OCT. 7

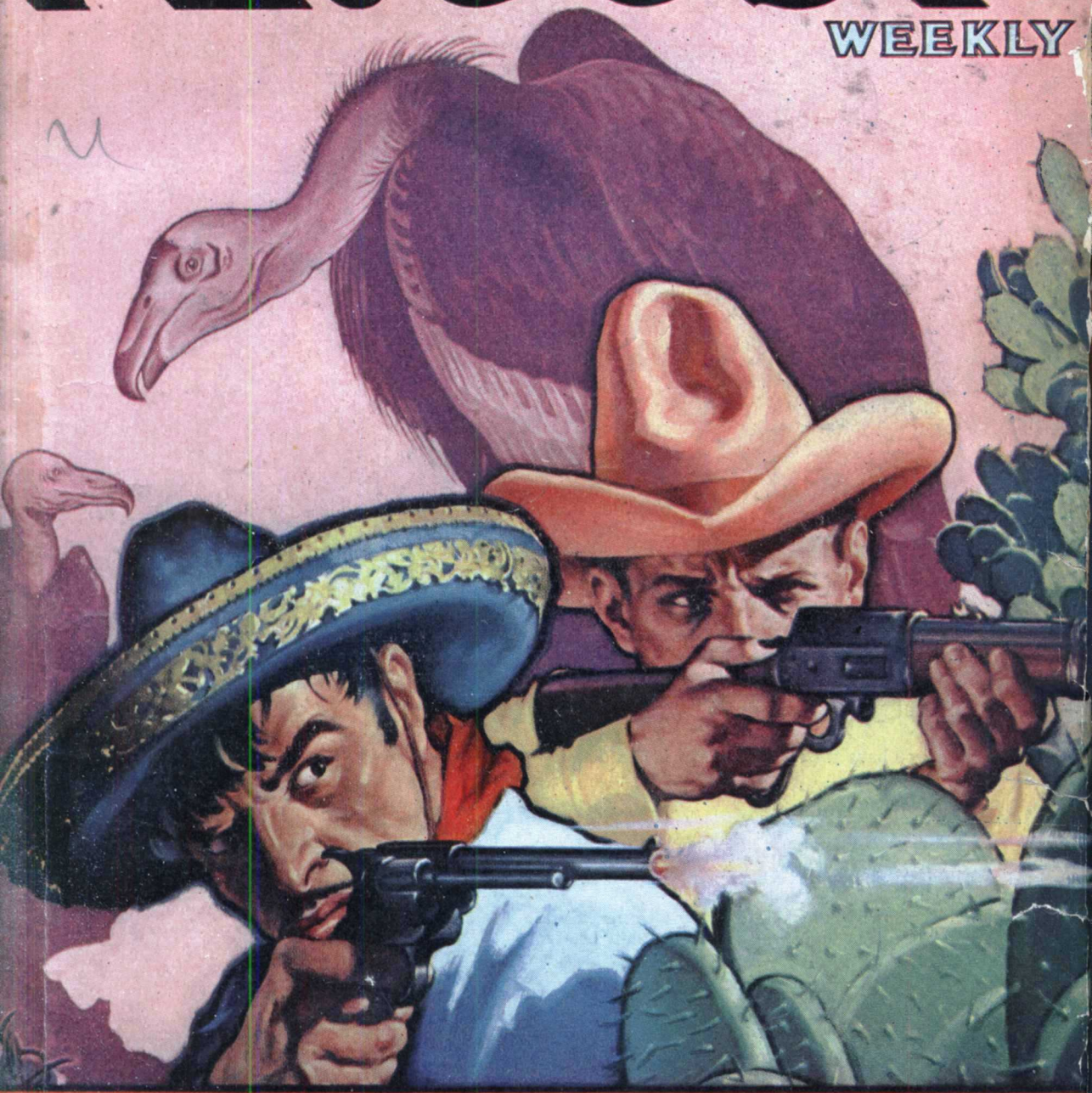
10¢

Robert E. Pinkerton · Richard Sale

ARGOSY

RED STAR MAGAZINE 10-7

WEEKLY



BUZZARD BAIT

A Colorful Short Novel of California

New, Easy, Scientific Home Method that GETS RID of DANDRUFF

Pityrosporum ovale, the germ that causes dandruff, magnified many times.

Listerine Antiseptic kills stubborn bottle-shaped germ (Pityrosporum ovale) which scientists proved causes dandruff. That's the secret of Listerine's amazing results . . . why many people have turned to it for real relief.

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LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY
St. Louis, Missouri

THE TREATMENT

MEN: Douse Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp *at least once a day.* **WOMEN:** Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage with fingers or a good hair brush. But don't expect overnight results, because germ conditions cannot be cleared up that fast.

Genuine Listerine Antiseptic is guaranteed not to bleach the hair or affect texture.

LISTERINE THE *PROVED* TREATMENT FOR DANDRUFF

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If you earn under $3,000, Higher Accountancy *may be the answer for you*

"THE size of my pay-check? What business is it of yours?" Perhaps that's the first reply that comes to your mind.

But—stop a moment. It really *is* our business—to help men just like you. In fact, it's been our business here at LaSalle for 30 years.

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Why don't *you* do as they are doing—take advantage of LaSalle training? Even though you do not know the fundamentals of bookkeeping now—you nevertheless may have an excellent opportunity to master accountancy. Many others have done it.

Perhaps you're asking yourself, "But don't these others possess natural ability that I lack? Don't I need a special talent for all this?"

Ask rather, "If I do my part, won't *I* get results, too?"

You will! For all it takes is intelligence, serious study and work—not genius. Under the LaSalle system you solve problems by simple steps . . . from day to day, as an expert accountant does. You use the same basic principles. And when these problems become difficult and puzzle you, you get counsel that could be matched only through personal coaching by a battery of experts in a big accounting house.

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If you're tired of pinching pennies, investigate accountancy and LaSalle training. There isn't a faster, less expensive or more convenient method to master accountancy. Fill in the coupon and mail. We'll send you our 64-page book, "Accountancy, The Profession That Pays."

Then, when you read all the facts, you yourself will be able to judge best whether you have the will to study and apply your best efforts—toward a more secure future.

