per hour. She's doing that right now. She could hold to that speed all day long, idling, without fouling her engines."

"You haven't tested her enough to be certain of that," Commander Ashton said.

Sammy Brubaker remained unruffled. "We'll guarantee it," he said.

She moved like her name, like a shark. Her motors could not be heard at all, and she barely left a ripple in her wake. She was not a displacement boat. She rode over the water, not through it. And as she came toward them, across the slick, black water of the anchorage, she looked formidable.

Her center of gravity was low, and nowhere was her free board more than six feet high from stem to stern. At her bow her raised deck was six feet from the water line. At her stern it was two feet.

She had no cockpit at all. Where her cockpit would have been normally there was nothing but flat deck, with a footing of steel.

She was sixty feet long and the highest point in her entire length was the top of her cabin. This was no ordinary cabin. To port and starboard there were only two large port holes. Dead ahead there was a windshield of bullet proof glass. Astern there was a rear vision window, also of bullet proof glass. The cabin seemed very low, almost a part of the forward deck itself.

Sixty feet long, mind you, and not a projection anywhere on her deck. She was made of steel, welded. There wasn't a seam in her.

Abaft the bow there was a spot for the mounting of a gun, a small 4.5 millimetre cannon. Astern, in the yawning vacancy of her afterdeck, were places where her two torpedo tubes could be installed. The arrangement was such that she could discharge her torpedoes against any point within an arc of 280 degrees.

The only direction in which they could not fire was dead ahead. Through a nozzle in the armored roof of the cabin bristled the long, ugly barrel of a machine gun. She was a false gun, put there for effect, but in her place a deadly fifty caliber modern M.G. could easily be mounted. The details of her hull were hidden, of course, by the fact that she was in the water, but it was apparent that she was a modified V-bottomed boat and built with a hard chine forward.

Hall threw the stern line to Sammy Brubaker, who snubbed it on a piling, holding the stern in, and allowing the Naval men to clambor aboard.

"Hold your hats, gents," Sammy Brubaker called, grinning. "Too bad we haven't got a real whole gale today, she doesn't really get going unless the weather is filthy." He unslacked the stern line and tossed it back to Hall.

At the helm, Johnny Kent eased her away from the landing dock, while the Naval men descended the hatch into the cabin. Hall followed, and locked the hatch securely behind him. "Take her away, Johnny."

They crawled away through the anchorage at four miles per hour. While they moved, barely disturbing the surface, introductions were in order. By the time these had been completed they were clear, a few hundred yards off Premium Point, and Johnny began to step up the Curtiss Conquerors as they head out toward Execution Light.

"I don't care," Sammy Brubaker said to himself as he stood there alone on the landing dock and watched the *Shark* rise up on her step and smash the placid Sound white, "I don't care if *they* say she's a tug. I know better. She's the most perfect boat that ever came out of this yard, and if they don't like it, they can lump it."

As it turned out, they liked it. When the *Shark* returned to the landing dock some two hours later, it was plain to see that both Commander Ashton and Lieut. Com. Parker were quite impressed. Commander Ashton went so far as to say, "Kent, you've got a fine boat here. You'll hear from us again."

Sammy Brubaker got so excited he nearly fell off the dock.

Johnny Kent smiled. He thought of Marsha—of Rick. Even, and with only a tinge of bitterness of his father. Unconsciously, he held his small, muscular frame a little bit straight, and almost by pure instinct his thumbs found and pressed the seams of his trousers.

III

WHEN Johnny was admitted t Rear-admiral Huston's office, a the Naval Department in Washington, i was vacant, for Huston had stepped ou for a moment. When he returned, Johnn Kent sprang to his feet, clicking his heel

Since that day I've been thinking o myself as Navy. Fool. Nothing is fina yet. Nothing settled. Nothing . . . shif shape.

He relaxed. Rear-admiral Huston smiled.

"That isn't necessary, you know," h said, pleasantly. "You're a civilian, Mr Kent, and I'm not your superior officer Please sit down."

Johnny Kent flushed, sat down.

Huston still looked amused. "You die it very well, sir. Not an old Navy man by any chance?"

"No," Johnny Kent said, nervously fumbling with his hat.

Huston looked sober. "Regrettable, Mr Kent. From the reports I've had, we los a good man. Your *Shark* seems to be quite a craft—for a small boat."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir," Johnny said *Small boat. That's torn it again.* Anger grew in him, but generations of service breeding had schooled discipline into hi blood and bones.

"You have a tremendous advantage over the rest of this field," Huston said quietly, "in that you have presented us with a full-fledged model to try out as is You are aware, of course, that all other bids we have received for the letting of contracts on these Mosquito boats, have been purely designs. But even from the designs which we have, none ventured to promise such a performance as you yourself promised when you wrote your first letter to the Naval Department."

"I suppose it was a brash letter," Johnny Kent said. "But I have the boat here ready to back up my word."

Huston nodded. "It is a very startling letter, Mr. Kent. I have it right here. A sixty-eight-mile-per-hour top speed in flat

er. An ability to sustain a speed of miles an hour in the face of a whole . A cruising range of one thousand s. The ability to withstand the attack n airplane equipped with machine guns light bombs. Absolute freedom from nding in heavy seas. Hal! the given of roll of any displacement ship of size in similar conditions. Able to carry war torpedoes, a small cannon for- d, a fifty-caliber machine gun in the n, and two depth charges astern. Abil- to destroy any enemy landing party. finally, an accuracy of torpedo-fire rol, which would enable you to sink rst-class battleship with but little re- nce."

Huston shook his head and smiled ly. "Well, young man, that's a very order. You can't dismiss the defense a ship of the line with such startling alness."

ohnny said: "If you will recall the e of the Mediterranean Sea during the iopian crisis, you will recall the ap- hension of the British fleet over the that the Italians had developed these squito boats to a very fine degree. They are natural defense-weapons. ey do not cost much, are definitely non- ressors since they must base close to ne. And the *Shark* will do everything aid it would. You have only to take up on it and try and make me eat words."

HUSTON chuckled. "Well, that's honest enough, Mr. Kent," he said. nd I think we are going to give you t chance. We want you to deliver the *rk* at the submarine base in New ndon, Connecticut, there to be out- ed with a small cannon forward, and o torpedo tubes on her stern deck. You going to carry two torpedoes. mmies, of course, but we want to try out under her full specified load, on ocean. If her performance in this re- ct measures up to the standard you for her, she will play a part in the ning war games and sham attacks in- volving the eastern coast of the Atlantic Fleet. You'll get a chance then to eat your words or—and mind you, I doubt it —I'll eat mine!"

Johnny Kent smiled and looked quite surprised. "I hadn't heard you say anything, which you might have to eat. Do you mean that you are on the opposite side of the fence?"

Huston smiled thinly. "I can't answer that question. My present position requires that I keep an utterly open mind."

Johnny Kent said, "You sound as though you don't believe in the Mosquito Fleet."

"To be perfectly frank," Rear-admiral Huston replied, "I don't." He toyed with a pencil on the desk. "I am well aware that the Italian Navy has developed this motor torpedo boat, as it is called, in the hope of constituting a realistic threat against British sea power. But I do not believe in its efficacy.

"Now, I've no doubt you've built a fine boat, Mr. Kent, but you're an American, and it is just like an American to like the idea of a small boat licking a big one." He didn't see Johnny's wince. "The underdog licking the bully. And in this light, I think you have let your enthusiasm override your real judgment.

"Just because a boat is small—"

"That will depend upon the tests to come. Nevertheless, Mr. Kent, I want to remind you of one thing. The motor torpedo boat, or Mosquito boat as you call her, is compelled to meet the battleship on her own ground.

"The battleship is a complex war-machine evolved over a good many years. And now, because you have a fast, small boat which can fire two torpedoes, you say you can destroy a capital ship. A torpedo, you know, need not necessarily sink a battleship these days.

"In the construction of a modern capital ship, we have added an extra outside wall which kills the initial explosion of the torpedo and confines the damage to a single bulkhead. I wonder if you are aware of these things?"

Johnny nodded soberly. "I am quite aware of it."

"And still you feel the way you do. Well, perhaps I am wrong. But then again, such fighting must take place upon the ocean, not in the quiet and protected waters of some inland sea. And you must not forget that the battleship carries besides her sixteen-inch guns a good many other weapons which could be used against a motor torpedo boat.

"So do not go under the apprehension that you are safe from her fire because she would not waste a sixteen-inch shell on you. Or rather, could not if you were too close. She has small cannon, remember, and heavy machine guns, and can throw torpedoes of her own."

He looked sharply at Johnny, and then shook his head. "I can see that you still stand by your letter. I admire you for it, Mr. Kent. After all, this is theory. It is like the argument of the bomber versus the battleship, which cannot be solved until actual tests transpire. Perhaps in the next few weeks we shall have a chance to make that test, and I tell you that I will abide by the decision."

Johnny shook hands and said goodbye.

THE Shark carried her new weight well, and she passed her ocean trials with flying colors. Commander Ashton, who had been one of the first inspectors, had become very fond of the boat. The last trials had been made off New London, and it was from here that Commander Ashton sent his report.

That same week came orders from Washington, from the Naval Department, instructing the *Shark* and its crew to proceed to New York, there to base at the Coast Guard Station at Fort Hamilton on Staten Island. The ship was to stay at Fort Hamilton until further orders.

"What does it mean?" Johnny Kent asked, when Commander Ashton told him of these orders.

"It means," Commander Ashton replied, "that we're close to maneuvers."

They stopped off at the Apex Anchorage on the way South and displayed *Shark* before the delighted eyes of Sam Brubaker, who could hardly contain himself at the sight of her. As a matter fact, the boat had changed greatly. was beginning to live up to her name. sheer sweep of innocuous deck had ished. Forward they had fitted a pounder.

In the cabin a machine gun bristled a camera for ammunition instead of lets. Sternward, lay the length of two pedo tubes on her deck, the nipples ready in their places and all ready waiting for the compressed air. "S Sammy Brubaker said gleefully. "I nasty."

"We're on the way to Staten Isla Johnny told him. "We're basing in Coast Guard Station there, awai further orders from Washington. T is going to be a battle, a sham ba Sammy. As I understand it, the Atla Fleet will attempt to attack the Atla Coast. It will be up to the resource all Coast Guard Patrol Boats, Cutters, Planes, not to mention the batteries Sandy Hook, to repel the invaders. Is right, Commander?"

Commander Ashton nodded. "And not as much of a game as we would th The possibility of such an invasion the main fleet in the Pacific, is not remote. It's an excellent place to re test the *Shark*."

"And if she proves herself?" Joh said.

"In that case," Commander As said, "she would then be turned to the Naval Authorities, who will fur experiment with her on her own. Sh she then prove satisfactory, I have doubt but that the contracts would let."

Sammy Brubaker asked, "What's in Atlantic Fleet? I mean, how many s do we have to beat?"

Commander Ashton laughed. " sound as though the *Shark* were goin take on the entire batch of them. afraid that would be quite an under

ing. You must remember that the main purpose will be the spotting of the attacking fleet by the Coast Guard planes and the relaying of such information to the shore batteries, with the resulting deploying of National Guardsmen at strategic points where we might expect landings.

"The Coast Guard boats, too, will attempt to destroy the landing parties under the nose of the mother ship. This whole action will be based upon the repelling of an attack without the assistance of the fleets, either Atlantic or Pacific."

The *Shark* was only to lie in at the Apex anchorage that single night, but it gave Johnny Kent a chance to see Marsha again.

"You look different, darling," she said, squeezing his hand. "You look as if you thought you had built a good boat after all."

"Do I?" he said. He smiled. "Maybe I feel a little different. The way she looks, with her armaments, it makes you forget destroyers and cruisers and battleships. It makes you feel she's big and strong. I'm excited about that maybe. But it'll be different when we go to sea."

Marsha said, "To sea? You're really going offshore then?"

He shivered suddenly. "Yes. Sham battle. But it'll be real enough. Marsha—Rick will be out there—in the attacking fleet. Aboard the cruiser *Johnson*."

Marsha watched him. "You're afraid of the Johnson, aren't you?"

"If we're sunk—if some one has to sink us—I hope to—anyone but the *Johnson*, any ship but her. And she's one we've got to skip by to get in at the battleships. If Rick's ship put us out of action—"

His voice quivered and his jaw trembled a little.

"Johnny."

He stared at her. Marsha stood up and kissed him gently and said, "Johnny, suppose you sink Rick. How would you have him take it?"

He didn't answer at once, just watched the knuckles whiten in his hands. Then he relaxed and smiled at her. "Sure."

"How?"

"Big. Like—like I'd want to take it."

"You're growing up."

"Give me time," he said. He took a long breath, and added fiercely, "No matter what happens, Marsha, she's perfect, she's a perfect boat, as perfect as a man could ever hope for. Like you. . . . I won't see you again till it's all over. But I'll be back, Marsha. I promise you that."

IV

FROM New Rochelle, the Shark proceeded down Long Island Sound into the East River with startling speed. As they passed the Brooklyn Navy Yard, they dipped their ensign to a destroyer, the Adams, which was proceeding upstream to the Yard on the starboard side of the river. If the *Shark* had teeth, that destroyer had fangs.

"Those are the ships you'll have to beat," Commander Ashton said, in a low voice. "They've got the guns to handle a craft like this. And the speed, too."

"She'll have to catch us first," Johnny Kent said, shivering at the sight of her.

"On the contrary," replied Commander Ashton, "she won't have to catch you at all. You must remember that she will be in the vanguard. The destroyers protect the capital ship. For you to reach a capital ship, it is necessary to break through the screen of destroyers and so discharge your torpedoes where they will do the most good. It isn't a case of out-running her. It's a case of out-maneuvering her, while she has you under fire."

Lennie Hall said, "Have you any idea, sir, how many ships will be in the attacking fleet?"

"I'm not certain. I think the *Michigan* will be the only battle wagon. Of course, she will represent more than just one. The destroyer screen, naturally, will be present in relative strength. But the Aircraft Carrier Ranger will also be there, ready to discharge her seventy-nine planes against the coast."

They berthed the *Shark* at Fort Hamil-

ton, and filled her fuel tanks, so she would be ready for any orders when they arrived.

Three days of rumors and counter-rumors slowly passed. The next thing that arrived for the *Shark's* equipment was a wireless transmitter and receiver, and a Naval operator to handle this. His name was George Graham and he had seen service aboard a heavy cruiser.

"Yes," he said, politely, "you've got a nice little boat here. But she *is* small." He superintended the installation of the radio equipment.

Johnny held his peace. His little boat had given him enough confidence to withstand the chafe of casual gibes. But if she failed— His mouth twisted into an ugly grimace.

THE following day Commander Ashton arrived with another man. His companion was a keen, wiry man, about forty-five. His name was Captain Miller.

"Things are going to pop at any moment," Commander Ashton said. "This is Captain Miller, Johnny. During these maneuvers, he is in command of this ship. You, of course, will take care of the controls as you have been doing in the past. And you are free to make any suggestions to the Captain since he is unfamiliar with the craft. But he is familiar with battle formation and maneuvers, and a lot of your success is going to depend upon his judgment. So you must work together."

"Are you coming along too, sir?" Johnny asked.

"Yes, I am. My capacity will be that of an observer. Or perhaps I should say umpire. There will be various umpires throughout the Fleet to give a verdict on these maneuvers."

Early that evening, around eight-thirty P.M., the wireless began to crackle, and George Graham went to work. When he finished, he had a message in Navy code. Graham and Captain Miller went to work on the message with their code books.

"Well?" Commander Ashton said, when they had finished.

"Here it is," Captain Miller said in a quiet voice. "I'll read it aloud.

" 'At four A.M. on June 20th, sham defense of New York and New Jersey shore against the invading Black Fleet will begin. The experimental ship No. 13, known in these games as U.S.S. *Shark*, will be held in readiness at the base to stand out to sea as soon as the Coast Guard planes have established contact with the enemy. The U.S.S. *Shark* will then proceed to a rendezvous with the enemy and attempt to destroy as many of the enemy ships and airplanes as is possible. She is to return to her base only when this mission is accomplished, or failing that, when either her munitions or her fuel is exhausted. Signed, Rear-admiral Huston, Naval Department, In Charge of Operations.' "

Leonard Hall said, grinning, "They've picked a fine time to start this war. Look at the way the night is starting out. And did you see the storm warnings? They are flying from the Coast Guard tower. Southeast storm warnings, gentlemen, for a full southeast gale. Do landing parties invade our shores during the height of a gale?"

Commander Ashton smiled. "I imagine it would be rather difficult to land a contingent of soldiers in a southeast gale, for the surf gets pretty nasty. On the other hand, if the storm gets bad enough, I imagine that we will hear from Washington about it."

BY MORNING, the wind was howling and the sky was absolutely leaden. There was a slanting rain which beat upon the *Shark's* deck in a frenzied and somewhat hysterical tattoo.

The lower Bay, feeling the incoming thrust of the ocean swell, was packed with froth, and even in the upper Bay, they could see the Staten Island ferries enroute to the Battery, rock in the swells as the southeast wind tossed spray off the crest of the combers. Captain Miller looked disturbed. He had not been aboard the *Shark*

sea, and he had a pretty good picture what the Atlantic Ocean would look , if New York Harbor looked like this. ney'll call it off for the day," he said. on't you think so, Commander?"

I'm sure I don't know." Commander ton shrugged. "The last I heard the d was doing forty miles an hour, so out of the question, of course, to send Coast Guard planes off shore, even for ham battle. Too dangerous. They may call it off, but it looks like a stalemate both sides. For if the Coast Guard 't locate the enemy fleet, neither can enemy fleet land her soldiers upon our res in the storm."

The war games were not off. From Washton came a crackling message at ten . When George Graham had deciphered message, he handed it to Captain ller, who read it aloud to the crew. It d:

Operations will not be canceled due o the southeast blow. The Navy Department is endeavoring to simulate an actual defense, regardless of weather. No further orders will be issued.

The defense of New York and New Jersey is hereby entrusted to those ships who already have their orders and are manned. There is an enemy fleet offshore. It is your duty to locate him and destroy it before it can engage your shore batteries or land soldiers.

Rear Admiral Huston, Naval Department, in Charge of Operations.

Johnny Kent had not said much. But w he rose to his feet, rubbed his head d looked bothered. "If all those planes grounded," he said, somewhat plainely, "isn't there any other way we may ablish contact with the enemy fleet?" Captain Miller smiled. "You should be t as glad they are grounded. If we ew where the enemy fleet was, we'd be afting at the bit, and we'd sit here and irm impatiently, waiting for the ather to blow out so we could move." Johnny Kent frowned. "Wait for nothg," he said. "If I knew where that fleet s, or if there were any way of finding t where the fleet was, we'd reach them mehow."

Captain Miller looked surprised, and a trifle annoyed. "Now, look here, Johnny," he said, "you've got a nice little boat here, but you wouldn't take her out in that sort of soup. She's small. Give me a big boat in a high wind."

Johnny Kent said, his voice unsteady, "Look here, Captain Miller, I'm sorry that you never had a chance to try out this ship. I didn't build her for flat water. I didn't build her for inland water. This boat was built to sink battleships. She was built to sink them in the heaviest weather the sea could dish up. And if you could locate that enemy fleet, I'd take you offshore and prove it to you today."

"Do you realize that the weather may get worse?"

"I only know, Captain, how I built this boat, and I know what she'll do, and she's perfect. I know *why* I built her. My heart's in her, every inch of her. She's as buoyant as a lifeboat. She could live through a hurricane at sea. She would have an easier time of it out there today than those battle wagons are having right now. Ask Commander Ashton, Captain. He's been on the ocean in her."

"I told you," Commander Ashton said, with a faint smile. "If I were you, Captain, in charge of this craft, I wouldn't hesitate to shove off, if I had some definite information." He smiled again, more wryly this time. "But then again, I shouldn't be talking. I'm an umpire, an unprejudiced observer, and really not one of the crew."

"By glory!" Captain Miller exclaimed. "If this ship is that much of an Achilles, where's her vulnerable heel?"

"She has two heels," Johnny Kent said. "One of them is a direct hit by a heavy bomb from an airplane. But there are no airplanes out in this kind of weather. So we're safe there. The other is a direct hit by a shell fired from a destroyer. Those are the chances of war. What do you say, sir?"

His voice was positive; its tone even. His manner called for their respect and got it. He saw it in the way they looked

at him, and he was proud and—and happy.

"COULDN'T we rig the radio direction finder on the frequency they are using for sending wireless messages throughout their own fleet?" he went on. "We could get a bearing on their position that way and be led right to them by following the strong wave of the radio direction-finder. Think of the strategy of it, sir, coming up on them in these seas when they least expect it. This is war, sir, and war goes on in spite of Hell and high water."

George Graham, the radio operator, said: "I could rig this radio direction-finder on their frequency with no trouble at all. That would work fine." He slapped the table. "We wouldn't need planes to find them. The radio beam would lead us right to them. If they were sending any messages at all, which they are bound to be doing."

There was a dead silence aboard. Everybody stared at Captain Miller. Finally Lennie Hall said, with a gleam in his eye: "It's up to you, Captain. It's all up to you."

Captain Miller grinned. "You seem to be doing fine without me," he said. "It's Johnny Kent's ship, it was Johnny Kent's idea, and all in all, it seems to be Johnny Kent's war.

"Well, I'm all for it, and if this ship can do what he says she can do, it will be a pleasure to take a back seat here and just watch it. You need me for orders now, I'll give them. But when we hit the open sea, the ship is yours, Johnny, you know what she can do, and you know how she can do it.

"All right, then, let's get under way. Cast off and make the course for Ambrose Lightship. That ought to tell us what this boat will do and whether she is going to be able to stand the gaff. I warn you, I'll order her back if I am not satisfied with her when we sight Ambrose. Until then, let's go."

Leonard Hall was tickled. "If a newspaper reporter was here," he said, "write this up: 'The *U.S.S. Shark* left base suddenly for an undisclosed destination at sea.' "

They started up the engines and tu them, and as soon as they had war sufficiently, they cast off the lines Johnny Kent put her in gear, and re up the engines as they moved away f the mooring. Overhead, at the C Guard Station, the southeast storm-v ing whipped in the wind. The waters the Lower Bay were iron. The crests v green, flecked with white and deep in troughs there was purple water. All v colorful, but all very dangerous.

As they moved through the Narrows, short chop kicked up in flying spray Johnny Kent set the storm windows s ning. Once clear of the Narrows, howe he stepped her up to a speed which lowed her to plane on that step, and difference in her performance was am ing.

Captain Miller sat back and watch The spray against the weatherbreak v ished. Only the rain splattered itself th in large firm drops, as though some were pelting the weatherbreak with gra High in her step, her bow raised, *Shark* proceeded with an easy fore-a aft motion and did not pound a bit. it's pounding that shakes the life out a ship. But the *Shark's* raised bow the crest of each oncoming wave ten as she glided over each top, only to r her bow again as she slid into the trou so that she could meet the next w with the same magnificent ease.

V

AS THEY proceeded down Ambr Channel, Johnny speeded her In the Bay and off Sandy Hook, the c would be worse than ever, short, sharp vicious.

Once offshore where the blue water gan, the running swells, although lo deep, and huge, would be of much nea pattern. The tachometers registered 18

r.p.m. and the speed shaft lock showed 22 knots. Captain Miller was astounded. The *Shark* picked her way across the tumultuous cliffs like a snake. And inside her small, weather-tight cabin, Captain Miller sat easily, aware that the terrific motion which he had expected and feared (for even the best sailor in the world is liable to get seasick when the movement of the ocean goes beyond his capabilities), had not developed. He said: "She doesn't even squat. She's as level as a log."

Johnny's heart took it easier.

In a little more than twelve minutes, they raised Ambrose Lightship, dead on the nose. Scotland Lightship, to the south, had passed in the blinding rain, but they came hard up on Ambrose, until her great white letters on the black, squat hull were plainly visible. Her roaring horn vibrated through them. She tossed crazily in the hard southeaster. Johnny Kent took the *Shark* around her, to show Captain Miller that the craft's performance did not depend upon a head sea. Running across the seaway, her movement was very steady, and there was no feeling at all that she would capsize when the green wall of water bore down on her left side.

"Well, sir," Johnny Kent said, "this is Ambrose Lightship. Shall we put back or shall we go on?"

Captain Miller grinned. "The question, Johnny, is superfluous. We're heading out to sea. . . . By glory, I'd give a week's pay to put one over on Old Kenescot."

"Who's Kenescot?" Lennie Hall asked.

"Kenescot," Johnny Kent said soberly, "He's commander of the *U.S.S. Michigan*, the battlewagon out there we're trying to find—and sink."

"More than that," Commander Ashton said. "Commander Kenescot is also Commander-in-chief of the attacking fleet."

"And a wilier old seadog," said Captain Miller, his eyes shrewd, "doesn't exist in the entire United States Navy. He knows the sea like a book. It's in his blood, it's been in his family's blood for centuries, and if we can put him down, we'll have done something."

AMBROSE LIGHTSHIP vanished astern, hidden in the curtain of rain and mist. Ahead only horizon and sea. The day was so completely gray it was hard to see where the two mingled. Captain Miller worked at the chart table. He guessed at the presence of the enemy fleet some sixty miles east of Ambrose. It was only a guess, an approximate position, which was to serve them until they had more definite information. And it was on this course that he put the *Shark*.

Meanwhile, George Graham rigged the radio-direction finder. He selected the frequency used for the interchange of messages between ships of the fleet. Then he adjusted the headphones and, placing his hands upon the disk of the radio direction finder, he began to turn the loop, attempting to bring in the crackle of wireless. He heard nothing.

Hall, intensely interested, said, "Are you sure that damned thing has enough power for the game we are playing? What's its range over water?"

"A thousand miles," Johnny Kent said. "She's got plenty of power. We'll pick them up. We've got to." His voice was savage.

Astern, the sound of Ambrose Lightship's lionlike horn had dissipated. Captain Miller frowned, glanced at his watch. "Where the devil—"

Johnny Kent knew what he meant. "She's gone, sir. We are not exactly lolling along, you know."

Captain Miller knew that. The *Shark* had taken up a smooth, straight-line motion, broken only at each roaring crest by a remote and almost inaudible thrust upon the chine of the bow forward. He dared to look at the sea shaft lock. And then he looked away, without comment, but he felt a strange elation.

In these seas, in the face of this gale, the wind and rain and spume flying all about them, the *Shark* was logging close to fifty miles an hour. And Captain Miller could see, by the position of the throttle, that she was far from wide open. He knew, of course, that she could not be opened

wide in such seas, but even so, he suspected that Johnny Kent was still holding back some reserve power which he could use in case of emergency. Power that could be used without tearing the bottom out of them, or burying their head in the sea never to have it rise again.

Ten minutes passed. In that ten minutes, at that speed, they had come eight miles. George Graham, at the radio receiver, suddenly clapped his table hard and roared "I've got 'em!"

Quickly he turned the loop of the radio direction finder until the signals were coming in at their strongest peak, and when he had found the peak, he locked the radio direction finder in that position. But he did not, at once, give directions on the course. Instead, he listened.

On the table, the pencil in his hand simply flew over the lines. The message was in code. But it was Navy code, and translatable. George Graham consulted his code-book when the messages stopped. He transcribed, and when he was finished, he said: "Oh-oh."

Captain Miller asked quickly, "What is it?"

"They're on to us," George Graham replied. "Some wireless station has relayed a message to them. That was the *Michigan* herself, informing her flotilla to be on the lookout for us. I guess we can presume that the attacking fleet has espionage agents ashore to keep them informed on the movements of the Home Fleet."

Commander Ashton said drily: "Even-Stephen now."

Johnny Kent said, tensely: "It will be a fair fight then." His hands gripped the helm tightly, until the knuckles showed white. "A mosquito against a monster. *A little man against a big man.*"

Captain Miller and the radio operator figured out the true course from the bearing taken on the radio direction-finder. It was almost due southeast, dead into the teeth of the storm. They came about and headed that way, but the *Shark* loved it. She was putting her bow in more solidly now, and the going forward was wet. Th wind had power to lift the frowsy edge of the crests and blast them across th face of the one-pounder mounted on th forepiece. But never were the blows of th sea solid; never did they shake her.

TWENTY minutes passed. And the George Graham, startled, ejaculated "We're getting close! The signals are ver strong. And listen to this: I just picke it up. They've changed course. The flag ship ordered a course to the northwes That means—it must mean—that they ar heading for New York Harbor. What the strategy of that?"

"I can see the strategy of it," Captai Miller said in a clipped voice. "They ar discounting any resistance which we ma offer. They think the weather will b too much for us. They intend to tak advantage of it, and come up close o the city while the storm holds the re sisting fleet bottled up.

"That would mean, that when the storm blew out, they would be in an excellen position to bombard the coast and lan soldiers, under cover of the bombardmen The resisting fleet would most certainl be bottled up. By such a surprise attac they might render the shore batteries a Sandy Hook ineffective. And you must re member that if the *Ranger* gets in tha close with her brood of warplanes, th theoretical damage which those ship could do, loosed upon the city, would b enormous. We want the *Michigan* and th *Ranger,* for without them, the Black Fle will be utterly crippled."

George Graham warned: "Signals ge ting very strong."

Captain Miller touched Johnny Kent shoulder. "Careful now, Johnny," he said sternly. "We've got visibility of about eight hundred yards in this storm. That damned good considering the soupy loo of everything. At this speed, we'll be u on them before *we* know it. No collision boy."

Johnny Kent nodded. "I'll keep an eye peeled," he said. "But how about the to

loes, sir? You know how to handle m. Will you stand by? I'll try to give i every advantage." He was shaking. Captain Miller smiled grimly. "You 'n't have to give me any advantage, nny. You just show me the hide of t bomber-wagon, and I'll do the rest." Johnny Kent had stepped up the engines little more, and the *Shark* was now veling at a fraction over fifty-three es per hour. Within the cabin, a quiet seness made itself felt. Nothing more s said. They all waited. Graham took the headphones and laid them down, if he was finished with them. From table, he took up a pair of binoculars, l rose to Captain Miller's vacated place the weatherbreak, to peer ahead into storm. But it was Hall who spotted m first. His roaring bellow shattered brittle silence of the cabin. "*Enemy p!*"

EVERYONE stared out the weather-break. It was true. Slightly off the rboard bow, in the distance, almost in-cernible as their gray met the gray sky and sea, there they were! The nguard, four savage little destroyers, th bones in their teeth. They pitched d tossed crazily, their narrow beams eling the sea's fury.

"Clear for action!" Captain Miller apped. "Johnny, stand by the helm for ders. Hall, you watch your engines— 're going to need them! Graham, come ck here. The two depth bombs are urs. Stand by for orders to release em. We will have to let the machine gun I'll take the torpedo tube."

George Graham looked startled. "Are ese depth bombs real, sir?"

"Of course not!" Captain Miller apped. "They're dummies, but their e and performance will be judged as ough they were real. If one of those stroyers happens to chase us and gets se enough in our stern, I'll tell you let a can go. Presuming the can bursts, en from a great depth, while the de-oyer was directly above it, she would be put out of commission. You don't have to wait for submarines to use depth bombs."

Commander Ashton rose to his feet. His eyes were gleaming with excitement. "I'll take the machine gun," he said. "It's not your fault that you're undermanned. Besides, I haven't worked one of these things in years. It will do me good to see how bad my aim is getting."

"Thank you, sir," Captain Miller said, pleased. "It will be your duty to pick off the crews with any guns which attempt to go into action."

"They see us!" Johnny Kent cried. "There goes the signal on the destroyer to starboard. I thought we would get closer than this. We're going to have a run for our money."

Grimly and silently, they watched. George Graham's wireless receiver crackled. "Boy," Graham said, "are they burning up the air!"

Captain Miller said grimly, "Are we doing our best, Johnny?"

Johnny Kent shook his head. "She'll do sixty-eight, Captain, but I'm afraid to push her to that in these seas. I think she'll take sixty, but I was holding it in reserve. What will they do—the destroyers, I mean?" He looked ahead, his eyes tense. "Four of them have pulled out of line and are bearing down on us."

"They're going to attempt to engage you in action," Captain Miller replied, his voice taut. "They are going to attempt to make you turn away broadside to them and then rake you. But by heaven, they can't get men forward to man the forepeak gun in these seas. That means they'll turn north presently themselves, and rake you with their beam gun." He chuckled. "Things aren't so bad at that. They'll never be able to draw a bead on us with this speed, with the seas throwing them like a cockleshell."

"I can outrun them," Johnny Kent said. "What's to prevent me dashing right between them and going on to the main fleet? They couldn't possibly do anything but machine-gun us in these seas, and

they'd be lucky to hit us at that. If I held my power until they turn broadside to us, and then stepped the *Shark* up, I'm sure we could squeeze between them. It's a dangerous maneuver, but she'll do it. If there is any danger of collision, they'll have to sheer off, and not us. They must remember that we are loaded with torpedoes, and if we hit them dead on, it would supposedly blow them to Kingdom Come."

"Hey," Lennie Hall called out. "Don't forget this is a sham battle."

But there was little sham about it. They all took it in deadly earnest. Captain Miller nodded at Johnny Kent, as if to agree with his suggestion. "Wait," he said. "Just wait until I tell you."

VI

JOHNNY KENT held the *Shark* dead ahead, and she bore across the sea, smashing the crests into boiling foam. Captain Miller had guessed right. But then he was only guessing what he himself would have done if he had been in command upon one of those destroyers. At five hundred yards, they bore away to their own starboard, heading north, expecting the *Shark* to turn to, and attempt to outrun them. But the *Shark* did not turn.