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 293 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 7, 1939 Number 6

Cover by Marshall Frantz
Illustrating Buzzard Bait

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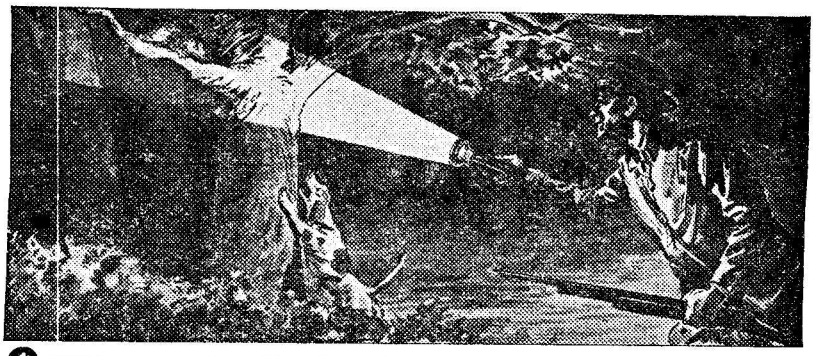
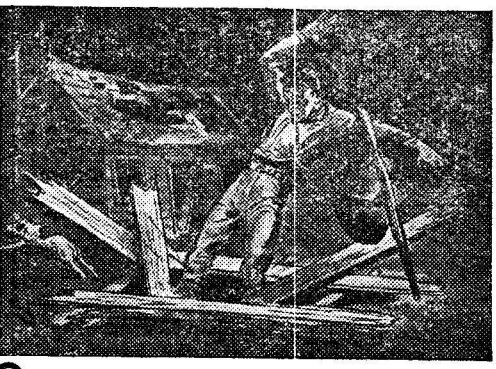
DEATH LEERS as Hunter Plummets into Pit!

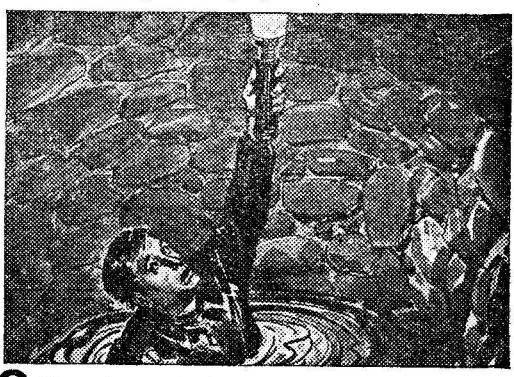
JAMES KIDWELL
Mt. Vernon, Texas



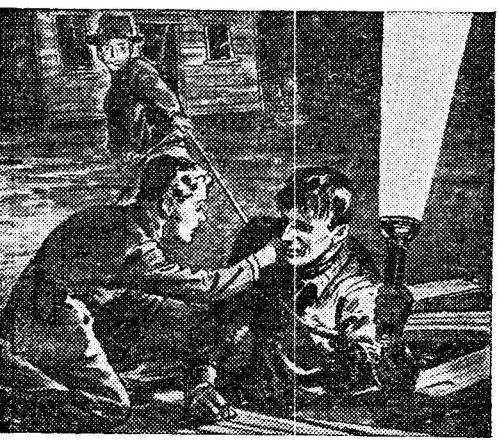
1 **"With my hound Jep,** I had bagged seven 'possums and was heading back for bed," writes James Kidwell. "I was cutting through the yard of an abandoned hilltop house, when the hound gave a frightened yelp and lit out for home.



2 **"I chuckled,** for superstitious folks down our way regard this as an ill omen. The next moment, rotten timbers crashed under me—I was falling!



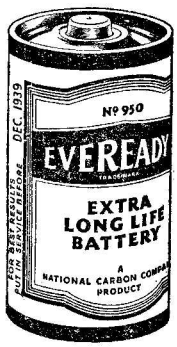
3 **"I landed** at the bottom of an old well. It was impossible to scale the walls. I retrieved my flashlight from the icy water. She still worked.



4 **"My only chance** was to keep shooting the beam upward, hoping that it would be seen and that the batteries would last. My luck was good—two boys going home from town saw the strange flashes, and investigated. Those 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries positively saved my life, as I would have died of exposure, if help hadn't come. You've got to be in the predicament I was before you really can appreciate the value of *fresh* batteries.

(Signed)

James Kidwell"



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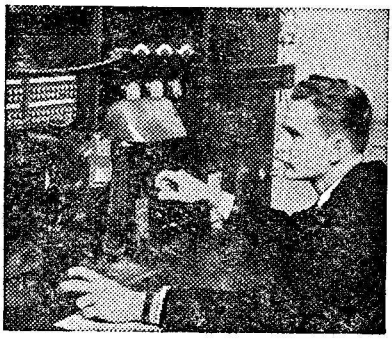
Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm certain I can train you at home in your spare time to be a Radio Technician. I will send you my first lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Judge for yourself whether my course is planned to help you get a good job in Radio, a young, growing field with a future. You don't need to give up your present job, or spend a lot of money to become a Radio Technician. I train you at home in your spare time.

Jobs Like These go to Men who Know Radio

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are newer fields offering good opportunities to qualified men. And my Course includes Television, which promises to open many good jobs soon.



Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to my regular course, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do actual Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training, I send plans and directions which have helped many make from $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning.

You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio and Television receivers, broadcasting station and loudspeaker installations. My 50-50 method of training gives you both printed instruction and actual work with Radio parts—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make more money fixing Radio sets while learning and to equip you with a professional instrument for full time work after you graduate.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

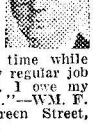
Act today. Mail the coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my course in Radio and Television; show letters from men I have trained telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9KK,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

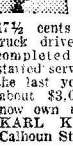
Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M - - - Furniture Co. for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1543 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.



$10 to $25 a Week in Spare Time

"I am now making from $10 to $25 a week in spare time while still holding my regular job as a machinist. I owe my success to N.R.I."—WM. F. RUPP, 611 Green Street, Bridgeport, Pa.



Owns Shop, Makes $3,000 a Year

"Before taking your Course I earned about 17½ cents per hour as a truck driver. When I had completed 20 lessons I started service work. During the last year I have made about $3,000 in Radio. I now own my own shop."—KARL KELLY, 306 W. Calhoun St., Magnolia, Ark.