Johnny Kent held her, pushing the throttle gun until the screws were turning over 22 hundred r.p.m. The *Shark's* sinister shape leaped forward and bore upon the four destroyers as if to ram one of them broadside.

At the machine gun, Captain Ashton spotted men running aft out of the *Revere,* attempting to man the stern gun. They would have had some time shelling from that tossing stern. Indeed, the only trouble with hitting them in the machine-gun camera's eye, was not in the motion of the *Shark,* but in the motion of the *Revere.* "I think I got them," Commander Ashton said presently. He was flushed with excitement. "I really think I got them."

For seconds it looked as though the *Shark* might meet bow to bow with t fourth destroyer, which had come up i the line. She was the *Perry,* and she h adamantly to her course, attempting frighten off the *Shark.* But the *Shark* v not to be frightened. Johnny even pul the helm over to cut in closer to her. *Perry* lost her nerve first. She turned of line, sharply, and the *Shark* flash by her bow, so close that her wash s up a geyser of spray onto the destroye deck.

Pulled of balance, the *Perry* rol alarmingly in the sea, threshing it wh The men at her guns saw the gray clip flash by them, and then she was gone, a they knew it was hopeless to try and sp her again through a sight, while the s rolled that way.

Ahead of them now lay two sm cruisers, light cruisers, the *Johnson* a the *Jefferson.* They were not construc to engage an enemy ship at three hund feet. Not when its size was a mere si feet, traveling at sixty-two miles an ho Johnny Kent held the *Shark* on the lan like prow of the leading light cruiser, *Johnson.* As he closed with her, he s denly pulled off the course, no more th twenty-five feet off her side. They had yet reached her when Captain Miller s denly snapped to Graham: "Let a dep bomb go!"

Comander Ashton watched this act with interest. Graham released the dep bomb. These dummies were bright-ora cans, so that they could be easily spott From the moment it hit the water, Co mander Ashton watched his stop-wat The *Shark,* cutting out, tripped by light cruiser's beam, and disappeared ward her stern. But the *Johnson,* be bigger, could not turn out of line, and the time she had reached the orange c attempting to bend her course due w away from it, twenty seconds had elaps and the depth bomb, theoretically, h exploded.

"Did we get her?" Johnny said grim

"We got her."

"Who was she?"

"The *Johnson.*"

"Rick's boat! Rick's! He's downed!"

Captain Miller stared at Johnny. Then, to Graham: "Let the other one try for the *Jefferson.*"

But the *Jefferson* was not to be caught napping. She had seen the maneuver, and her commander guessed at its meaning.

Before the *Shark* had reached her, she had turned off her line and was speeding west. The *Shark* could have caught her easily. But she was not the quarry. Commander Ashton called to Graham and said, "Radio the *Johnson,* Mr. Graham, and tell her that she is out of action, through your depth bomb. They'll check with us."

Captain Miller said: "Zigzag, Johnny—zigzag. The *Jefferson* isn't pitching so much that she can't use those guns. Make your course erratic. I don't want a radiogram that we have been made the object of a direct hit."

"No fear of that," Johnny Kent replied excitedly. "She couldn't possibly draw a bead on us when we're traveling by her broadside. It would be hard to hit us with a machinegun, on a broad sweep. We are traveling too fast." And he was right, for the radio did not crackle, did not announce that they had been disabled. *Rick's ship downed! The words sang in his head.*

He knew they were staring at him . . .

AHEAD of them she loomed. The U.S.S. *Michigan,* her thirty-five thousand tons easing lazily in the chaotic seas. She looked gigantic and indestructible, a mighty engine of war. She was a sight to awe them all, and they could not repress a feeling that they were in the position of the sardine who attacked the sea serpent.

"Destroyer!" George Graham suddenly cried sharply. "Off to starboard. She's coming up on us fast. I never even saw her. She's going to converge to meet us."

Captain Miller sprang to the starboard porthole and peered out. *"Torpedo!"* he cried sharply. "She's launched a torpedo at us!"

Johnny Kent's face was grim, but he clung to the helm and kept the *Shark* upon her course, pointing the tip of her bow on a straight line with the black combers bow of the ship of the line, dead ahead.

"Hard aport!" Captain Miller snapped. "Hard aport, Johnny! They have timed it right! We will strike it on the quarter!"

Johnny Kent replied, his voice vibrant with emotion: "It can't hit us. We don't draw enough water. This is a planing boat, not a displacement boat, Captain. We only draw a foot and a half, and she draws more than that herself."

That was hard to believe, and Captain Miller held his breath as the torpedo's white boiling wake reached them. Captain Miller braced himself for the strike, but there was no strike. And when he looked out the porthole, on the port side, instantly following, he could see the white wake continue, as the torpedo sped harmlessly off toward the Long Island shore.

He sprang to the tube then. They were only four hundred feet away from the U.S.S. *Michigan.* "Johnny," Captain Miller said in a low voice, "I've rigged it to fire in the arc off our port bow. Meet her dead on as long as it's safe, and then sheer off slowly, so that her own port bow will be completely exposed. If we can put a warhead into her bow, she's done for. Out of action, if not destroyed."

Johnny couldn't speak.

"You're under fire," Commander Ashton said. "Her five-inch batteries are in action, and I can see her machine guns manned."

"Another moment," Johnny Kent said with a prayer. "Just another moment."

The moment passed, and in an instant, traveling at their speed, they were inside the range of guns. So close to the gray dreadnaught's hull that it was impossible to use five-inchers on her. For all they knew, they were being raked with machine-gun fire. But since the *Shark* was armored, this did not affect her action. They were within fifty feet of the *Michigan's* plunging bow, when Johnny Kent

turned the *Shark's* head slightly off the wind to starboard.

The change of course lined the port torpedo-tube on a direct line with the battleship's port bow.

Instinctively, Johnny Kent opened his mouth to say: "Fire!" but before the words came out, Captain Miller had depressed the button, and from their stern decks, the dummy torpedo plunged into the sea, kicking up a cascading geyser of water which seemed to hang in the air for many seconds.

They flashed by to the east. The aircraft carrier *Ranger* was heading away from action.

"Never mind her," Captain Miller said suddenly. "Let her go."

Johnny Kent turned his head slightly. "I can catch her."

"I don't want you to catch her," Captain Miller said. "Look off there to the east—one of those cruisers is racing to her protection, and she has a flotilla of protective destroyers all round her. We couldn't break through them twice without getting hit. Too much luck. Besides, there's no word from the *Michigan*. We may have missed her altogether, although I don't see how that's possible. We've got to try again, Johnny.

"We'll use this other torpedo on her. If we can put the *Michigan* completely out of action, we've won the game. Under normal conditions, an aircraft carrier wouldn't think of attacking in close, without the support of her dreadnaughts."

"Aye," Johnny Kent said. He eased the speed and brought over the helm, bringing the *Shark* back upon the vanishing form of the battleship's wake.

"I want you to pass the *Shark* inside this time," Captain Miller said. "Never mind her bow. Try and give me a perfect line on her stern. If we can get the torpedo in close to her screws, she's through."

"Destroyer coming up astern," George Graham warned sharply.

Captain Miller said: "Let go that other depth bomb—we need just a minute more."

GRAHAM released the depth bomb and the orange can floated astern. But this destroyer was not to be caught as had been the *Johnson*. She instantly sheered off, losing way, dropping far off their port quarter.

Ahead of them the bulky stern of the *Michigan* showed itself. Johnny had stepped up the motors and they were traveling very fast. It was wet going forward, because they were running now with a following sea, and Johnny had revved up the Condors high. Not a sound in the cabin.

Captain Miller leaned on the sights, and waited tensely. At a range of one hundred yards, he suddenly said to Johnny: "Star at five points."

The *Shark* turned slightly, and Captain Miller pressed the button. Amidst the spray, they saw the torpedo go. She disappeared from sight beneath the gray-iron view of the sea.

But they could mark her way, because she left above her as she went, the boiling white trail of her fury. Captain Miller had fired at a point abaft her starboard beam, but she now moved forward so that she was presenting her stern to the torpedo's warhead.

Frantically, she tried to come about, pulling her stern out of the fire. But she was too big to evade the missle at such a short and murderous range. They saw the boiling white wake stop beside her stern, and they knew that they had struck her.

Johnny stared, and emotion swept through him. He was sorry for those men aboard the giant. He was suddenly glad to be a mosquito! For the giant was doomed.

"It's done," Captain Miller said, quietly. "Now get out of here, Johnny. Get out of here as fast as you can, and try to raise Ambrose Lightship. Get away from here before those destroyers gang up on us. We have completed our mission; we are out of ammunition; now let's see if we can get home safely."

As the fleet sailed south toward a point

ne thirty miles east of Barnegat Ridge, hnny Kent headed the *Shark* home. ey were not pursued. In half an hour, ey crossed the Cholera Bank. And not ny minutes later, they heard Ambrose's rous horn, shattering the muffled roar wind and sea.

At the radio table, George Graham sudnly said, "Here comes something for ." He listened through the headphones, rching them jauntily on his head, and pencil flew. When he had finished, he nded the message to Captain Miller. It ad as follows:

COMMANDER ASHTON REFEREE ABOARD THE U S S *SHARK* U S S *MICHIGAN* DISABLED BY FIRST TORPEDO BUT ABLE TO HOLD WAY DUE TO WATERTIGHT COMPARTMENT SECOND TORPEDO DEFINITELY PUT HER OUT OF ACTION SHE MAY BE PRESUMED TO BE SINKING.

They shook hands with each other, and oked very pleased.

Johnny sat, pale, his lips bloodless.

Ahead of them, the lightship evolved t of the mist. Captain Miller arranged s coat and cap, and began to assume expression of dignity. He began to alize that for a Navy boat, the discipline oard had been simply scandalous. He d been calling people by their first mes; he had let all rules and regulaons drop.

Of course, she was an experimental boat, sting under experimental conditions. And e fact that two of the crew were not avy men, had accounted for the laxity. ut now, with a victory under her belt, d his home base soon to appear through e rain, Captain Miller resumed the ance of a commander and tried not to nile too much, to show just how good he lt.

AMBROSE was astern when the radio crackled again. It was a message for ohnny Kent. Graham, the radio operator, anded it to him. Lennie Hall took over ne helm when Johnny left it, a trifle tired. is eyes looked heavy, but his face was lled with the lines of relaxed cheerfuless. He read the message, slowly:

JOHN KENT ABOARD THE U S S *SHARK* CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU AND YOUR BOAT IT TAKES A KENESCOT TO SINK A KENESCOT IF I HAD TO STRIKE MY COLORS TO ANYONE I AM GLAD IT WAS YOU (SIGNED)
JOHN KENESCOT SR
COMMANDER U S S *MICHIGAN*

Johnny Kent's hands were trembling. He could hardly hold the message. His eyes seemed watery. "He knew," he said, his voice filled with emotion. "He knew it. He must have known it all the time."

Commander Ashton seemed to know what it was all about. "Yes," he said. "He knew it, Johnny. You forgot that you are the spitting image of your father. Rear-admiral Huston recognized you that day in Washington."

Johnny Kent said slowly, "You don't know what this means to me. My father always wanted me to be—ours was a Navy family. I did all this—the *Shark*—to prove to Dad—"

"I know."

They had passed Sandy Hook, and ahead of them they could hear the penetrating burping note of the Nautiphone in the Lower Bay.

The rain had slackened, and the wind was falling off. In Upper Bay, the fog had blown off the water. They could see the Coast Guard docks plainly. There were flags flying and signs of activity. Already they had the news.

Johnny said, "Commander, may I send a message to a friend? She's anxious—she's been waiting to know."

"By all means," Commander Ashton said.

Johnny wrote on a blank and handed the message to George Graham for transmission to a shore station. Graham read it to himself. It said: *Unpack that bag for good, Marsha. We have met the enemy and they are ours.*

Graham said, "Seems to me I've heard that last part before someplace."

"A man named Perry wrote it," replied Johnny.

Graham stared.

"Perry? Who was he?"

"He," Johnny said proudly, "was a Navy man too."

Blood of the Albacore

AN ARGOSY ODDITY

By NARD JONES

Author of "Detour," "The Last Horizon," etc.

IN THE first place, it was curious that there should be albacore along the coast of Oregon and Washington. So far as anyone knew, they had never schooled that far north.* The albacore likes tropical and semi-tropical waters, and the sea off the coast of the Pacific Northwest is not either.

Scientists really know very little about the albacore, and there were a dozen answers to why they were in northern waters. Some claimed that the Japanese current was growing warmer. Others insisted that the albacore had always been there at that season, but that the fishermen had not been getting far enough out to get them. Nobody really knew.

But the moment the albacore began to run out there, the fishermen of Astoria forgot all about the salmon which they had fished for years—the salmon whi had made a living for their fathers in t days when gillnet boats used sails. T albacore, iced down in cars and shipp to California canneries, would bring fan prices. The fishermen began to take e everything that would float. Landlubbe bought up rotten hulks and got into t chase. Sportsmen heard of the run a chartered boats never meant to go beyo the mouth of the Columbia River. A because the albacore played from fi to a hundred miles at sea, and the weath grows nasty off the north coast, there we many casualties. The timid said that the was no protecting fools from their ov foolishness. But some of the older fishe men had a different notion. I talked to o of them there on the bank of the Colu bia. He was a gray and windburned spe men who had fished since he was a b of eleven.

"They're gettin' lost out there becau they're doin' something that just ain right," he said. "Albacore ain't got a business up here. Albacore is a tropic fish, and it ain't right that they can sta the cold of these waters. Somethin's ha pened to 'em, and I don't like it."

The old man had other misgivings abo it, too. "Another thing, we shouldn't dese the salmon to go after a crazy fish th don't belong here. The salmon has ma a living for us all these years. The I dians knew better. They figured that t salmon was a kind of a god and they h ceremonies to him. And maybe they we right." The ancient fisherman looked at me with his wrinkled face. "Maybe th were right," he repeated. "And if the sa mon is a god, then, the way I look at the albacore is a devil. Did you ever s one?"

"No," I admitted. "I hope to, thoug tomorrow. I came down here to try m hand at catching some."

He shook his head dubiously. "Well, hope you come back all right. And

* It was in the summer of 1938 that albacore appeared in commercial quantities for the first time, although several fishermen claimed to have caught an occasional one in their nets in previous years.—N. J.

you get hold of one of them fish, just take a look at it. They ain't like a fish." He paused. "They got a hard skin like blue steel. They got big round eyes that look right at you when you throw 'em into the ice. They got a tail like a trip-hammer and I've seen them tails slap for hours—not feeble, but powerful—after the fish is out of water. And another thing—*their blood is warm and red and thick, like a human's.*"

I didn't laugh, partly in deference to the old man and partly because I really didn't feel like it. "I take it you've been out after them."

"Just once," he said. "That was enough for me. You see, when you get an albacore inside the boat you got to stick him and let him bleed before you throw him on the ice. And he bleeds like a murdered man, that albacore. While he's doin' it he pounds that tail—so strong that you can't hold it still with two hands—and them big eyes look at you. Sure, I know that these science fellows say it's a fish. They say it's related to the mackerel. But then those fellows *got* to say something. They're like the old Indian medicine men that used to be around here. We ask them something and they got to answer—but we don't know whether the answer is right or not."

IT WAS difficult for me to get the old man's words out of my mind as I went to bed at the hotel that night. I was to be up at four in the morning to meet the owner of the boat I had chartered, and more than anything I wanted to sleep. But I did not doze off until at least two, and when I did I dreamed of bleeding tuna.

That in itself began to seem significant to me, for I am not one given to falling under the effects of gloomy prophecy.

When the hotel clerk called me at four and I set about getting myself dressed for the trip I decided that it was something more than the old man's pessimism that was affecting me.

I dressed in the dark, as is my habit on winter mornings or when I arise before sunup in the summer months. My room faced the river, but beyond the windows I could see nothing. It occurred to me that it was more than the mere blackness of night. It was like a thick cloud, pressing against the window panes. I had the sensation that at any moment the glass might burst into the room.

When I reached the street this feeling was not dispelled. The town was deserted at that hour. From the hotel to the waterfront I encountered not a single soul, saw not a single light. You may imagine my relief when I reached the riverfront street and saw the lights of an all-night restaurant and, bathed in their feeble glow, Pete Forrest, the man from whom I was chartering.

He greeted me as jovially as a man may at such an hour and asked me if I wanted breakfast. "You'd better eat," he added. "Won't do you any harm to lose it—and if it should be a smooth day you'll be getting mighty hungry before we break out sandwiches."

I wondered how the weather might be out there, but I didn't want to ask Pete. We went into the all-night café where the owner-cook-waiter threw ham and eggs and coffee at us with the air of a man who did not expect to see us again. I found that my appetite was not nearly as keen as I had believed, but I made an attempt to eat as much as Pete.

"How many charter parties have you taken out?" I asked.

"Oh . . . maybe ten or eleven."

"Ever hit very bad weather?"

Pete looked at me. "Depends on what you'd call bad weather. I didn't call it bad except twice, but some of those I had out with me thought it was rough. After all, we got to go out there sixty or seventy miles and the boat's only twenty-five feet long and seven at the beam. The ocean ain't hardly ever a mill pond."

"Of course not," I agreed, trying to appear hearty.

"We'll be all right," Pete said, as though to reassure me. "I keep my engine in good shape—and I got a 50-watt radiotelephone

set that will pick up the Coast Guard station if we get into trouble."

That made me feel better, but somehow I did not care for the fatalistic tone of Pete's voice.

I began to feel alone, there in that greasy, dimly lighted all-night café. It was as if Pete and the restaurant man and I were alone—and in a few minutes Pete and I would be getting onto a stick of wood twenty-five by seven feet and going out there sixty or seventy miles. Going down the twelve miles of river from the town to the bar—and then out . . . out to catch and kill a strange, alien fish which bled like a human being.

"Well," I said, "I'll get some cigarettes and let's get out of here and on our way, Pete."

"Yeah . . ." He slid off his stool, and I followed him down to the lonely pier. The river was down with the receding tide and I had to peer over the edge of the wharf to see the boat. I had examined her the day before, but she had looked much more competent in the daylight. I followed Pete down the ladder and stepped into the little craft. It seemed damp and unfriendly as I sat gingerly on the aft seat.

It wasn't much of a boat, as boats go. There was the seat athwart the self-bailing cockpit, and a box over the engine amidships, and a little doghouse forward in which Pete kept his gear, and lifejackets, and the radiotelephone set. There was a wheel and a compass under the shelter, but Pete used the steering wheel that was set into the outside after-wall of the dog-house.

I watched him start the motor and cast off the lines, and we began going astern into the channel of the river. He seemed to know what he was doing, but he had a surly, what-the-hell way of doing it that reminded me of his fatalistic speech.

His actions seemed to say, "We don't know what we're getting in for, but it doesn't make much difference whether we get back or not because we don't matter in the scheme of things." I suppose that fishermen and those who have to do with the sea get to be like that.

I had been around small boats most of my life, although always on bays and rivers, and I had made ocean voyages in liners. But I had never been in a small craft on the open sea, and after we were out a way I began to understand this attitude which Pete Forrest represented. Out there you begin to realize your insignificance. You begin to know that the sea can, at any moment, do what it wishes with you and the little shell which is preserving your life for you.

WITH an outgoing tide and the current, we boomed down toward the mouth of the majestic Columbia. The little boat pitched and tossed and I found myself hanging to the gunwales as Pete steered for the outside.

Once I looked back and saw that the sky was lighting just a little in the east, but ahead of us it was still that oppressive black, broken only by the blinking navigation lights that marked the channel. Even those seemed eerie. It was only by an effort that I could convince myself that they were man-made and man-controlled.

In no time at all we were outside, and to my astonishment it was smoother there.

When we passed the huge red bulk of the lightship the sun had risen pinkly and out before me I saw the ocean stretching as smooth as a lake in summer.

I sighed with relief. We were going to have good weather. And this little boat possessed such speed that undoubtedly we could run away from sudden squalls. Should the motor fail, by some remote chance, there was Pete's radiotelephone. I began to feel pleased that I had decided on a tuna fishing trip. This was going to be a pleasant experience which I could retail at the club—and make exciting with a bit of verbal embroidering. Inwardly I laughed at myself for my misgivings of the earlier morning. And I smiled as I remembered what the old fisherman had said down there on the river bank.

Beyond the lightship we began to pass an occasional trolling vessel, bound out for albacore. Then we encountered three large purse-seiners. The crews of all these boats waved us on, and seemed quite amused at the sight of Pete and me bouncing along in our water flivver intent on catching a dozen albacore for the sport of it.

But after the purse-seine vessels, there was nothing. Once, far off to the southwest, I did see the trailing smoke of a freighter. But the birds which had followed us a little way from shore were now nowhere to be seen. The ocean seemed smoothly lifeless.

I looked back, and by straining my eyes could still make out the shore—but the river mouth seemed to have closed up. The shoreline appeared to me just as it had to old Captain Vancouver when he had failed to discover the Columbia and left it to Gray. Then, as I watched, the thin line of shore seemed to drop slowly down into the water.

I stood up in the cockpit as we boomed along. I turned in a complete circle, and could see nothing.

Nothing.

PETE FORREST and I were two men alone on a great gray disc of sea. It seemed incredible to me that the ocean could be so smooth, and suddenly Forrest echoed my thought: "I ain't ever seen it so smooth this far out," he said.

"How far have we come?"

He looked at his watch. "About twenty-five miles." He turned to the wheel again.

The motor was roaring along at almost top revolutions and I suspected that it would not take us very much longer to reach the place where the tuna ought to be. The further west we ran the more smooth the sea became. There was literally not a ripple. There was not even the long slow swell that you will encounter when the ocean is behaving. Only our little boat marred the surface and it gave me an odd feeling—a lonely feeling—so that I got up and stood by Pete at the wheel, pretending to watch for albacore.

"Never seen it so smooth," said Pete again. I looked at him. His face was troubled, and it struck me that this quiet worried him far more than a storm.

As we headed further out a faint haze settled down. It was not a light fog, for the visibility was still good. It was more like a light veil of smoke. But there was neither the smell of smoke nor the wet tang of mist.

"Take the wheel a minute," Pete said. "Let's see who we can pick up on the radiotelephone just for the hell of it." His voice tried to be casual, but it was fraught with a loneliness. Pete was feeling the same thing that I was feeling, though he would not admit it.

While I held the boat to her course I watched Pete fussing with the dials of the radiophone through the open doorway of the dog-house. I heard him calling: "This is WXYZ calling and standing by. This is WXYZ calling and standing by." Then he would flip the transmitter switch and listen. There was only silence.

"That's funny," he said, and tried again. Still without success. "I'll see if I can get the Coast Guard station—it's a different wave-length."

But he heard nothing from the Coast Guard station, either. "I can't figure it," he said at last. "The weather is perfect."

"Maybe the outfit is on the fritz," I suggested.

He shook his head. "I had it gone over yesterday, and last night I picked up a dozen boats with it." He came out of the dog-house, his forehead wrinkled, his eyes puzzled. "Well," he said, taking the wheel, "one thing—we won't need any radiotelephone this kind of weather, anyhow."

On we went . . . forty miles out . . . fifty . . . fifty-five.

The smoothness of the sea continued, and the mist persisted. Then I noticed something else. It was a different sound from the motor—not the motor itself, but the sound as it reached my ears. There seemed to be an echo, as though the motor were operating inside a huge room.

"Does the engine sound funny to you?" I asked Pete.

He looked at me for a moment before he answered. "Yeah. I been noticing it for the past half hour. It's like—well, like the noise was hitting against the sky and bouncing back at us."

"Do you suppose it's this haze?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's nothing wrong with the motor. The sound's all right—it's just that damned echo."

He had been steering generally west and now, I suppose to determine our position in relation to the river mouth, he looked inside the shelter at the compass. I saw him go suddenly pale. "My God! Look at that thing!"

I looked at the needle. It was revolving, slowly but surely, clear around the compass rose! There was a steady pace to the needle; it was making, I should judge, a complete revolution about every two minutes.

"Listen," Pete said, his voice shaking. "Let's get out of this. Let's get back—and if I can hit that river anywhere close I'll be lucky."

"Well . . . we ought to be getting into some albacore pretty soon," I answered. "But you know more about what we ought to do than I. If you think—"

"I don't think anything. I just figure we ought to get out of this—if we can."

"Would there be any albacore here?"

"There might be. We're running in the Jap current. But I'm going to put her about and hope I can keep her fairly on east."

"That's okay with me. But I'd like to get out a line and see if I can pick up an albacore."

He nodded. "You'll find a pole under the aft seat. Put one of those three-pronged lures on the line, and a big weight. Let out about thirty feet astern. You'd better hang tight to the pole. They hit hard when they hit."

I FOLLOWED his instructions and presently was standing with feet wide apart, waiting. Suddenly my pole jerked out of my hands. "I've got one!" I yelled, and Pete reluctantly throttled down the engine.

"Pull easy," he advised.

I had to pull easy, so great was the force on the line. Inch by inch the line came in. "Bring him around to the side," Pete said, standing ready with the gaff. I thought I would never get the end of that line in—it must have been at least a five-minute job.

But at last the albacore seemed near the boat. I peered over, anxious to glimpse the steel blue, powerful fish the old fisherman had described. Then my heart whirred inside my breast like a frightened pheasant. On the tranquil surface was a trail of thick, red blood!

Pete saw it as soon as I did, and the gaff hook dropped from his frozen fingers. Determined, I reeled in another foot or two. There, just a few inches below the surface, I saw the albacore. Yes, it was steel blue—that much I could discover from a spot near the tail. But the rest of the body was bloody—with blood that seemed to flow as fast as the water carried it to the surface. The great round eye gazed up at me through the quiet water balefully. With a choked scream I threw the pole and line into the water and turned to Pete.

I expected him to be astonished and chagrined at my lack of nerve. After all, he had not heard the yarn of the old fisherman. But his expression was as fearful as my own must have been. Without a word, he turned and took the wheel of the boat and pressed the motor into action.

Over that terrible, smooth surface we plunged—and neither of us called the attention of the other to the streaks of red that striped it everywhere. . . .

WE RAN INTO the storm suddenly—a howling Southeaster that seemed to pounce upon us from nowhere. When it struck, I thought that surely we were lost. Our radiophone was useless, and our compass—

"The compass!" Pete yelled suddenly.

It's quieted down. He veered his course back and forth to test the action of the needle. It seemed to be normal.

We were taking green water over the bow, and I had to clutch at the coaming to keep from being pitched overside. As I stood there it occurred to me that we had overtaken none of the vessels we had passed on the way out. Perhaps, I thought, they had seen the storm coming and made a run for it.

"There she is!" Pete cried. "The river mouth!"

He was right. The compass had corrected itself the moment we had hit the squall.

I would not want to go over that bar again in such weather. Yet to Pete and me the experience was a relief. It was somehow much less terrifying than that awful quiet we had experienced.

Even inside the bar the river was so disturbed that we moored at the pier with the greatest difficulty. A group was on the wharf to greet us. They had been watching our progress up the waterfront, and when we finally got our boats onto the pier they regarded us dubiously.

"How'n the devil did you make it, Pete?" one of them asked. "This is the worst blow we've had in eight years. How're the rest of 'em coming? Those other boats?"

"The rest of them?" Pete repeated. "We were out fifty-five miles and we never passed a vessel coming back!"

They couldn't believe that—because we were the only boat that had come back over the bar. More than that, none of the others came back over the bar that day. It has been more than a year now since I went out with Pete Forrest. On the same day there were four purse-seiners and eighteen trollers went out over the bar. They have not come back.

In Astoria they refuse to believe Pete Forrest when he tells them that, thirty miles from shore, the ocean was like a mill pond that day. They knew that the storm started at ten o'clock that morning, blowing in hard from outside. They know that the freighter *Arline* was pounded to pieces twenty miles down the coast, and that the passenger liner *Denman* was two days off her schedule, bucking seas and headwinds.

They believe that those four seine boats and those eighteen trollers, husky vessels all, were lost in a storm. Pete and I know better—but only a little better. We know that they were lost in a tranquil sea, a sea streaked with blood.

And Pete is even more puzzled than I, because he did not hear the old fisherman talk. But I have often wondered what might have happened that day if I had tried to bring that albacore into the boat.

With that last shove the wagon went rumbling down the hill; the camp exploded awake

Hurricane Range

By LUKE SHORT

ON THE vast grazeland west of the Chisholm Trail arrives Frank Christian with his small crew and herd, certain that his partner, Morg Wheelon, has already bought a claim from the Indians. All too quickly Frank learns the truth. Morg Wheelon has been killed by an unknown hand; his lease has been taken over by the powerful Reservation Cattle Company; and Christian cannot even get grain delivered unless he releases through Scott Corb, leader of a band of tough gunmen, who controls the Indians by selling them whisky. Christian is caught between the big cattle company and Corb's ruthless organization.

But Frank Christian isn't going to take it sitting down. Determined to find Morg Wheelon's killer and to get back his claim, he drives the Cattle Company riders out of the camp and establishes his crew there. Christian's one ally is Hopewell Barnes, but the latter's pretty daughter, Luvie, warns her father not to get in trouble by aiding Frank. The grain, promised by Barnes, is never delivered.

AGAINST the advice of his wise old foreman, Otey, Frank decides to go to work on Scott Corb. So, with a wild Irishman named Red Shibe, Christian descends on Corb and forces him at the point of a gun to deliver grain. The dangerous Corb does so, promising eventually to drive Frank out of the territory.

The next day an Army troop arrives at the camp—and arrests Frank Christian for peddling whisky to the Indians. Obviously the charge is false, but Frank is thrown in jail. Then once again Hopewell Barnes comes to his aid, with money for bail. That night Otey and Red Shibe, who dislike each other intensely, guard the gold—and the next morning it has mysteriously disappeared.

BUT finally, by a shrewd trick, Frank escapes from the jail. Picking up Red Shibe, he searches out the Indian who testified that he peddled whisky. After a sound beating, the Indian admits that the whole thing was framed by Chet Milabel, foreman of the Reservation Cattle Company.

A hunted man now, Frank pays a swift night visit to the Barnes. He convinces Barnes that he is playing straight with him; and privately Frank warns Luvie to stop

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trying to break up the friendship between himself and her father, or else he will prove his certain suspicion—that she was responsible for the mysterious theft of the bail money. . . .

CHAPTER XI

WAGONS A-ROLLING

WITH Barnes' acceptance of Frank's note for the five thousand dollars that had disappeared and his assurance that he was still on their side, Frank felt he was clear to move now.

He and Red had slept on the prairie south of Darlington that night, and at the first light of day they were up and on their way back to the wagon. They crossed the Canadian above Reno and were breaking out of the shore timber when Frank reined in and pointed off across the prairie. A quarter of a mile away were two heavily loaded tarp-covered freight wagons in tandem. Six teams of horses dragged them at a snail's pace across the lush greening grass of the prairie. But what interested Frank was the fact that six outriders escorted the wagons, as if they contained a valuable shipment of gold.

"Know 'em?" Frank asked.

Red nodded. "Circle R freightin' outfit. That's a mountain hitch, but they're usin' tandem so they won't have to run so many guards."

Frank's eyes were musing. "Sure of that?"

"It's the only outfit that freights that way." Suddenly, Red looked over at him. "Why?"

"Maybe," Frank said thoughtfully, "this is what we been lookin' for. It won't hurt to make sure."

Red remembered there was a plum thicket several miles on where a man could hide close to the road, and turning back into the timber, they made for it. The thicket turned out to be acres in extent and some freighter, tired of traveling a mile to cross a barrier some hundred feet wide, had laboriously cleared a road through it. While Red waited with the horses in a swale a quarter of a mile off the road, Frank took up the vigil alone. By midmorning he returned, his clothes torn from the plum briars, but a look of restrained excitement on his face.

"It's the Circle R," he confirmed. "We'll just keep 'em in sight this afternoon."

It was a dreary business, for the pace of the freight outfit was slow. Red calculated in late afternoon that they would camp by the Canadian that night. And when they saw the wagon leave the faint wagon trail later, Red nodded. "They're headin' for the upper ford," he announced. "The lower ford has a bed that can turn into quicksand under a heavy load. I reckon they're loaded."

"Tell me more," Frank said.

"More about what?" Red asked, puzzled at Frank's curiosity.

"This upper ford. Where is it? How do they cross it?"

Red shook his head, understanding now, and he grinned. "It won't work, kid. There's only a smidgin of water runnin' and they're more careful crossin' the river than any other time. While they take off the roughlock on the shore, half the crew crosses to the other side and beats the brush for Corb's ambush. They aim to—"

"Roughlock?" Frank asked.

"That's right. They camp on the bluff, and it's a steep slope to the river, and they have to roughlock the wagons."

"How do you know all this?" Frank asked.

"I used to pick up five dollars now and then ridin' guard. That is, I did until I threw in with Morg."

Frank settled back into silence, and Red, knowing something was up, kept his counsel. He was hungry, but he forgot it trying to puzzle out what Frank was thinking.

When darkness settled they could see the pin point of the freighter campfire in the distance. Frank rose from where they had been lying in a sheltering dip in the prairie, and said, "I'm goin' to have a look."

"You go careful," Red warned. "It's in the open, with no trees around it."