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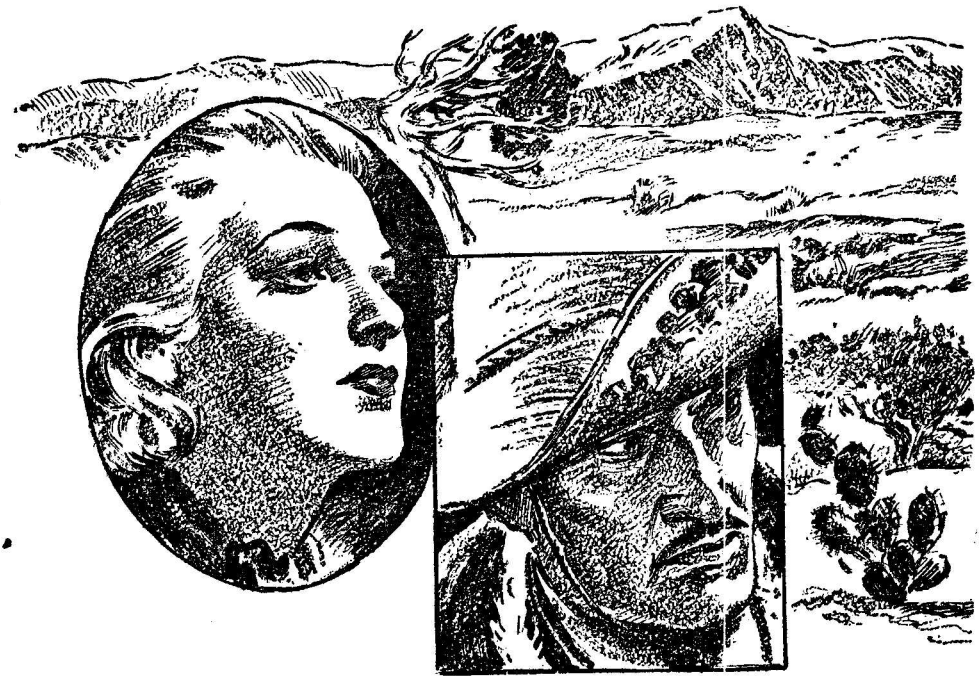


Buzzard Bait

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON
Author of "A Pretty Country", " '49 Gold", etc.

High in the wild hills of California the folk generally live their gentle lives in peace, to the tune of a Mexican love song. But when Public Enemies Numbers One to Four stopped in on business, the natives—and the buzzards—declared open season on villainy. An exciting short novel

CHAPTER I

WHISTLING HORSEMAN

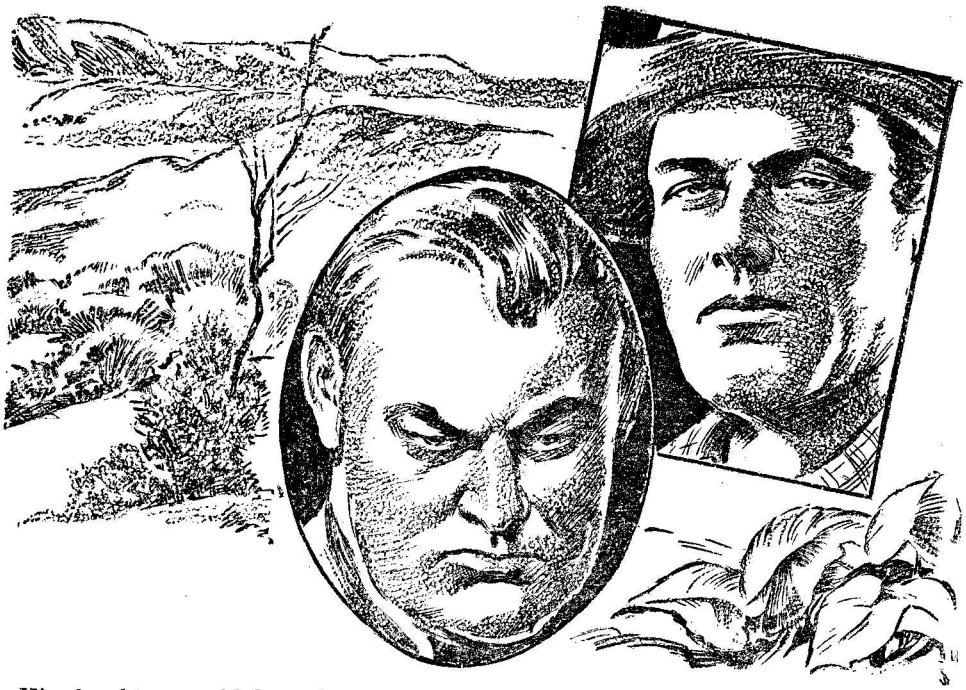
ONE of Rita Jennings' ancestors, Diego de Azara, had been in the garrison of the presidio when the Spaniards established San Francisco, but Rita had no love for San Francisco now.

She felt as much a prisoner as the men on Alcatraz.

Rita could see part of Alcatraz from a window of the mean little tenement under Telegraph Hill where she and her father sat through the long days. Gregory Jennings looked at the island a great deal and Rita wondered if he were connected with some scheme to free a prisoner.

It was more probable, Rita thought, that he was devising a scheme that might land him in a cell out there on the rock in the bay.

Rita hadn't left the apartment since their arrival. Her father left only late at night. Gregory Jennings was tall and blond and he walked and talked with a distinguished air. In the Italian quarter he would be as conspicuous as a blazing sunset.



His daughter would have been as conspicuous in that district of black-haired women and children. Americans had been marrying de Azara daughters since the coming of the first Boston trading ships; and Rita had fluffy blonde hair, blue eyes, and a delicate pink-and-white skin untouched by the California sun.

"I am tired of this," Rita said after two weeks of imprisonment. "I want three hundred dollars."

"It is dull here," Gregory Jennings said. "But three hundred— Want some new clothes?"

"I want to work," Rita said. "But I don't know how. I must learn. I will go to a school and study shorthand and the typewriter."

She said it very calmly and with that peculiar accent which was a product of her strange, flitting life. In America she knew something of New York and Palm Beach; but for fifteen years she had felt more at home in France and Spain and England, though she was familiar with Italy and Egypt and the Balkans.

Gregory Jennings smiled when she spoke. It was extremely difficult, Rita thought, ever to catch him off guard. That must have been quite a shock to him, and yet he displayed only amusement. Rita knew her father believed he had kept her in ignorance of how he made his living and why they kept trunks in their rooms and never stored them in the basements of the great hotels in which she had spent most of her life.