FRANK caught his horse and mounted and rode out toward the freight camp. A quarter of a mile away he dismounted and approached on foot. The campfire, he knew, would blind the crew to anyone out of the circle of firelight, but nevertheless he moved cautiously, creeping through the tall grass until he could see the whole layout of the camp. It was a sight he was familiar with. The cook was poking the Dutch oven into the coals. Another hand came out of the darkness up the hill with an armload of driftwood. The freighter was straightening out the harness to be in readiness for the next morning, and the horse wrangler was leading the teams, two at a time, down the slope to drink.

But it was the man working on the wagons who interested Frank. The tandem hitch had been broken and the last wagon hauled up abreast the other. They were on a gentle downslope, their wheels solidly blocked. And one of the crew was making a roughlock of a log, which was thrust through the spokes of the back wheel and lashed solidly to the wagon frame.

Frank took all this in, studying it, then wriggled back into the darkness and made a wide circle upstream to the river. Where the ground fell away he had to move cautiously down the slope.

The ground flattened out at the base of the hill, then ended abruptly at a low cutbank. The river had swung toward this bank and was slowly eating into the hill. But from the noise of the river Frank knew it was traveling over a boulder bed, and that this ford had been chosen because of the solid footing. Satisfied, he returned to his horse and rode back to Red, after filling his canteen at the river.

They backtracked a mile, found some timber, built their fire, boiled coffee and ate jerky, then doused the fire and lay smoking in the deep grass.

Then Frank told Red what was in his mind. Red listened judicially, and when Frank finished, he said, "What about the guard?"

"I'll toll him over and slug him. If he won't come, it won't work."

Red only grunted, but Frank knew he agreed.

They waited there in the dark for a couple of hours, then got their horses. Riding toward the camp now, they could see that the fire had died down. They swung over to the right and left their horses up wind, tied to a picket stake, and then they split up.

Red walked off into the night, starting the circle that would bring him to the other side of the camp. And Frank walked straight toward the camp.

As Red crawled through the grass, he could see the guard squatting by the small fire, feeding it sticks of driftwood. Around him was the sleeping crew. Afterward, the guard moved back into the darkness and sat down against a wheel of the wagon, his rifle across his knees. He smoked and occasionally moved around, but he never left his rifle and he never came into the circle of firelight unless to replenish the blaze.

RED had waited half an hour, now, and he wondered if Frank had given up when he heard a sudden commotion among the horses who were in a rope corral on the other side of the far wagon. The guard listened, and when the commotion died, he settled back. As soon as he sat down, the commotion started again. There was a snorting and a stomping among the horses that the guard knew was unnatural.

He rose, rounded the end of the wagon and approached the corral. Then Red saw a shadowy figure come around the front of the wagon, drop on all fours and crawl under it.

The guard came back, looked uneasily toward the horses, stirred the fire, then returned to his seat against the wheel.

Red held his breath, watching. There was a blur of motion over there, a muffled sound and then the guard rolled over on his side. Grinning, Red rose and cautiously circled the fire and came in under the wagon. Frank's dim shape loomed between him and the fire. Beyond were the blanketed figures of the sleeping crew.

Without a word Red set to work on

hat they had planned. He took his knife, cut the ropes that bound that roughlock, then helped Frank to drag the log noiselessly through the spokes and lay it aside. They followed the same procedure with the second wagon.

Then they met under the first wagon, and Frank whispered, "Ready?"

"Let her go," Red murmured. They both went to the front wheels and removed the blocks. The wagon did not move. Then moving in the dim light, they both put their shoulders to the wheel and pulled on the big spokes. The wagon moved a little, settled, moved again, and then nothing in the world could have stopped it.

Frank and Red ran out of the circle of firelight and dropped to the ground as Frank raised his voice in the long yell.

"Ye-ow-eeeeeee!"

The camp almost exploded awake. And the first thing they saw was the wagon rumbling out of sight down the slope.

"Bart!" a man yelled. "There goes the wagon!"

The riders came to their feet, guns in hand. One man shot into the night on general principle and then he turned and listened. The whole crew had frozen into a listening attitude.

The rumble of the wagon down the steep slope grew louder as it gathered momentum. There was a slack jolting of ungreased wood that mounted to a furious racket, and then it ceased abruptly. For a split second there was no sound at all.

Immediately a great rending and breaking screaming of splitting wood filled the night, drowning the splash the wagon had made as it went into the river.

That sound speeded the whole crew into action. Every man there started running down the slope, and cursing filled the night with bedlam.

Frank and Red rose out of the grass, ran for the second wagon, and set it in motion. Again, there was the slow ominous rumble of the wheels.

Suddenly, from down the shore, a man's wild voice raised shrilly, "Look out! Here comes the other!"

The wagon drowned out the cursing and the yelling as it made its ponderous way down the dark slope into the night. Then, as before, the noise ceased, and an instant later the crash came. This crash seemed to shake the ground, and it was louder than the first, for it had hurtled down on top of the smashed wagon.

After that, there was utter silence.

And then Red's brash voice lifted in the night. "If you want any more whisky, you'll buy it next time!"

And he and Frank faded swiftly away, sure that Red's words would place the blame for tonight directly on Scott Corb.

CHAPTER XII

BLAZING RANGE

MILABEL'S office looked over the yard and the corrals, so that when Bart Hampstead rode into the Circle R, and vaulted out of the saddle before the horse stopped, Milabel saw him.

He stepped out through the office door into the yard and walked toward Hampstead. They met under the big cottonwood that was huge enough to shade half the big log building that was the Circle R headquarters ranch.

"What's up, Bart?" Milabel demanded. The bruises on his face were a ripe purple now, but the swelling had gone down. The bags under his eyes were a deep green, yet he could see well enough. His right eyebrow held a sticky smear of pine tar under which a deep gash was already healing.

Bart Hampstead hauled up out of breath, and said angrily, "We got the two wagons smashed to splinters in the North Fork. The corn's swole up, the flour is paste, and all that grub must be damn near to Arkansas."

"What happened?" Milabel demanded harshly.

"That damn Corb's crew snuck into camp and slugged Barney while we was sleepin'. Then they cut the roughlocks and started the wagons down the slope. They piled up in the river and smashed to

splinters. Cove got run down by one and it broke his arm. I tell you, all hell broke loose. I never seen such a mess. And then the horses stampeded and we was afoot, and—"

"Get your breath," Milabel said coldly, and waited a moment, glaring at his rider.

"How do you know it was Corb? Did you see him?"

"No, but he yelled down to us, 'If you want any more whisky next time, you better buy it.' "

"That's Corb, then," Milabel said bitterly. "He's gettin' pretty big for his pants, now that he's took over Christian's place."

Bart shifted his feet, wanting to speak but waiting for a sign from his boss.

"Well?" Milabel demanded.

"Part of that-there grub we was freightin' was headed for Shafer and that herd of three-year-olds," Bart said. "He'll hit the North Fork tonight, and he won't have no grub."

Milabel swore again. "All right, have Reilly hitch up that fast team to the buckboard and go into the post and buy enough grub to last Shafer till Caldwell and take it out to him."

"You want me to take it?"

"No!" Milabel said savagely. "I want you to stay here until that crew of rockin' chair punchers gets back!"

Bart turned away and started walking back to the corral. "Bart," Milabel called. He walked over to him. "You think Shafer's herd is far enough away so Corb won't make a try at it to get even for what I aim to do to him tonight?"

Bart looked at him shrewdly. "Depends on what you aim to do to him. If you run off his horses that would give Shafer's herd time to get across the North Fork. I don't reckon Corb would try to touch it after that."

"That's all I wanted to know," Milabel said in a soft voice. "Let me know when the crew gets here. And be sure that grub reaches Shafer, so he don't have to wait."

He turned and walked back toward the house, his face thoughtful. Once in the office, he sat down in his swivel chair, cocked his booted feet on the desk and stared thoughtfully out at the corrals. He remembered Abe Fuckett cursing him out for letting Corb take over Christian's place after the Circle R frame-up had paved the way, and he smiled faintly. Corb had gone a little too far this time. The theft of Christian's place was bad enough, but this was rubbing it in. Corb would regret this.

That afternoon when he saw the freight crew filing into the place, he picked up his hat and crossed over to the deserted bunkhouse. One by one the weary crew filed in, and when they were all assembled Milabel began to talk. The first twenty minutes he administered a verbal raw-hiding that left every man in the crew redfaced and cursing. After that, he settled down to business, and was eventually interrupted by the clanging of the supper gong.

The crew ate in silence, afterward returning to the corrals. Eighteen men saddled up and rode off in pairs toward the east. An old buckboard left the place, too, Milabel driving out alone. By dark, the Circle R was deserted except for the cook.

THE dozen horses stamped impatiently in the night gloom of the live-oaks, and all the talk among the men afoot was carried on in whispers. Presently, when two riders approached and dismounted, Milabel's voice, thick and almost indifferent, said, "Well?"

"We cut the fence and drove out every head of horses," one of the riders said.

"Is there a light in the shack?"

"No. There's a guard on the porch, though."

Milabel's cigarette arched out and fell to the ground, making a shower of sparks.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes to find your positions. After that, you know what to do."

He and Bart moved off into the timber with six other men. One by one the men dropped away in the darkness. Now Milabel walked softly, for he was on the edge of the clearing toward the house. When he

picked up the rank smell of kerosene, he went more cautiously. Presently, his hand touched the buckboard and he stopped, squatting on his heels and watching the dark bulk of the shack beyond and below the trees. It hadn't been as much of a job as he thought it would be. Six men had carried the light buckboard on their shoulders through the timber, and they had contrived to do it silently enough that the shack hadn't been alarmed.

When he judged the time was up, he struck a match, held it under his coat, and glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes.

Then he looked around at Bart, nodded, and threw the match up into the buckboard. There was a soft explosion as the kerosene-soaked rags caught fire. Bart knocked the block out from under the front wheel on his side, Milabel did the same, and then they gave the buckboard a shove. Some of the full gallon cans of kerosene slopped over, adding to the fire.

The buckboard trundled noisily down the slope, and at the same time the first hammering of shots out by the front porch broke the night.

The buckboard gathered speed, slopping burning kerosene onto the ground. Its tongue had been wired up, its wheel set. It headed straight for the leanto cookshack.

It just missed the corner of the house and crashed into the leanto, whose boards gave way. Then the buckboard stopped abruptly and the cans of kerosene slopped forward in a shower of fire.

Bart was already firing at the back window. Milabel drew back into the timber and circled around to the edge of the timber where he could see the front porch.

There were answering shots from the shack. The leanto was wholly ablaze now, and the flames were eating into the logs of the main shack.

It didn't take long for the first man to make a break. He tried it through the kitchen door, because it was nearest to the timber, and he didn't get ten steps before the fusillade of gunfire felled him and he lay quiet.

The burning shack was lighting up the night now, and by the aid of its light Milabel could pick out the place where each of his men was forted up. He didn't realize he was visible until a Corb slug ripped some bark off the tree against which he was leaning. He dodged behind the tree and calmly watched the fire take its course.

Presently, another rider made a break for the corrals and the barn. He almost made it, but he went down, too. And now the night was light as day, and Milabel chuckled. When the shooting died down temporarily, he raised his great booming voice in the night, "Corb! Oh, Corb!"

Above the crackling of the fire Corb's voice lifted in a curse. "Damn your soul, Milabel!"

"Next time you aim to wreck my wagons, think twice about it!"

At the end of his shout, the men in the shack made a break out the burning kitchen for the timber. There were six of them, and among them was Corb. All the guns of the Circle R crew opened up, but they were caught off guard. One man, the last, went down on the edge of the timber, and the rest vanished into its depths.

Milabel, seeing he would be cut off from his retreat if he didn't hurry, plunged back into the live-oaks and ran for his horses.

One by one the Circle R hands drifted back into the timber, got a horse and faded into the night. When Milabel's count was right, he too rode off alone, looking back toward the shack when he was clear of the timber.

And lifting over the black line of the timber was a faint glow that crawled to the stars. Satisfied, Milabel didn't look back again.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHEEPHERDER'S PUP

OTEY'S wagon had swung far over to the east side of the range, and when Frank and Red spotted it in mid-morning after wrecking Milabel's freight wagons, they didn't go near it. Instead, they offsaddled beside a thicket of cotton-

wood saplings, threw down their bedrolls in its screening cover, and slept. The wagon was too dangerous in daytime.

It was late afternoon when Frank awoke, and quietly, without waking Red, he picked up his blankets and saddle and trudged over the rise of ground and the few hundred yards of prairie to the chuck wagon. Joe Vandermeer, the cook, was the only man there, and he was asleep in the wagon.

At Frank's entrance he rose, and when Frank announced he was hungry enough to eat a folded tarp, Joe brought out some cold steak, while Frank built a fire for coffee.

"Where's everybody?" Frank asked.

"Otey and most of the boys are ridin' our east line," Joe told him. "Beach, he's in Reno after grub, like he always is. He's pretty restless, I reckon."

By the time the coffee was boiling, Red Shibe strolled in.

When they were halfway through the meal Beach Freeman rode into camp, dumped the sack of grub in the chuck wagon and squatted down opposite Frank and Red. He was a thin-faced kid with that wild touchy look about him that is often bred when a youngster is thrown on his own too early in life. But he was a good hand, and Frank had taken him on in the belief that association with older men and hard work would make him forget the saloons and gambling tables. Joe Vandermeer's words disturbed him. Beach, through the lack of steady work assigned him each day, was drifting back to the saloon crowd, and there was nothing Frank could do about it until this lease business was settled. He spoke to Beach with more friendliness than usual.

"Gettin' fed up with this boardin' house on wheels, Beach?"

Beach grinned and poked the fire. "Sort of," he said. There was a strange brightness in his eyes as he brought out a sack of tobacco and rolled a smoke.

"I heard some talk at the sutler's store at the post," Beach announced presently.

"Like what?"

"Like Corb and Milabel are tanglin'," Beach said. "Last night, Corb wrecked a couple of Milabel's freight wagons, and right under his nose."

Frank looked at Red and grinned, and Beach saw it.

"What's funny?" Beach said.

"Tell me how you heard it, and I'll tell you," Frank said.

Beach was still curious. "A Circle R hand come in to the post this afternoon with a buckboard and bought a load of grub. He was in a hell of a hurry and headed northwest with it, but not before he got a fresh team from the wagon yard."

Frank's attention sharpened. "Fresh team? Which way'd he go?"

"Northwest."

"You see him hire the team?"

"Sure. After he told the clerk about the wagons bein' wrecked I drifted out to the stable behind him. I seen him hire the teams," Beach said.

"Hear him say any more?"

"Nothin' I understood," Beach said. "He called to the hostler that he'd have one of Walking Elk's boys bring the team in."

Frank looked at Red, and Red said, "Walkin' Elk's summer camp is on the North Fork."

"Sounds like he might be hurryin' some grub up to a trail crew."

Red nodded, and he and Frank exchanged brief glances.

Beach blurted out, "What's the secret, anyhow?"

"Nothin'," Frank said. "Only we wrecked the Circle R freight wagons, Beach." He told him about it, and Beach's eyes glowed as he listened. He laughed when Frank was finished, and there was a kind of longing in his face. Nothing that had passed between Frank and Red had escaped him, and when the talk shifted to other things, he was quiet, watching them.

AS DUSK settled, Frank rose. "We'll have to be driftin', Joe," Frank announced. "Fix up a couple of day's grub for us."

Red rose too and headed out for their horses which were grazing nearby.

Beach poked the fire nervously and rolled a cigarette and watched Joe and Frank pick out the grub. Finally, he rose and came up to Frank.

"Can I talk to you, Frank?"

"Shoot," Frank said.

"Not here," Beach said, looking at Joe Vandermeer. Frank, puzzled, walked over beyond the fire, then turned to face Beach. The kid's face was tense, excited.

"I seen you look at Red when you said that about the trail herd," Beach said quickly. "You aim to raid it, Frank?"

"I dunno," Frank said slowly. "We haven't even talked it over."

"Let me go," Beach said.

Frank had his mouth open to refuse when Beach burst out, "Hell, Frank, I'm growed up. You promised me a ridin' job when you took me on. I done all right on the trail, didn't I?"

"Sure."

"I want work!" Beach said vehemently. "It ain't no fun listenin' to Otey grouse around every night. You and Red are out raisin' hell, doin' somethin'! All I'm doin' is runnin' errands for Otey over at the post, and then settin' around listenin' to his moanin' every night about the bad trouble we're gettin' into."

"This is risky, Beach, and—"

"I want it risky!" Beach cried. "I ain't a old man!"

There was a desperation in Beach's face, and Frank felt a sudden sympathy for him. He had broken too many colts not to know that there were times when a man had to let up on the discipline if he didn't want to spoil the spirit of the animal.

He said gently, "No gunplay goes, Beach. You got to be fast on your feet and not stoppin' to fight."

"Try me," Beach said, excitement in his voice.