"You are restless, *enamorita,*" he said. "But this won't last long. You will make a journey in a day or two and then this enforced—ah, seclusion—it is due wholly to a temporary financial embarrassment, a clumsy error on the part of a London banker—"

He swung around, beaming indulgently. There were times when Rita doubted what she knew to be the truth about him.

"We'll go to France!" he said, lifting his hands in a French gesture. "And by way of the Orient."

"No," Rita said. "I never want to see another hotel or train or ship. I want a job and a home in which I can live as long as I wish. I want to walk the streets

in the sunshine and not worry about men following me and waiting in doorways across the street to spy on me. I'm tired of strange signals and messages and packing five trunks in three minutes. I am going to live my own life in my own way and I am willing to work so that I may."

SHE was a little breathless when she finished, though she had rehearsed that speech for a year. She had steeled herself, too, for what she felt would be her father's certain response. But Gregory Jennings only beamed upon her.

"I have suspected this for some time," he said, "and have been planning for it. But you do not wish a job. A de Azara working! In California! You must remember the family."

"I do not think anyone of the de Azara family is left in California," Rita said, "or anyone in California who remembers who they were."

"They were a great family even after the Americans came. The hacienda, San Patricio, has always been in de Azara hands. In three months, when you are twenty-one, it will be yours to do with as you please."

Rita did not speak. The rancho, only a shred of the original de Azara holdings, had been left to her in such a manner that her father could not touch it. Rita's mother had arranged that a month before she died, when Rita was six years old. Rita often wondered how much her mother knew of Gregory Jennings.

"In a week or so we will go to the hacienda," he said. "You have always loved riding, and there will be your own horses and thousands of your own acres to ride over."

Rita did not answer that. She had dreamed for years of the great rancho and of living there, but always she had been afraid that when it became solely hers her father would devise a way to get control of it, to squander it. She had deduced, from bits of fact and recollections, that he had not wasted much time in squandering her mother's fortune.

"This other journey?" she said. "What is that?"

"In a day or two," Jennings said. "Just a few errands. Over night. To Los Angeles."

Rita went to Los Angeles. She had made such journeys before—to London, to Cannes, to Naples, to Paris. They were not exciting journeys. She was not to make friends or talk with anyone. Often she wore dark glasses and dowdy clothes.

Going to Los Angeles was no different. She went at night, down the coast and back by the valley route, then the reverse of that. The third time she flew.

She carried sealed messages from her father and carried sealed messages back to him. They were delivered to total strangers in hotel lobbies or the railway station, men who saw a large signet ring on an ungloved hand or a spot of rouge, which she hated, higher on one cheek than on the other. It was done rather crudely in Los Angeles, with none of the finesse and attention to detail to which she had been accustomed in Europe.

Rita wondered if her father were becoming careless, and she remembered how he watched Alcatraz Island.

Rita didn't like anything about this business. She knew something was going to happen again. Something always had. She never knew just what it was. She never was told anything. But as she grew older she began to see a connection between headlines in the papers and sudden flights. An international scandal, a big swindle of wealthy people, a theft of war secrets—she never knew the details but she learned to know the connection. Always there was poverty and hiding and stealth, and then suddenly ease and wealth.

The trip to Los Angeles and back by plane had been different. It was not like flying in Europe, with the earth laid out in order beneath her. Here were wilderness, mountains, vast stretches of desert loneliness. It would be a marvelous country in which to lose oneself. There was solitude and inaccessibility down there, a chance for peace.

The rolling yellow foothills and the higher forested slopes brought a memory of something similar, of something she had never forgotten in all her unhappy life but which she could never remember definitely.

On Rita's return to San Francisco by plane she brought a thin flat package. Her father unwrapped it eagerly. When he dropped it on a table and sprang to help her with her coat she could see many bills, each of one hundred dollars. She asked for three of them.

"No, no!" Gregory Jennings laughed. "You are free from these horrible rooms now. Your life will be as you wish."

"Are we going to San Patricio?"

"Tomorrow. Or the day after. You must have riding things and we must have a car."

"A small car," Rita said. "A cheap car."

"To drive up to the hacienda of San Patricio, to the home of the de Azaras, your ancestors?"

"I'd rather have the money."

"We need worry no more about money, *enamorita.*"

HE WAS very gay and very attentive. He had always been like this just before something happened, before one of their swift sudden journeys. For years, after her mother died, Rita had adored her father. He was handsome and he was charming. He was generous in many ways.

Rita felt almost gay when they started in the cool of an early morning.

The car, she admitted, was beautiful, but she had never known her father to drive one that was not. It had power and speed and swiftly carried them out of the fog around the bay and into the sunshine of the Santa Clara valley. The hills were like yellow velvet, as Rita had seen them from the air. She leaned back in her seat and let her eyes flow along the soft contours.

"Only a few hours," Jennings said. "Isn't it great to be free again, traveling, watching the world slip past? It's a pretty fine world, *enamorita,* if you enjoy it as you live."

They glided into the rounded hills, through a pass and into another great valley bordered by mountains, and always smooth cement was beneath the wheels. Then roads narrowed, soon were no longer paved. Dust rose. Ruts appeared. Grades stiffened.

It had been hot in the valley and here, between hills, the heat was suffocating. The road became so narrow that brush whipped the sides of the new car and scratched the glistening body.

"We should have a small cheap car," Rita said.

"Nonsense!" her father laughed.

"The road is so narrow, the turns so short, you cannot get around them."

"Don't worry, *enamorita.*"

Rita did not like it. He was not a good driver. He was too careless and had been in accidents in Europe and in Florida.

And he was doing a strange thing. When they left the well-paved road he got out of the car and tied a small piece of white cloth to a bush beyond the fork. Each time the road branched he did this, until they traveled only a rough and little-used lane.

"So I will not get lost," Jennings answered the question in her eyes. "It is so many years since I came here, before your mother and I were married, and it is unfamiliar."

Rita couldn't see how this trailblazing helped to find their way; but she forgot that as memories flooded in, memories that had been aroused when she looked down from the airplane. This country was familiar. She knew she had been here before, of course, but now scents made her aware of it when sights had not. The dust, the sage, the chamisal, even the heat carried odors she had known as a child.

Rita became strangely excited. She felt as if she had been waiting all her life to return to this place. She was sure she would find peace here. Her father would never remain long in such solitude but she would. And she would not let him take the rancho San Patricio from her or take her from the rancho.

The road narrowed and climbed and the pace slackened. A horse and rider appeared ahead. The man crowded his mount into the chaparral that they might pass. Jennings stopped and asked if it were the road to San Patricio.

Again Rita caught a memory-arousing odor that of a ridden horse; and she knew this was her home to which she was going. In gratitude she looked up at the rider and smiled.

HE WAS young, straight in the saddle. His hair was brown and his face heavily tanned. He wore overalls and chaps and an old woolen shirt, a crumpled high-crowned felt hat; and his saddle was old and brush-scarred. Yet he was handsome in that saddle because he sat it so well, because he was a part of the nervous horse.

And he smiled back at her, warmly and as if he understood. Rita found something very clear and honest in that smile; and in his face she found a strange thing—dependableness. Rita had not found that quality in the faces of any of her father's friends. She knew suddenly that for years she had not seen anyone she could trust.

The young man's glance turned from her reluctantly and swept the car.

"It's the right road but the wrong auto," he said.

"It'll make any grade you have," Jennings said.

"But not the curves."

"I can back and fill."

"On a decent road. But this is washed out, too narrow. There's a turn near the top of Mescal Ridge that you can't get around."

"We'll be waiting for you beyond it," Jennings said.

After they had gone on, Rita looked back. The horseman was following. She could not see him well in the thick dust.

"We'll show these hicks," her father said.

They climbed along the side of a high steep ridge. If Rita looked past her father she saw only the haze of the depths. Sometimes, as they turned sharply to angle back, the fenders grazed the yellow clay banks. And then they came to a place where there had been a slide at a hairpin turn. The road was barely wide enough for the wheels.

"Stop," Rita said, and she opened the door and stepped onto the running board.

"You worry too much," Jennings laughed.

He let her off, went on. When he saw the wheelbase was too long to permit a turn he stopped. He backed to swing in closer. The grade was steep. When he shifted from reverse to low he took his foot off the brake. The car slipped back. A rear wheel went off the edge. The other rear wheel went off.

Rita saw the car disappear. She saw her father's white face as he sat motionless, gripping the wheel.

She heard a crash, and then another. There were many more crashes before silence returned to the canyon.

After a while she went forward to the edge. She saw crushed brush down the steep slope and far below, near the bottom, the sun picked out bright metal.

Rita was sitting on a rock, staring across the canyon, when the horseman came up the grade behind her. He was whistling a little tune that was simple and very gay, like songs she had heard in the fields in France and Spain, and a new compartment of her memory was unlocked. The tune fitted the solitude and the heat and the entrancing scents, for she had heard it sung when a little girl, by the dashing riders of the rancho San Patricio.

CHAPTER II

ROAD TO TROUBLE

THE young man stopped his horse. He was smiling when he saw the girl but when his glance shifted to the marks on the edge of the road he slid quickly to the ground.

"Was he in the car?" the young man asked; and he walked to the edge and looked down.

He swung back to her, horror and pity in his eyes.

"I knew he couldn't make this turn," he said.

"He has never liked to listen," she said.

"Was he—anybody you—?"

"He was my father."

She said it flatly. There were no tears in her eyes. She had known in that first instant that there could be no grief. It was not that she did not love her father. She thought only that now she could be certain she would never see his face between steel bars.

The young man glanced at her. Rita could see he was struggling to say something that might comfort her.

"He has had accidents before," she said quickly. "All his life he has never been careful."

She tried only to put him at ease, and she saw that she had shocked him. He was staring at her dry eyes. Suddenly he turned and looked down into the canyon.

"I'll have to get down there," he said. "He might not be dead. You—where were you going?"

"To San Patricio."

"You had better take the horse. It's only four miles. Tell Pedro. Tell him to bring a pack horse. Blankets. Tell him to go to the bottom of Mescal grade and come up the creek. I'll be there."

He led the horse to her, looked at her skirts.

"Can you ride? Sidesaddle? You'll be more comfortable."

"I'll be all right," she said. "My riding clothes were in the car. But I can ride."

"Tell Pedro to bring two pack horses," he said. "One for your baggage. You'd better stay at San Patricio. I'll come later. I have a car and I'll go to the valley and report this."

"You are very kind," Rita said.

She felt stunned and dead, and her voice was dead, and she saw him look at her curiously.

"You're a cool one," he said.

He helped her onto the horse. "Tell Pedro to hurry," he said. "You can save a little time by taking the riding trail just beyond the crest. It's a short cut to San Patricio. And in the flat, where the road forks, take the left. The other leads to my ranch."

He turned and plunged over the edge of the road and down into the canyon.

As Rita rode up the grade she tried not to think of what the young man would find down there.

She had known Gregory Jennings was becoming careless and over-confident, and very desperate. As she had learned more of his past and understood more of what he was—gay and fun-loving, soft and weak, slipping from the dazzling adventure of great crimes in Europe to sordid and more dangerous crimes in the States—she had become aware that disaster was inevitable for the only person in the world whom she knew or loved.

Now she could remember him as he was before the weak lines had deepened and while there was still sincerity in his tenderness for her. Rita felt that the past was gone now, with the car and its driver.

One thing did trouble her. Those bits of white cloth tied to the brush were not the result of a prankish idea. They were too much like the crude things she had seen in Los Angeles. There had been a reason for those road markers, but her father was dead now and they could no longer touch her.

A cool breeze came from the west when she reached the top of Mescal Ridge and she turned off onto the horse trail. Then she reached the road down on the flat, where it was hot again, and she emerged in a long valley.

The road forked, and Rita looked curiously toward a side canyon. That led to the young man's ranch. She wondered what it was like; whether he had a wife, a family. She saw that tire-tracks led his way, none toward San Patricio. There were only hoofprints in the road she followed.

Rita wondered about that. It didn't fit the grandeur she had always associated with San Patricio. She remembered stories of the rancho in her mother's childhood,

of the cattle and the wild horsemen and the gay fiestas.

BUT it was pleasant in the valley beneath the liveoaks. The road wound in lovely curves. A deer leaped across it and a wild boar ran from a thicket, ferocious even in flight. Rita forded a brook several times and saw trout dart through the shallows. And then the forest fell away and the valley lay open and she saw the ranch house on a rise of ground.