Presently, Frank said, "All right. Get a horse and some grub."

Beach let out a whoop of joy and ran for the wagon. Red drifted in with the horses and Frank walked over to him and told him Beach was joining their party.

"You aim to raid that trail herd with him along?" Red asked.

"What's the matter with that?" Frank demanded.

Red looked away. "Nothin'," he said mildly.

Frank took his reins. There was something the matter with it for Red, he thought; and then the old stubbornness built up inside him, and he didn't care. He was boss of this crew. It was tough enough being outlawed into this strike and hide way of fighting without having to argue every step of the way. He was dimly aware that his patience was a pretty thin thing nowadays as he waited for Beach to bring in his horse. Red was whistling faintly, and the incident had apparently already slipped his mind.

IT WAS a long ride that night and a fast one, for Frank didn't want to lay over a day unless he had to. Red, as usual, set the pace, for he knew this big land. It was close to dawn when Red pulled up and said, "Listen."

They quieted, and they could hear the far yapping of dogs.

"That's Walkin' Elk's camp," Red announced. "My guess is that the Circle R will use that old Army freight crossing a mile below the camp. They'll be shippin' three-year-olds this time of year, and the crossin' will have to be just as gentle as they can make it, on account of the tallow on them steers."

"Head for it," Frank said. "We'll see."

They rode on for another hour, and the sky to the east was beginning to gray faintly with false dawn. Frank kept an uneasy eye on the east, and as they pulled out of a dip in the ground, he had almost decided that by the time they found the herd it would be too light to work.

Suddenly, ahead of him and over the ridge he caught the bright flare of a campfire, and he pulled his horse around and grabbed the reins of Beach's pony. Red saw it too, and they moved softly away to the east. There, across the flat prairie.

they could plainly see the fire built behind the chuck wagon. Two men were moving around it, the horse wrangler and the cook. Off ahead of them, just barely visible against the prairie was the dark mass of the herd bedded down for the night. It would only be a matter of seconds before the first steer came to his feet and drifted toward the river, and the herd would be wakened.

Frank spoke swiftly to Beach. "You and Red strike north and stampede them toward the river. Don't talk to anyone, don't shoot, and the first sign of daylight strike straight for the last creek we crossed and wait."

They split up. Frank waited alone. When the first shot came and Red raised the long yell, he touched the spurs to his horse and headed for the herd at one side of the wagon, letting his gun off into the air.

He was where he could see the camp and hear the herd. There was a clashing of horns ahead of him as the cattle, panicked out of sleep, reared to their feet and started to push. The trail hands came out of their blankets at once, running for their horses, and off across the herd, from two places, bloomed the orange wink of Red's and Beach's guns.

Then the thunder started as the cattle began to move, bawling in their terror to get away from the thing that had passed among them like a prairie fire sweeping dry grass. Frank swung in behind the herd, letting off his gun and yelling. The space around the wagon was empty now; the cook had climbed up on the drop shelf of the wagon and was now perched on top of the box, out of harm's way. A few frantic cattle ran on the other side of the wagon, and off to the right there was a fusillade of shots.

Then the last steer swept by the chuck wagon and Frank reined up, the reek of dust strong in his nostrils.

BEACH, on the heels of the frantic steers, emptied his gun into the air and yelled while he reloaded. Off to the right a mounted figure loomed up, and Beach pulled over toward it and yelled above the thunder of the herd, "That you, Red?"

As soon as he did it, he knew he had disobeyed Frank's last word. The mounted figure shot at him then, and Beach felt a cold crawling sensation along his spine. It was a night-herder he had mistaken for Red.

He leaned down over his horse's neck, and this time he remembered Frank had said no fighting. But this rider had heard him call out to Red, knew him for a stranger and had shot. If that word got back to Milabel, the secret was lost. And on top of that, Beach found he had spurred into the herd, and that the cattle were crowding his horse over toward the hostile night-herder.

Pure panic seized Beach, then. He would have to shoot in self-defense, have to stop this man's mouth. He swung up his gun, caught the tall form of the night-herder silhouetted against the sky, and with shaking hand he pulled the trigger. The man went out of the saddle as if an invisible hand had brushed him.

In sheer terror Beach fought his horse out of the herd, letting the few cattle drift by. In the dust haze he saw another rider pulled up outside the circle of the firelight. It was Frank.

Then, as thunder of the herd died a little, he heard Frank's voice lifted, "Cook!"

Beach pulled up, watching. The cook swiveled his head and called, "Who is it?"

Frank said, "Go back and tell Milabel he better buy whisky next time instead of stealin' it."

The cook straightened up, peering into the dark, and Frank rode off into the night. Beach pulled off in the opposite direction. Suddenly, he picked the sound of a horse behind him, and palming up his gun he turned and peered through the coming dawn.

A voice said harshly, "Put it away!"

It was Red. In a moment he pulled alongside Beach and said grimly, "That was nice shootin'. He's dead."

Beach's heart sank. "I—I had to, Red," he stammered. "I got caught in the millin' and I was bein' carried over close to him and he was shootin' at me."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why was he shootin' at you?"

"He saw me stampedin' the herd," Beach said.

"You're a liar," Red said bluntly. "I heard you call out to me."

After that, neither of them spoke. They rode on south in the dawn, and they could hear the distant shots of the trail drivers trying to turn the stampeded herd and get them to milling. At the creek, well away from the river, they dismounted. Red had scarcely had time to build a cigarette before Frank's high shape loomed up out of the gray dawn.

Frank said wearily, "That was a sure-enough, center-fire stampede. Couldn't even have bought one as good."

Red said slowly, "Beach cut down on a night-herder. Killed him."

Frank was dismounted now. He stood utterly still, and then he said quietly, "What?"

Red said, "I took the trouble to make sure."

Frank looked over at Beach, who was standing by the creek. "I thought I told you to run, not fight," he said ominously.

"I couldn't help it!" Beach cried. "He was shootin' at me, Frank! I couldn't let him cut me to doll rags!"

Frank didn't speak for a long moment, then he said in a thick voice, "You damn sheepherder's pup! So you're tryin' to hang me too!"

"I couldn't help it!" Beach cried.

"Get out of here before I cut down on you myself!"

Beach started for his horse. Frank, cursing savagely, swung back into his saddle and crossed the creek and struck out south alone.

Beach paused and watched him, his small eyes wicked. "Nobody's goin' to call me a sheepherder's pup," he said. "He better take that back."

Red said bluntly, "Keep out of his way until he cools off."

Beach turned hot eyes on him. "Why'd you tell on me?"

Red said drily, "I'm tryin' to learn you somethin', kid. You're old enough to take the medicine you make for yourself. You ain't goin' to run away from a damn thing you ever do, not ever. You better start facin' it right here."

"He'd never have found out if you hadn't told," Beach said angrily.

"I didn't expect you'd have brains enough to see what I meant," Red said, an edge to his voice. "Get on your horse and ride with me. And keep out of Frank's way."

CHAPTER XIV

MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE ENEMY

CORB hung around Fort Reno the morning after the fire just long enough to hear the talk. It wasn't hard to pick up. Nobody knew about last night's fire yet, but a half dozen men in the sutler's bar grinned slyly at him. The bartender, when he called for a beer, served him with the remark, "I hear Milabel's havin' a little trouble with his freightin' outfit."

"Who told you?"

"A Circle R rider was in here yesterday afternoon breathin' plenty of fire against your outfit, Corb."

"That so. Where'd it happen?"

"Above the Comanche Ford," the bartender said, and grinned. He admired a man who could keep his business to himself, and admit nothing, as Corb was doing.

Corb finished his beer and went out to his horse at the tierail. So this was what Milabel meant last night at the burning shack when he spoke about wrecking his wagons.

Corb rode out of Reno alone, headed for Comanche Ford. He reached it about noon, and finding nothing headed upstream. Presently, at the bend in the river, he saw the wreckage of the two wagons

blocking the main channel. He dismounted at the cold campfire and read the story left by the tracks. They were plain enough, from the wagon tracks that missed the cut in the steep bank into the river to the telltale ends of severed roughblock rope.

Corb hunkered down on his heels and tried to reconstruct the scene. It had been done at night, and it had been done stealthily, for there were only a couple of empty shellcases here that spoke of little shooting. The camp hadn't been aroused, or there would have been some fighting. And a big bunch of men would have roused the camp. That meant that there were only two or three at most who had done it. And they had made it look as if Corb had done it, else why had Milabel retaliated with the burning of the shack?

Corb pulled at his lower lip, then scratched his ragged roan mustache, his black eyes veiled and scheming. He had enemies in this country, but they were pretty well cowed. And then he thought of Frank Christian, he came to his feet, his mind shuttling to Red Shibe. Two of them, both wild as hell and tough as leather. Christian was out of jail, loose, and Corb was squatting on his place. Who else would have done it?

Thoughtfully, using those two as possibilities, Corb again reconstructed the scene of the wagon wrecking. It fitted neatly, and he turned back to his horse.

He mounted and turned toward the burned shack, casting about in his mind for a motive. Abruptly, he pulled up and gazed off across the prairie, all the tag ends of his questioning suddenly fitting together like the tumblers of a lock.

Neat enough.

Motive? Christian's motive could be read plain enough in the ashes of that shack. Too small to fight two big outfits, Christian's idea was to get them fighting between themselves.

And no sooner had Corb realized it than he changed directions and headed straight for the Circle R. He might get shot, but that was a chance he had to run if he was to see and talk to Milabel.

HE RODE into the Circle R in late afternoon, rode straight up to the blacksmith shop where a puncher was hammering away on a shoe.

Corb's voice surprised him. "Where's Milabel?"

The puncher wheeled, and saw Corb sitting loosely in the saddle, his hands folded on the horn. The puncher looked twice, closely, and then he said, "Ain't you Corb?"

"That's right."

The puncher sized up his chances, and then went for his gun. Corb didn't move, only stared calmly into the barrel of the rider's unlimbered Colt.

"You'll see Milabel soon enough," the rider said. "Climb out of that saddle and walk toward the house."

Corb did. When he was under the cottonwood Milabel stepped out of the office door, a look of amazement on his bruised face.

Corb said crisply, "I came over to talk to you. If you're wise you'll listen. Send that puncher away from here."

The two enemies, one a big and bluff man, the other a slouched untidy figure who looked as mild as a country storekeeper, regarded each other levelly, shrewdly. It was one of the few good close looks at each other they had ever had. Milabel's eyes reflected a momentary and grudging admiration, and then, not to be outdone in indifference to danger, he said to the rider, "Drag it."

The puncher walked away, and Corb said, "Where can we talk?"

Milabel gestured to the office. Corb went in first. There was a worn leather chair in front of a sagging sofa which he took. Milabel lowered himself into his swivel chair, eyeing Corb warily.

"What's the matter?" Milabel demanded suddenly. "Gettin' a bellyful of this fightin'?"

"You nor all your crew couldn't give me a bellyful," Corb murmured. "It's just that I don't like to waste my men."

Milabel's face flushed a little. "Come to buy me off?"

"I come to give you some cold facts," Corb said. "Milabel, why'd you burn me out last night?"

Milabel's eyes narrowed. "You know damn well why I burned you out. I'll burn out your other place the next time you raid one of my wagons."

"But I never raided your wagons," Corb said flatly. "That's what's funny."

Milabel stared shrewdly at him. "Takin' water?" he jeered.

"I ain't scared of you," Corb said mildly. "Hell's bells, we've scrapped back and forth for a couple of years now. You ought to know I won't run, Milabel. If I saw a chance to down your outfit for good and all, I'd do it this minute. You'd do it to me, too. But I reckon we both decided the same thing, decided it a long time ago. We both figured it was too expensive in men and money to war it out."

Milabel nodded. "That's the way I figured it, until you raided them wagons."

"But I didn't raid the wagons," Corb said patiently. "That's what I'm tryin' to tell you. I beat you to Christian's place, after you framed him with that whisky peddlin'. It was luck, pure luck, because he'd cleaned up on my boys the night before and I was after his hide. Your frame-up moved him off and I saw it empty and moved in before you did." He paused. "I was wonderin' if I could hold the place against you. Does it look reasonable that I'd get you more on the prod by wreckin' you wagons?"

"No, it don't," Milabel conceded. "Still, you did."

"You're wrong," Corb said bluntly. "I didn't. Somebody else did. And I'll tell you why, Milabel. They figured you'd be mad enough to fight. You were. You burned my place. They figured I'd be mad then, mad enough to turn around and start a grass fire on your range or have the Indians raid one of your herds."

"They?" Milabel said skeptically. "Who's they?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Corb said drily. "Just supposin' you and me started fightin'. You'd get half your crew killed off and the other half would leave. Your cattle would be choused around until they was as gaunt as crows. Your range would be burned and your line camps wrecked. Pretty soon the company would decide that they were losin' more money than they were makin', and they'd just pull stakes, wouldn't they?"

MILABEL didn't say anything, and Corb went on. "Take me. If you started fightin' me the Indians would start fightin' you. Pretty soon the Army would decide that I was raisin' a little too much hell in the Nations and they'd kick me out. That right?"

Milabel nodded slowly.

"All right," Corb said. "If we was both moved out of here, who'd profit?"

Milabel scowled, alert now. "Lots of ranchers."

"Which ones?" Corb said. "Just figure the one outfit that's got it in for us both, and you'll have it." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"That's Frank Christian, I reckon," Milabel said slowly.

Corb only nodded, watching him. There was a sudden pounding on the door, and Milabel bawled, "What is it?"

"Can you step out a minute, Chet?" someone asked.

Milabel went out the door, closing it behind him. Corb tried to listen, but he could only catch a murmur of voices. Then Milabel started to curse softly, and there were more questions, more answers. Finally, two men, one the puncher who was shoeing his horse and another rider moved past the window. Corb saw this second rider take the reins of a lathered horse and walk toward the corrals.

In a moment, Milabel came into the rom and walked to his chair, not even looking at Corb. His face was ugly, and a half-smoked cigarette hung from his lips He looked keenly at Corb, and then sank into the chair. He stared at the floor, looking at Corb now and then, and finally, his mind seemed to be made up.

He said to Corb, "A herd of three-year-

olds Shafer was drivin' to Caldwell was stampeded up on the North Fork last night. About two hundred of them bogged down in quicksand and there's still three hundred missin'. The rest each run about twenty pounds of tallow off in the stampede."

Corb only smiled faintly under his roan mustache.

"Three men done it," Milabel went on, watching Corb. "They told the cook that if I wanted whisky again I better buy it." He paused. "That's the same thing they called that night when they wrecked the wagons." At Corb's frown of puzzlement, Milabel went on, "We raided a cache of yours for whisky to frame Christian."

"I know," Corb said.

"Then whoever it was wrecked the wagons and stampeded the herd last night wanted it to look like it was you gettin' even with us for stealin' your whisky."

"But my whole crew was in the house when you burned it last night," Corb pointed out.

"I know, I know," Milabel said wearily. He dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "Well, it looks like you're right."

"Sure I'm right. You need any more proof?"

"What do you want to do?"

"First thing," Corb said, "is for us to quit fightin'. We're just wreckin' each other so Christian can step in."

"What else you think we ought to do?"

Corb stood up. "That's up to you," he said quietly. "If you want to throw in with me to lick this Christian, I'll do it. We'll call a truce long enough to run him out of the country."

Milabel said, "There's one thing I didn't tell you. One of my trail hands was killed last night."

He and Corb looked at each other, and Milabel said, "The first thing we ought to do, then, is to have that reward for Frank Christian raised to two thousand dollars. You and me will put up the fifteen hundred extra. And this time it will be 'dead or alive.'"

Corb nodded. "Now you're talkin'."

Milabel rose. "I'll think about the rest of it. I'll ride over in a couple days and let you know. I want to get Puckett's permission, and I'll have to use the Army telegraph at Reno."

"There's no hurry," Corb said. "Think it over."

Milabel nodded. "Understand," he said slowly, "I ain't got any love for you, Corb. I'll smash hell out of you some day. This is just a truce, see?"

"I do," Corb said drily. "Those are my sentiments exactly." And he left the place, unmolested.

CHAPTER XV

MR. CORB TO CALL

FROM his seat in the gloom of the Murphy Hotel front porch in Darlington, Red Shibe had already picked up enough talk to know that he and Frank had made a mistake in stampeding Milabel's herd. For the night they had elected to stampede the herd was the same night Milabel had chosen to corner all Corb's crew in the shack and burn it down on top of them. Milabel would know Corb couldn't have raided his herd. Once he knew that he would question the wagon wrecking, and Frank's plan would go up in smoke, Red thought gloomily.

Red decided to sit it out to the bitter end, and find out, if possible, who was suspected of stampeding the Circle R herd. He was listening to the talk with only half attention, when he saw a woman's figure on the boardwalk across the street. She paused opposite the hotel, and stared across at the porch.