The low adobe building seemed deserted. One wing had melted under winter rains. The rest of the sprawling one-story structure looked solid enough with its thick walls and tiled roof; but there was no sign of life, no smoke rising from a chimney.

Rita was looking at the building as she stopped beneath an enormous spreading liveoak before the entrance and she did not see a man lying asleep behind the great trunk. The thud of hoofs wakened him and he sat up.

He was a huge man with a big roughly carved head and a great mop of blond hair that gleamed whiter against his tan. And though he seemed to be past sixty he got to his feet nimbly and bowed with a flourish.

"Señorita!" he said. "I am ashamed that you find me so, but the visitors they never come and it is the siesta time."

Rita slid to the ground. "I am Rita Jennings," she said. "There has been an accident. My father and his car went over a cliff. A young man, the owner of this horse, said you would go to help him."

"When this happen?" the man asked excitedly. "And you are the *señorita?* I have not seen you since you were so high," and he held his hand at his knee.

Rita gave the instructions.

"He is Cal Preston," the man said. "Our only neighbor, and a good one. I will go, but first I will call Mariana. She is my woman and she will take the good care of you. Me, I am Pedro Svensen. The blond greaser, they call me down in the valley."

He began shouting and a woman came from the house. She was fat and shapeless in a long cotton dress gathered by a string that sank deep into the fat of her waist. Rita thought she was an Indian, she was so much darker than any Spaniard, and her face was fat and impassive and her black eyes hostile. But sympathy and kindliness shone when Pedro Svenson jabbered at her and she became suddenly alive and astonishingly active for her bulk.

Pedro, too, lost no time. Before Rita was settled in a chair in a dark cool room she heard the pounding of hoofs and the clatter of rawhide alforjas.

Mariana jabbered her sympathy and excitement but Rita did not recognize many of the words. It was not Spanish as she knew it. She lay back with her eyes shut. Soon she was left alone. It was hours later when she heard hoofbeats, and when she went to the door she saw Cal Preston slip from the saddle.

"He was dead," Cal said simply. "We took the body to the road at the foot of the grade. Pedro is there. I will get my truck and take it to the valley. "Would you want to come?"

"I must go," Rita said.

"I'll be back soon."

Mariana brought frijoles and a broiled young chicken. Rita insisted that Cal Preston share the meal.

"I haven't eaten since early morning," he admitted. "And it will be midnight before we get to town."

He ate in silence for a while.

"I am sorry," he said to Rita. "Riding in the truck. But there is no other car."

"It must be done," she said. "Are there no people here except Pedro and Mariana?"

"No others. Pedro is the caretaker. The owners haven't been near the ranch for fifteen years. Guess they've forgotten it."

"I am the owner," she said. "I am Rita Jennings. My mother was Margarita de Azara."

"Oh!" he said in astonishment. "Why didn't you answer my letters?"

"We have been in Europe, and I did not get any letters."

"I wrote about—but never mind now. It's tough, all this happening. And when you came for your first visit."

"I did not come to visit," Rita said. "I came to live here—always."

CAL PRESTON stared at her. She knew he was looking at her dress and her white skin and trying to reconcile them with this deserted ranch.

"I have always wanted to live here," she said. "Now there is no place else. There was no one except my father."

He didn't say anything, only looked at her, and soon he rode away down the road.

Cal returned surprisingly soon. He had a light truck. It was dusty and rusty and it clattered and shivered and threatened to fall apart. But it didn't seem to mind the rough roads.

"An old model T," Cal said. "Only kind that can get around in these hills. I should have gotten tough about your father taking that big car up Mescal grade."

"You could not have stopped him," she said. "Nothing has ever stopped him. That was the trouble."

Her tone was flat again and she did not know he was again watching her curiously or that he was wondering how her eyes could be dry and her voice steady. He did not speak again until they reached the bottom of Mescal grade and saw Pedro beside the road.

It was two days before Rita and Cal Preston returned to the mountains. She told him, as they left the valley, how grateful she was for all he had done. Cal had taken care of everything for her, even to going to a city and watching the cremation.

"We're neighbors," he said; but there was not much warmth in his tone.

His tone had been warm at first, but as she continued dry-eyed, as she asked questions about the ranch, she saw him watch her curiously and saw his warmth vanish. Once, on the way home, he turned to her anxiously.

"You won't crack up when this is all over, will you?" he asked. "So far you've—"

For a moment Rita was tempted to tell him why she would not, why she felt suddenly so free. She knew she could trust Cal but she wanted to begin this new life wholly free of the past. She wanted that more than anything else.

They had left the pavement and Rita saw the first of her father's pieces of white cloth on a bush.

"Stop!" Rita said. "Will you take that down?"

"Sure," he said. "It must be a sign, a signal. It wasn't there last week."

Rita felt her heart stop beating. Of course it was a signal. It was as much a part of something as that long wait in San Francisco and the trips to Los Angeles and the mysterious messages. Cal had stepped from the truck and was looking at her.

"My father put it there," she said. "He was joking. Said he wanted to find his way back. But it—it makes me think of him."

Cal removed the white cloth at each fork of the road after that. He stuffed them under rocks and drove on. But when he talked to her his tone became warmer. Rita felt more than ever that sense of dependability in him.

She liked him, too. She had known few young people in her strange, distorted life. Mostly her acquaintances had been associates of her father, older men she had never trusted and had often disliked. Always there had been restraint and undercurrents and veiled speeches. Now, riding up a canyon in a rusty truck, with dust swirling from the wheels, Rita felt for the first time that she was living.

They left the last side road. Cal was telling of his small ranch and of his hopes to make it a big one. Rita had never heard a man speak of working for a living, or trying to build something. Then Cal slowed down and peered past the radiator.

"Someone's been here," he said. "A small car. Maybe the police."

"Police!" Rita said in a low voice.

"To check on that accident."

But the car had climbed the Mescal grade. It had passed the place where Gregory Jennings had backed into the canyon. It had gone down the other side and into the flat, past the branch road to Cal's ranch. It stood under the great liveoaks before the door of San Patricio when Cal and Rita drove up.

And three men came out when the rattling old truck stopped. Rita recognized them all. One was Clifford Ramsden, an Englishman she had known well in Europe. The other two were men to whom she had delivered messages in Los Angeles only the week before.

All three stood looking at her. She got out of the truck. She thanked Cal again, but she didn't ask him to stay for supper. She wasn't even thinking about Cal Preston when he drove away.