Red watched her curiously, until suddenly he came to his senses. This was Edith Fairing, and she was looking for him. The day Frank was in jail and Red took Edith home, he had left her with the admonition that if she ever received another warning note to come to the hotel porch every night until she found him.

Red rose, left his chair, and crossed the street to Edith.

"Trouble?" he asked, touching his hat brim as he stepped on the boardwalk.

Edith said, "No," smiling a little, and then added, "I think we'd better walk away from my house until I explain."

Red fell in beside her watching her out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't see this girl without remembering that she would now be Morg Wheelon's wife if he hadn't left Morg alone that night. She was too young for sorrow, too pretty, and he wished he could drive that haunted look from her eyes.

When they had passed the corner Red said, "Did you get another note?"

"No. Scott Corb is at the house, Red."

Red stopped, staring at her. "Corb? Did he—"

"No, he's very polite. He wants to talk to Frank."

"What about?"

"He won't say. He said he couldn't find Frank, didn't know where to look for him, and that he thought I might be able to get in touch with him."

Red said, "Is he alone?"

"He's alone in the house. But he may have men outside. That's why I suggested we walk away from the house."

"Good girl," Red murmured.

"Do you want to take him to Frank?"

"I dunno," Red said. "I'll hear him talk first. You turn around and go home. I'll drift back and take a look around the house before I knock on the door."

When Edith had gone, Red swung into the closest alley and made his way by a a devious route to the Fairings' small house. There was something almighty queer about this—unless Corb figured he was licked and wanted to make a deal. But that wasn't like Corb. Red grinned when he thought of Frank laying eyes on Corb. Frank was in a savage temper after the Circle R stampede. Beach had been fired. Frank blamed himself for the useless death of that trail hand, although Red had tried to convince him that the man was a hired gunnie of Milabel's, and that Beach Freeman was guilty anyway. And to boot, the news of their blunder and the sight of Corb wouldn't help Frank's temper.

WHEN he reached Edith Fairing's place, Red investigated the alley and the barn. Then he walked the street on both sides of the road, and even circled the block to see if any men were hidden out around town. Almost satisfied, but still wary, he came back to Fairing's house and knocked on the door.

Edith let him in, and took him into the parlor. Corb was standing there, hat in hand, waiting. His bland face didn't change at sight of Red, but his cold little eyes studied him minutely.

"Better leave the door open," Red said to Edith. "I don't like the smell in here."

"I want to see Christian, Shibe," Corb said, ignoring Red's jibe.

"That's a bushwhack trick that's old even for Indians, Corb," Red jeered.

"I haven't any men here," Corb said. "Look and see if you want to. I'll give you my gun and we won't be followed."

"Frank will shoot you on sight."

"No he won't. He'd better not, because I have some information he wants."

"About what?"

"I'll tell him when I see him."

Red leaned up against the table and regarded Corb with grudging admiration. "For a skunk," Red drawled, "you got more gall than a government mule, Corb. You can't tell Frank anything he wants to know. You can't do him any favor, except drop dead."

"Red!" Edith said in a half-frightened voice. Corb was the power here and Red was talking to him like any saddle bum.

Red looked over at her and grinned. "You ain't afraid, are you, Edith? Look at him. He's just an old man with weasel eyes and a black heart and a snake's brains." He looked over at Corb, but Corb was regarding him placidly. Corb wasn't being baited tonight.

"Let's talk business," Corb said. "Will you take me to Christian?"

"What's to prevent your hardcases from trailin' us and cuttin' down on Frank when we meet him?"

"It's night, and you can't trail at night," Corb pointed out drily. Then he said casually, "Can't you get it through your thick head I want to talk to him? You've got a wagon and a crew haven't you?"

Red didn't answer.

"I know you have because I saw them," Corb went on. "Take me to your crew and then bring Frank in to talk." He sneered. "You ought to feel safe enough that way."

Red's freckled face flushed a little. "You're a pretty cagey hombre, Corb. You know damn well I'll take you to Frank, just to prove we ain't scared of you."

"Do it then."

"I will," Red said grimly. He walked over to Corb, took the gun from his shoulder holster, searched him for other weapons and finding none, motioned him to the door. Corb went out.

Edith said, "Be careful, Red," and her eyes were worried.

Red grinned reassuringly. "Not me. If I could rawhide that coyote into a fight and lift his scalp, I'd try it in a minute."

"No you wouldn't, Red," Edith said calmly. "You'll be careful."

Red looked strangely at her and when she smiled faintly he gulped, grinned, mumbled, "I reckon I will," and said goodnight.

Outside, Corb was waiting for him. Red said, "Meet me in front of the hotel," and walked upstreet.

Once he had his horse he said, "We'll go out of town my way, Corb. You just follow."

Corb followed quietly; but Red wasn't taking any chances.

Red started toward the river, but as soon as he was away from the town's lights, he circled, and went out the south road. Once there, he made a wide swing west and to the north, occasionally stopping to see if he was being followed. Corb was patient through it all, even when Red ordered him to stay set and made a wide circle over their backtrail. After that, Red made for the wagon in a straight line, and they rode for two hours without exchanging a word.

OTEY'S wagon was pulled up in a swale by a deep, wide feeder creek of the Paymaster, screened from any but the most prying eyes by the willow thickets and the high creek banks.

They were challenged by Joe Vandermeer, but Red was identified and they dismounted and walked to the dying fire. Red built it up, and the crew came awake.

Otey, from his blankets, said suddenly. "What's that lobo doin' in camp?" eyeing Corb balefully.

"You just keep a gun on him," Red grunted. "He wants to make medicine with Frank."

Red went out and stepped into the saddle again and rode out west. As soon as he was out of hearing of the camp he turned north and the night was unbelievably black after the light of the fire. A quarter mile up the creek, after making no attempt to cover the sound of his movements, he whistled twice. Almost behind him and close came the answering whistle. Neither Red nor Frank was taking a chance on being caught in camp.

"Frank?"

Red got only a grunt in reply, and he walked in that direction. Presently, he saw Frank's blankets on the ground. He squatted beside them and said, "Corb's in camp. Wants to talk to you."

Frank's voice was not sleepy as he echoed, "Corb?"

"That right. And listen, kid. Milabel caught Corb and his crew at the shack last night and burned them out. Shot a couple of his men."

Frank didn't speak for a moment, and then he said bitterly, "So our stampede was for nothin', then?"

"Looks like it. Corb's crew couldn't be in two places."

Frank didn't say anything, but Red knew how he felt. This was a long waiting game at best, and now the little work they had done was for nothing. Frank pulled on his boots, strapped on his gunbelt and rose. They rode double back to camp, coming in from the south.

As Frank dismounted and walked into

the circle of firelight, Corb might have been warned by his looks. Long hours in the saddle and food snatched when he could eat it had gaunted Frank into a lean, wolfish looking rider. His gray eyes that had once been calm were smouldering and sultry, and the line of his unshaven jaw was dogged. Red had seen men come out of prison looking that way. It was from too much defeat, and too big odds, and only fighting men looked that way. And Red had learned to drink his whisky and walk out of a saloon when he saw them. He wondered if Corb had.

CHAPTER XVI

RIDERS, GOODBYE

FRANK stalked up to the fire and Corb stood opposite him warming his hands. The crew was standing away from the fire, regarding the meeting expectantly.

"I won't offer you anything to eat or drink," Frank said softly. "We feed the dogs away from the camp."

Corb's face didn't change. "I want to talk to you, Christain, not eat your food."

"Go ahead and talk."

Corb looked around him. "In private," he murmured.

"Get the hell out of here, then," Frank said quickly.

"All right, all right," Corb said pacifically. "Don't get so red-headed."

Frank didn't say anything, and Corb looked down into the fire, feeling for a way to begin.

He looked up presently and said, "That raid on Milabel's herd was a mistake. You tried to blame it on my crew, but Milabel had me and my crew cornered at the shack."

"How do you know I tried to blame it on your crew?" Frank asked quickly.

Corb smiled, and the ends of his pale ragged mustaches lifted a quarter inch. "I've talked to Milabel," Corb said. "It was a nice play, Christian, only you were in too much of a hurry. We're on to you."

"So you and Milabel are pardin' up," Frank drawled. "How come?"

"It was you," Corb said bluntly. "I was all ready to tangle with Milabel over burnin' the shack, but he called somethin' that night about my wreckin' his wagons that didn't make sense. I took my time and looked around and guessed the rest, then went to him."

Frank said thinly, "Did you come here to brag?"

"I'm tellin' you," Corb said. "Milabel and me ain't fightin' each other any more. We're fightin' you."

"I'm scared," Frank said drily.

"You ain't scared," Corb said evenly. "You're mad. But you ain't so mad you can't see what this means."

"You tell me," Frank said.

Corb said slowly, "Whatever happens to Milabel's cattle, his crew or his range, he's goin' to let me alone, because he'll figure it's you and not me that's doin' it. Do you get that?"

"So far."

"Me and Milabel are workin' together to down you. We're poolin' our information and we're aimin' to nail you. You get that?"

"Sure."

"Suppose I get a tip on your movements, take it to Milabel, and we take both our crews half way to Kansas to corner you." He paused, his black eyes glittering and intent. "You can take your crew, burn the Circle R, wreck all the gear, drive his horses clean out of the country, scatter his cattle all over three reservations and grass-fire his range.

"He's got shippin' dates to meet. He won't have time to meet them, he won't have horses for his crew and when he gets his cattle back they'll have all the tallow run off and no grass to put it back on with. When Puckett takes a look at that setup he'll pull out, because he'll have had to forfeit a quarter million in beef contracts he couldn't met."

RED saw Frank smile, and he waited for Frank to speak. When Frank did it was in a reasonable tone of voice, with an uncertain something mingled with it.

"My crew has done all the work. What do we get?"

"You get a clean title to Morg Wheelon's place with my guarantee behind it that you won't be bothered."

"And you'll take over the Circle R range?"

"That's about it," Corb said, watching Frank.

Frank squatted by the fire and idly poked a stick. He said curiously, "That's a nice proposition, Corb. What makes you think I can handle my end of it?"

"I ain't scared about that," Corb said evenly. "When you busted into my place that night and wrecked it, you didn't do any shootin'. You could have, only you didn't. I figured you was scared of the law or the Army. But the other night when you picked off one of Milabel's hardcases in that stampede, I knew you was tough enough. If we work together you got to be tough enough to take care of the skeleton crew Milabel will leave at the Circle R. You can do it."

Frank stopped poking the fire and slowly raised his head to regard Corb. His face was pale and rigid with anger, and his lips were almost white.

"Get out!"

Corb scowled. "You mean you ain't goin' to—"

"I mean I'm goin' to kill you, Corb," Frank said, rising. "I should have done it the other night, but you didn't smell as bad as you do now. The next time you see me, you better come smokin'!"

Again Corb's mustaches lifted in a faint smile. "You're goin' to be sorry," he said.

He turned and started to walk away. Otey called, "Your horse is the other way, Corb."

Corb had a handkerchief in his hand and he was mopping his brow. He seemed not to hear Otey, and kept on walking out of the firelight, up the creek.

It was Red, standing well away from the fire, who saw it first. He ran straight for the fire, ramming into Frank and sending him sprawling, and kicked the burning sticks out into the night, wiping out the light as suddenly as thought. And immediately afterward rifles opened up from the ridges on either side of the creek and from down and upstream.

Frank, sizing up the trap, yelled to the crew, "Don't a man shoot a shot! Don't give 'em a target!" He crawled ahead in the darkness, for the slugs were searching out the spot where he had fallen. He brushed a man who was lying on the ground and he whispered, "Red?"

"I'm sorry as hell, Frank!" Red moaned. "I should have known it when he suggested comin' to the wagon. He's had it spotted all day and planted his men here tonight, just in case you turned him down."

"I'm glad of it," Frank said grimly. "I know where I stand with that hombre now. Get away in the brush, Red, and hold your fire till they rush us."

HE crawled to the wagon, stood up, reached down a rifle and crawled into the creekside brush. The shots were coming from seven different places, but they were aimless. The dark well of the swale was black as soot. Red's swift move to douse the fire after Corb's handkerchief signal had saved them all from being massacred. Corb's planted crew could shoot all night, and it would only be chance if they hit anyone. The smouldering embers of the fire were scattered all over the small flat, but their dying glow was barely visible.

Frank somberly considered the situation. If Corb was set for a showdown, he would try to rush the camp after he realized that his advantage was canceled by darkness. In a hand-to-hand battle both sides would lose men. Corb didn't care, and Frank did. He had brought these peaceful hard-working punchers into trouble, and he was not going to see them butchered by Corb's hired hardcases.

The shooting from the ridges and from up and down stream increased. It wouldn't be long before Corb gave the order to rush. Frank knew he had to get outside Corb's slowly encircling crew, but to move in this crackling brush was to draw fire upon himself. He couldn't crawl out and advertise

every move, for it would be sure death. He moved his hand out through the brush and touched wet ground.

It was the creek bank.

Suddenly, he knew he had it and he took off his shellbelt and gun. Slowly, quietly as he could, he pulled himself to the creek and lowered himself into it. The cold water, only a little deeper than the thickness of his body, took his breath away. He would have to leave his rifle, he knew. He reached out for his shellbelt, put his head through it, so that some of his shells would be dry, and let the rush of the water move him slowly downstream. He could see nothing ahead of him, but the current caried him on. He was approaching one of the riflemen who was shooting systematically at the camp. Frank drifted almost under the man's gun, and then past him, and the man did not know it.

Well downstream Frank crawled out, his teeth chattering. He heard Corb shout, "Close in!" and he knew that whatever he did would have to be done quickly. There was no time to round up the horses and stampede them through the line of encircling men to break it up. There was only one thing he could do.

He stood for a second, waiting. The water dripped around his feet and his clothes were plastered in chilly dankness against his skin.

He moved quietly toward the rifleman closest him who was levering and firing his rifle as fast as he could. There was no necessity for stealth, and Frank approached him from behind, made out the dark bulk of his figure and slashed out with his gunbarrel. The man went down without a murmur and Frank took his rifle and shellbelt. Then he moved on up stream and took up a new position where he could see the gunflashes of every one of Corb's riders.

He began to shoot in earnest then, throwing five rapid shots at the gunflame of a rifleman up the ridge. When he ceased there was a gap in the ring of rifles. He concentrated next on the rifleman down the ridge. On his second shot he heard a long-drawn scream, and the firing suddenly died. Corb's men had heard it too, and there had been no doubt that it came from one of their own crew. Uneasiness seemed to fill the night, and Corb's men resumed their shooting half-heartedly.

CORB'S angry voice yelled: "Close in, I tell you!" and still none of the riflemen moved closer. There was one left on the west ridge, and he was a long time making up his mind to continue firing. When he did, he had moved, for he could understand plainly enough what had happened to the other two men stationed on the same ridge.

Frank was ready for him, too. He laid a withering fire on the man and the rifle was silenced. Now the shooting ceased. Every one of Corb's men had seen the three rifles on the west ridge disappear and they had an idea what had happened. There had been no shooting from Frank's crew; therefore, either there was someone roaming the darkness who was silencing these men, or else there was a traitor among themselves who had killed his own companions under the cover of general firing.

Neither of these possibilities was comforting to contemplate; and Corb's men were unnerved, half angry, half frightened.

Corb's voice came again, and it was wild with rage. "Rush them, damn you! There's only five of them!"

Nobody moved closer to the camp, and there was no shooting. Up the creek Corb's voice could be heard cursing out one of his men.

And then someone struck a match in the middle of the camp. It caught, and brush started to burn, and suddenly the whole camp was lighted up. Frank held his breath. Had one of Corb's men succeeded in getting some brush together and lighting it to provide light for the killing? The riflemen started shooting again then, but Frank could see nothing to shoot at except the wagon.

Then suddenly, from behind him down stream and from behind the east ridge savage firing broke out. And Frank had it then.

Red and the crew had crawled out the gap on the west ridge, leaving one man to light the fire. And now his crew had Corb's killers between themselves and the fire.

A shot ripped the brush behind him, and Frank knew that somebody, Red maybe, had him spotted. As soon as Corb's crew saw what had hapepned, there was a crashing of brush up the creek. A man streaked over the ridge and dived into the willows, thrashed around in the water heading up creek. There was a savage fire out in the night. One man who had been across the stream raced through camp. There was a shot from the ridge, he tripped, sprawled against the wheel of the chuck wagon and lay still.

The tables were reversed now. Frank rose out of the brush and yelled: "Drive 'em up the creek, Red!"

Red nodded.

Swiftly, Frank's crew beat up the creek, firing ahead of them. But off on the prairie they heard the thunder of running horses, and Frank knew that Corb had escaped with what remained of his crew.

One by one the crew drifted back to the fire. Joe Vandermeer had been shot through the arm and his sleeve was soaked with blood. His teeth chattering, Frank bandaged him. Joe grinned up at him, and Frank smiled back, but that grin did something to Frank. It made up his mind for him.

It had not been an easy decision to come to. Everything—self-interest, all his hope for the future—told him not to speak, told him that he would be a fool to say what he had made up his mind to say. But there are other things a man must sometimes listen to; and these, Christian heeded now.

Red drifted back, declaring that he had found four of Corb's crew, all dead, and that Samse had better get the wagon hitched to move before Corb brought back reinforcements. Samse turned away to get the horses when Frank rose and called, "Wait a minute, Samse."

Samse came back to the fire. The others—Mitch, Otey, Red and Joe—looked at him, come alert at the tone of his voice.

FRANK said quietly, "I've been a damn fool for long enough. I ain't goin' to get that lease back for a long, long time, boys, and when I do it's goin' to be with a fightin' crew. You ain't gunmen and I ain't payin' you gunmen's wages, so I don't aim to hold you any more." He looked at all of them. "Ride out of here for good and you're welcome to horses and grub, and you can pick up your pay at the Stockman's Bank in Fort Worth. There's no strings hangin' on that offer, and you better take it."

Samse pulled back his shoulders and looked squarely at Frank. "I've done what I could, Frank, and it ain't much. I hate to do this, but I'm goin' to take up your offer."

Otey said quietly, "I'll stay."

Red said, "Me too."

Joe Vandermeer and Mitch didn't say anything, only looked at Samse and nodded. While Joe and Mitch packed the grub, Samse brought in the saddle horses. They shook hands all around and it was Joe, Samse and Mitch who rode off, heading for Texas and peace.

Frank stirred then, and said, "Pull some grub and blankets out of the wagon, Otey, I'm burnin' it."

It was a dismal moment, and once the brush was stacked under the wagon and lighted, Frank didn't even look at it. To him, a trail boss and the owner of the herd, the burning of the wagon was a gesture of bitter defeat. It was like selling his saddle. From now on, he was just another rider, soon to be on the grub line.

They pulled away from the fire, silent. And then, from down in the brush from the creek, a faint voice called, "Don't leave me."

Frank looked at Red, then pulled his horse around and they went into the brush. They found a man lying there, murmuring something in the darkness. Frank knelt by

him and struck a match, and by its flare he saw one of Corb's crew. The man was shot in the side, and his levis and shirt were soaked with blood.

The rider squinted against the match glare, and reached out for Frank's hand. "Don't leave me here, Christian. I can't move."

"Corb'll be back for you," Frank said tonelessly.

The man gripped his hand harder. "He's the one that shot me," he said bitterly. "He'll let me die."

Otey said bluntly, "That satisfies everybody then, I reckon."

"You ain't goin' to leave me?" the man whined. "Corb'll come back and put a slug through my head. I wouldn't rush the camp, so he shot me in the back."

The match died, and then there was only the distant light from the wagon. The man had hold of Frank's wrist, his fingers clutching to his last hope.

Frank looked at Red. "Reckon that's true?"

"I reckon," Red said slowly. "Corb'd do it."

Otey said bitterly, "Leave him there, Frank. What do you care? Half an hour ago he was tryin' to kill you!"

"Put me on a horse!" the man said desperately. "I got to get out of here!"

Frank said quietly, "Can you catch another horse, Red? It don't look like we could leave him here."

Minutes later, the four of them left the burning wagon and struck out into the night. Frank rode in bleak silence. He had come into this country with a crew, a wagon, a herd, a partner and a shack, expecting to take over a big leased range. There was left to him a scattered herd on range he couldn't claim, a wounded man he couldn't let die, and two friends who were siding him in a hopeless fight. And to cap it, he was a wanted man.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

·CANNON FODDER·

This term did not originally mean all soldiers engaged in a war. It referred specifically to the closely-massed formation of the German infantry during World War actions.

FIRST CLOTHING ·ALLOWANCE·

The first army to adopt the now universal practise of furnishing clothes to the rank-and-file was the British, during the reign of King George I.

·GAS WARFARE·

Gas warfare is by no means new. From their catapults, ancient Greeks threw powerful stench mixtures which could overcome a man.

·BLACK MONDAY·

On Easter Monday 1630 Edward III of England was laying siege to Paris. Bitterly cold, the air dark with sleet, so many men froze to death in their saddles the King ordered the date to be known as "Black Monday."

Hi, Roscoe

By SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

Author of "Eight Ball," "Strong Man's Burden," etc.

A hackie's lot is not a happy one—you never can tell what'll turn up in a cab

I WAS a far cry from the boy with golden curls to the man known as the Bite. Little Roscoe Nelson with his curls who sang and recited and danced—and who blindly hated the gushing ladies who thought him too, too sweet. . . .

The man—the Bite—was grimly alert as he turned into Powell street. He was driving a taxi. The man who ordinarily drove this taxi was on a bed in an apartment with picture wire cutting his wrists and a headache.

The Bite saw Greasy and Joe in the car parked across the street from the Burin place. They gave him the okay sign. He pulled up before the Burin place with the taxi. The house was a great pile of gray stone with a half dozen turrets and twenty-odd windows with curved glass. Sadie Burin lived there with seventeen cats, a parrot, and half the antiques in San Francisco. Everybody knew about Sadie Burin and nobody knew anything. Some said she was worth ten million, and some said twenty.

It was just 8:14 on this sunny morning when the Bite twisted the bell handle. He was exactly on time. For a month he and Greasy and Joe had been parked down the street when the taxi arrived each morning. They'd followed it down Powell to Geary, and left on Geary to the dingy Burin building.

The rattle of the door latch made the Bite start. This was the tight spot of the whole play. If he could get the old lady quietly into the taxi . . . Sadie Burin was nodding and smiling in the doorway. Her wrinkled old face was older than the sea. She had her inevitable umbrella and black bag, wore the inevitable black dress and shabby fur coat. With ducked head, the Bite offered his arm.

Her black-gloved hand hesitated. "You're not— The regular driver—"

THE BITE talked fast. Regular driver in the hospital with appendicitis. He'd been sent to substitute. He had a good record for safe driving. . . . Then he was almost weak from relief. And not a little surprised. Everything was okay. She knew him. Somehow, she must have—

"Why, of course, Roscoe," she was saying, "I know you'll be a good safe driver, Roscoe. I guess you know me, don't you? Tell me about yourself, Roscoe, on the way."

The Bite grinned as he drove along. He'd never thought little Roscoe Nelson of the golden curls would reach a helping hand from the past. Sadie Burin must have been one of those dames in the old home town who twittered about his Gettysburg Address or his Fawn Dance. He'd hated them all blindly. He didn't remember her—there'd been so many, and it had been a dozen years—but she remembered little Roscoe the model child. He'd run away from the past, and here it was reaching out and giving his big chance a boost!

But his grin wore away as he drove down Powell. The old lady was leaning forward and asking questions. "Are you married, Roscoe? How long have you had this job? Where do you live?" and so on. She kept pouring on those questions, and it got so the Bite winced every time she said his name. It kept jerking him back, and he didn't like to go back.

"Is your mother still alive, Roscoe?"

"I don—" The Bite swallowed. "Yes;

perfect health." He wondered whether she was alive. The taxi was a half block from Geary. Big hotel on the right, Union Square on the left. The taxi turned left at Geary every morning. The way Greasy and Joe and the Bite had it figured, this morning he would turn right. . . .

"Take care of your mother, Roscoe," Sadie Burin was saying. "Always make your mother proud of you."

The Bite gulped. She *had* been proud of him. And all the old ladies admired her little Roscoe. Such talent. . . .

He was at the intersection. He turned to the right. Then savagely he jerked the wheel to the left. He rammed the gas feed down, and hoped. He swung around a car in traffic and got it between him and the car Greasy and Joe were in. He knew he was a damned fool. This job would put the three of them on easy street for life. But somehow he couldn't let this little old lady find out what had happened to little Roscoe Nelson of the long curls.

HE WAS a half block down Geary when the shooting began. He knew Greasy and Joe had gone crazy when they saw he was crossing them. There was a siren. A woman screaming; tire squealing. Traffic suddenly snarled up; he was hemmed in. He pulled the hand brake and slid out. Then a couple of cops. He didn't have a chance.

"This way, buddy," a cop said. Then he whispered, "We don't want the old lady to see this." He took Roscoe's arm.

Greasy and Joe were stretched out on the park. Some cops were keeping the crowd back. "We got reported that a car had been parked up there by the Burin place every morning for a month," a cop was saying. "So we went up and tagged this morning, and the way they swung left into Geary behind you was funny, so we come alongside and told them to pull in. They started shooting. Know 'em?"

"Never seen them before," the Bite said.

He let Sadie Burin out at the Burin building, then tossed the taxi driver's cap onto the front seat and began walking. He was shaky. It was an omen. If he hadn't turned left at Geary, the old lady would have been squawking, and— An omen. Meeting somebody who'd known him when— He was going back. He was through with all this. He hoped his mother was alive. He'd make her proud of him, yet.

Sadie Burin got out of the ancient elevator at the third floor. "Thank you, Roscoe," she said to the elevator man. She stopped at a man working a pushbroom in the hall. "Hello, Roscoe," she said; "are you the new janitor?" He said yes, and she asked him a lot of questions about if he was married yet and if his mother was still living, and so on.

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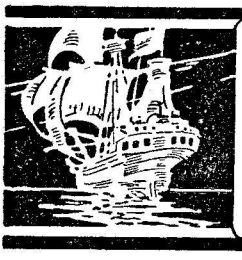

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

WHEN you were small, your Aunt Florence must have told you about her friend, now deceased, who read the encyclopedia right through from A to Z. This singular feat probably impressed you at the time, but afterward you decided that it was just one of Aunt Florence's legends. Well, *we* know a man who is cheerfully plowing through the encyclopedia at the present moment. His name is Roy de S. Horn, and he ought to be in the M's by now.

Mr. Horn started reading the encyclopedia because he thought it would be good for his soul. But before he finished with A he had become so fascinated by the history of artillery that he found himself lugging home innumerable dusty volumes on the subject. Eventually Mr. Horn determined to share his delight over bombards with less fortunate folk, and so he wrote a story called "Men with No Master," the first installment of which appears in this issue of ARGOSY.

There are going to be more stories about Robin the Bombardier you'll be pleased to hear. Mr. Horn tells us that the whole development of heavy artillery occurred during the Hundred Years War. His idea is to exercise his writer's privilege and to compress that history within the lives of his main characters. So by the time you have finished with Robin the Bombardier, you will be wise in the ways of gunpowder. And you'll have had a thoroughly good time.

Now Mr. Horn has some interesting things to say about the historical background of "Men with No Master."

ROY DE S. HORN

I have tried to give an accurate picture of the people and social conditions in England at the start of the Hundred Years War. Conditions in the royal forests, of which the New Forest was the most famous, were as stated in my story. The references to Oxford (better known as Oxenford) College are accurate, as well as the amazing researches and predictions of the Franciscan monk, Roger Bacon, who predicted that men would fly in air and that boats would be self-propelled. Because of his scientific researches and deductions, as being contrary to Holy Writ, he was imprisoned for almost the full last twelve years of his life.

Although it is common belief that gunpowder was invented by the Chinese, and some hold that it was early known to the Persians and Turks and even the Greeks, it is an amazing thing that nowhere in their chronicles is there actual proof, such as a formula. It is possible, even probable, that their so-called gunpowder was merely "Greek Fire", combustibles of brimstone, tar, etc, rather than actual explosives. Such "carcasses" were in regular use in sieges from the early days of Rome. Certainly the formula Roger Bacon wrote down for gunpowder is the first known record of the actual formula.

Though Roger Bacon put the formula for gunpowder in writing, its use as a propellent was first practiced in Germany and Flanders. It was from there that cannon—"bombards"—were first introduced into England. And these bombards were privately owned, merely leased under contract to the king or prince.

Anything so mysterious and thunderous smacked so strongly of the Devil that the bombardiers were under suspicion of being black magicians, compacted with Satan. The penalty for black magic was burning at the stake, so that the bombardiers had as much to fear from their own forces as from the enemy.

Considering how even today explosives must be handled with so much care, though their scientific composition and resolution of forces is well known, the early bombardiers must have

had a lively time, learning as they did by trial and error, by bitter experience.

In order to follow the early development of artillery more fully, I have chosen a young Oxford student, the forerunner of a modern engineer and scientist, as my hero, giving him the same scientific and deductive mind as Roger Bacon must have had. And through him I hope to trace the developments of early-day artillery, and all the mishaps and discoveries the early bombardiers must have experienced.

The Black Prince was probably the most romantic figure of all chivalry. For the better understanding of the present-day reader I have named him as such, though it was not until several hundred years later that he began to be known in history as "The Black Prince." Until then he was generally called Prince Edward, or Edward of Woodstock.

New York City

THE gentleman below is so feverishly anxious for another Hornblower story that something has got to be done. It's not up to us, though, unfortunately; a man named Forester is the only one who can relieve the situation. Surely Mr. Forester will rush to his typewriter when he learns about the suffering of

F. E. LONG

Many are the dimes I have slipped across some newsstand counter and demanded, in the same frame of mind as when they announce the winner of the Ford each Tuesday evening at our local movie palaces, the current copy of ARGOSY. This frame of mind is brought about by reason of the fact that if I hit the jack-pot I will find a new Captain Hornblower story starting—or at least an announcement that it will start in the next issue. Like the Ford night, I am doomed to disappointment each week, but I still live in hopes. I hope some Wednesday, before I hand in my chips, that I will slide the dime across the counter on some fine day and get an ARGOSY with the jack-pot—Captain Hornblower.

They do say that anticipation is greater than realization, but, let me tell you, that for one, it is a cockeyed statement. Because the actual reading of one of the Hornblower series is greater, infinitely greater, than all the anticipation in the world. I'll concede the point that I get many times my dime's worth in the regular issues of ARGOSY, but being a human being (so-called) I'm never satisfied. Now, take the Henry stories, such as the current one entitled "Thirty Days For Henry," there's a fine piece of work—one that will take a person's mind off his troubles as fast as anything I have ever read, with the exception, of course, of Captain Hornblower. Now, there is a bird who can really lift you out of this daffy-dill every-day world of ours and transport you to the realms of romance and adventure, just like that.

As one ARGOSY fan to another, how about putting the screws on that author and having him kick in with some more Hornblower sagas? Kid him, cajole him, bribe him, jail him, but for the love o' mud, get us a *Hornblower story* soon, quick, quicker than that.

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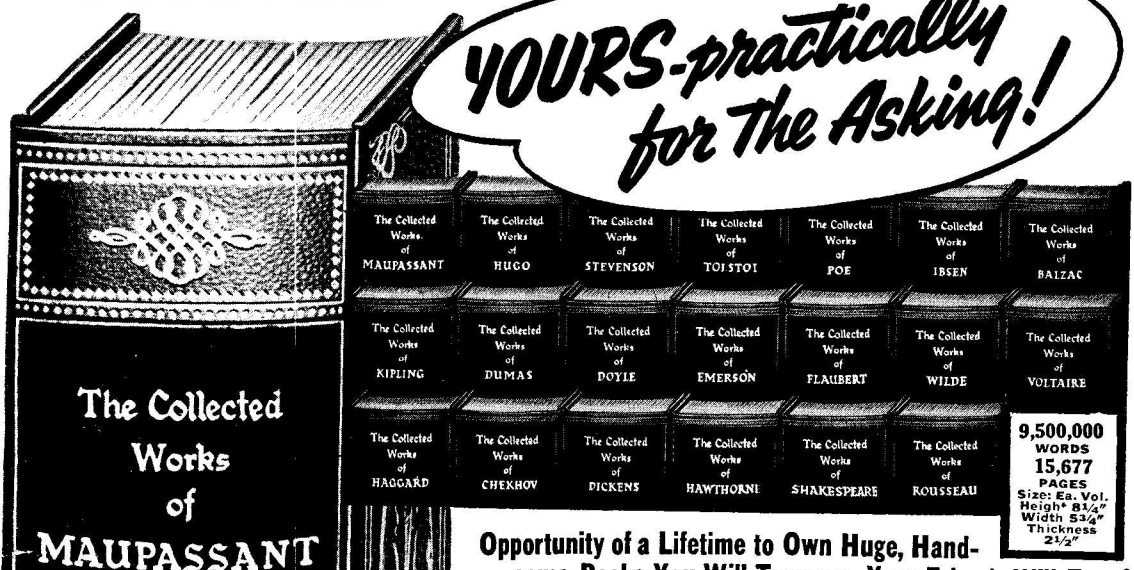

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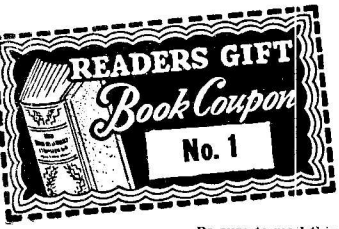

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