"We got here on schedule," Clifford Ramsden said to her. "Jennings certainly picked the right place. Where is the blighter?"

CHAPTER III

SKUNKS CARRY GUNS

RITA did not speak as she walked to the door and into the wide hall and on through to the patio. She heard the men following her but she did not turn to watch them. She went on to a large room with an enormous fireplace, and on the mantel she placed a small canister.

"He is in this," she said as she turned to face them.

She had control of herself now. The sick feeling had not wholly passed but she felt that she could speak, and she knew what she would say.

"Don't kid us," one of the men said. "Where's Jennings?"

He was short and fat, and yet he seemed very strong and he walked with a light step. His fat face gave no promise of slow thinking. One saw only his eyes.

"He is in this," Rita said again. "The car went over the edge into the canyon. My father is dead. Now you can go. I do not want you here."

They paid no attention to the last. The third man, slight and dark, walked quickly to the mantel. He took down the canister, removed the cover, sniffed, poked a finger inside.

Rita sprang at him in fury and jerked the receptacle from his hands.

"Get out!" she cried. "All of you. You are ghouls! Vultures! Get out and don't ever come here again."

They were not in the least concerned. Ramsden lighted a cigarette with the slow elaborate gestures she knew so well.

"Jennings never could drive a car" Ramsden said.

"This is a frame," the small man said.

His voice was cold, and it came like a flame. He looked at Rita.

"Maybe they burned a pig and stuck the ashes in the can," he said. "Maybe they only poured grease over ashes from the fireplace. Where's Jennings?"

He shot the last at Rita and took a step closer. She had never been so afraid of her father's associates before. She had never seen a man like Max Horning.

"Don't be silly," Ramsden said. "This fellow Pedro told us he helped carry the body down the canyon."

"Pedro never saw Jennings," Max Horning snarled. "I never saw him. Boyle never did. Are you in on this frame, you cheap limey?"

Ramsden didn't speak. He looked at Horning with contempt, and without fear.

"Forget it, Max," the fat man said. "What would Jennings be gaining? He's dead, all right."

"He's dead," Rita said. "Now get out. All of you."

They did not seem to hear her. Max Horning walked to the door and looked out. He felt of the thick adobe walls and seemed to approve. The others took chairs. The chairs were big and comfortable, home-made of oak and slatted with rawhide. Evidently the room had not been cleaned for years. Marks of Mariana's recent activity were evident.

"We're not leaving," Max Horning said. "We like this place. We've paid for it. We'll stay."

"This is my place and you have paid nothing," Rita said.

She was losing her fear of them, and it was her home. It was the only place in the world to which she could go and her sense of possession and of refuge was suddenly fierce and overpowering.

"Get out," she said, "or I will have you thrown out."

They did not seem to have heard. They seemed to have forgotten her. Max Horning was studying Rita with his flaming cold eyes.

"What's his game, Boyle?" Max said to the fat man.

"Jennings is dead," Boyle said. "I'll bet you've always figured your mother got you out of an ash can and palmed you off on your old man. You'd suspect the Pacific Ocean of being a lake. Jennings is dead, and now we cut three ways instead of four."

"We're cutting three ways if he's alive," Max said without looking from Rita's face. "See her weep any? Where's her red eyes? And why is she telling us to get out?"

"It is my home and I don't want you here," Rita said. "I never asked you to come. I will not have you here."

Max stared at her unblinkingly, as if he were listening to a strange language.

"What's eating her?" he said to Ramsden. "Thought you said this Jennings mob was jake. Or is this some of that smooth work you've been bragging about?"

Ramsden ignored that. He was looking at Rita.

"We're staying," Ramsden said. "As long as we wish. Take it easy, old girl, and enjoy it as best you can."

"And I said we've paid for our board," Max added. "I gave you the money myself. In L.A. Are you sure you gave it to your old man?"

Rita opened her handbag and took out a purse. She took out a hundred dollar bill and a ten dollar bill, and she threw them onto the floor at Max Horning's feet.

"My father bought a car," she said. "I paid for the funeral with what I found in his pockets. This is all that was left. You have paid me nothing. Get out."

She was angry. All the hot blooded spirit of the de Azaras was seething, now that she was back under the home roof. Rita might be blond and blue-eyed, but no *señorita* from old Spain ever flared up more angrily.

And she accomplished absolutely nothing. The three men sat looking at her without expression or concern. She knew they had no intention of leaving. She knew the life from which she believed she had escaped forever, this thing her father had fastened upon her, had engulfed her again.

CLIFFORD RAMSDEN was the only one she knew. Rita had known him for a dozen years. He had often been with her and Gregory Jennings in Europe. He and her father had seemed the best of friends, always laughing and planning gay times together.

Rita knew his name was Ramsden, though she knew he used other names. And several times she had seen letters addressed to him with *Bart* after the Ramsden. When she was small she had called him "Bart," and Ramsden and her father had thought it a great joke. Rita had liked Ramsden in those days. She had sensed something fine in him, something solid, even something gentle. Now she saw him to be as cold and as ruthless as the two who had come with him to San Patricio.

"Get out!" Max Horning said suddenly, and he waved Rita toward the door. "We want to talk, so keep well away."

Rita recognized something in that voice that had the force of an army. She turned in sudden fear to Clifford Ramsden.

"You look tired," Ramsden said as he arose. "Perhaps a little rest is what you need."

He was polite and considerate, as she had known him in Europe; and he escorted her to the door.

"Wait!" Max Horning said.

He reached out with a foot and kicked the bills toward Rita.

"For groceries," he said. "Tell that Mexican albino we want something besides chili and frijoles. Tell him to buy some white man's grub."

"And some whisky," Boyle said.

Rita went out, and she did not look back.

"Don't worry," Ramsden whispered at the door; but when she looked at him she knew it meant nothing.

She crossed the patio and went out through the entrance. The valley stretched before her and the mountains rose above. The stillness was complete. It was a picture of solitude and peace such as Rita had never known, and she knew it was a prison, the same sort of prison the mean little tenement in San Francisco had been, a prison such as she had known in hotel rooms in France and Spain, in Italy and in Greece. The whole past had followed her into this wilderness.

Pedro found her beneath the big liveoak and when he saw the expression in her eyes he swept off his hat and bowed.

"The *señorita* has my sympathy," he said. "To lose a father after one has lost a mother is the greatest sadness."

Rita stared at him curiously. The name Pedro did not fit this blond giant; his size and apparent strength did not fit the gentleness of his manner and words.

"You are very kind, Pedro," Rita said. "When did these men come?"

"Yesterday morning. They seemed to have traveled far. They were tired and they had a temper. They would not believe your father is dead. Not the little one. I—"

Pedro hesitated, and looked at her a little fearfully.

"I do not like that man," he said. "I do not like the others."

"They will leave soon," Rita said. "How long have you been on the ranch, Pedro?"

"Nearly fifty years, *señorita*. Ever since your grandfather, Lorenzo de Azara, brought me from San Francisco. He was a very kind man; his heart melted when he saw the marks on my body. I have never seen the sea since then, except from the tops of those mountains."

"The sea?"

"I was a sailor, a cabin boy. I left my Norway when I was eleven, and in London I ran away and joined an American ship. The mate beat me, and in San Francisco I jumped ship. Just as quick as I could. I ask the first man I see for a job, and the saints are good to me, for that man was Señor de Azara. I have been here on the hacienda ever since."

So that was it. Rita looked at him with interest. A Norwegian who talked and acted like a Mexican, except that he lapsed occasionally into the Scandinavian twist of a "j."

BUT what drew Rita's real attention was the loyalty of the man and his integrity. She felt at once that she could depend on Pedro. She was going to tell him that. In her loneliness and desperation she felt that she must have someone on whom she could depend. But the long years of fear and evasion, of flight and trickery, restrained her.

"I think our—our guests will not remain long," she said. "But I will be here. Always, Pedro."

His rugged face beamed, but quickly his eyes looked troubled.

"We are very poor now, *señorita*," Pedro said. "Each year the bank pays me less. For years I have been alone. The cattle are gone. We have only a few cows, some pigs and Mariana's chickens. We raise a little corn and the peppers. The frijoles. Some goats and sheep. There is so little."

"The bank pays you?"

"Every three months when I go into the valley. The bank is the boss. Your mother wanted it that way, I was told. The bank leases much land for grazing. It pays the taxes. But the bank says it gets little and taxes are high. There is so little left for Mariana and me."

Rita did not speak. There had been a time, she knew, when her mother received quite a sum each year. She remembered

her mother showing her a check and saying they could go to Paris and buy some new clothes. Her San Patricio check, she had always called it. But after her mother died there had been no checks. None that Rita ever saw.

"But do not worry, *señorita,*" Pedro whispered.

"What are you two talking about?" a sharp voice came from the patio entrance.

They whirled and saw Max Horning standing there. He came swiftly toward them and stopped before Rita.

"Careful, little girl," he said. "It's not nice to talk to the help about your guests."

"I'll talk—" Rita began, but he raised a warning hand and turned to Pedro, gave him the two bills Rita had thrown on the floor.

"Go to town," Max Horning said. "Get some grub, white man's grub. Something fit to eat. And some liquor. Here's a list. And hurry it up."

Pedro stared at the money in Max Horning's hand but when he reached for it Rita struck the bills to the earth. She stepped on them with both feet and crushed them into the dust.

"No, Pedro!" she cried. "The food of San Patricio is good enough for any guest we invite."

"You little hell cat," Max said, and he shoved her away.

Only he didn't shove far. A great paw grasped his wrist and a twist forced him to his knees. Pedro held him there without difficulty.

"You beg the pardon of the *señorita,*" he said.

Max reached beneath his coat with his free hand but Pedro was much quicker. He crushed the automatic from Max's fingers.

"Even a gun cannot make a man of a skunk," Pedro said. "Beg the pardon of the *señorita.*"

Rita saw the muscles in Pedro's arm contract. She saw Max Horning's face grow white and twist with pain. She saw the hot hate in Max's eyes, but suddenly he went limp.

"I'm sorry," Max said, and Pedro freed him. "But we'll talk about all this later."

He walked quickly toward the patio and left the shredded bank notes in the dust.

CHAPTER IV

BUZZARDS ARE GOOD TRACKERS

CLIFFORD RAMSDEN came to Rita's apartment half an hour later. The house was spread around four sides of the patio and Mariana had been careful to prepare the owner's quarters for her mistress and to put the visitors in rooms at an opposite corner.

Ramsden strolled across the big, roughly tiled square and Rita saw him coming. She could see all the patio from her windows, and out through the arched entrance. She noticed that the Englishman was smiling and seemed much as she had known him when she was a little girl. But when he knocked she did not ask him in. She indicated a bench outside.

"Is Gregory really dead or was that someone else?" Ramsden asked.

Rita blazed out at him. "Why should I lie about it? He was all I had in the world."

"Maybe, and then again if Jennings were still kicking around he might do quite well by himself—if you took the stuff out."

"Took what stuff?" Rita demanded.

"Get down to scratch, old girl," Ramsden said a little sharply. "Your father said he had let you in on this. The whole scheme was his, and you had a good part in it. He sent that word to Max Horning and Eddie Boyle and they've counted on it."

"I know nothing," Rita said. "My father told me I could come here to live. He was in the car when it fell to the bottom of the canyon. We took his body to the valley in Mr. Preston's truck. That is the truth and that is all I know."

Ramsden smiled, and lighted a cigarette.

"What did you think you were making

those trips to Los Angeles for?" he asked.

"I was not told."

"You guessed."

Rita was silent a moment. She suspected this questioning. Each query seemed to cover another.

"I guessed," she said. "I guessed in Europe. I mean that I saw newspapers after we made quick journeys, and always the news was the same. But my father never told me anything. He did not tell me anything this time. But I told him I was coming here to live. Alone if necessary. I would not carry messages or hide in small rooms again."

She jumped up to face him as she spoke. It was difficult to remember her hair was blond, and her eyes blue when she was so aroused. It was old Spain speaking.

But Ramsden only smiled at her.

"Very well done," he said. "Now let's get down to business. Are you going through with your part?"

"I have no part."

"We have several pounds of ice, white, green and red," Ramsden said. "Your father made the plans. We carried them out. I was a house guest. Max and Eddie Boyle waited outside a window. It was ridiculously easy. Nothing is easier than a wealthy nitwit trying to crash the Hollywood crowd. We could have carried banners while we worked. We drove out of town in broad daylight—headed east, of course. Now we're here, safe and sitting pretty."

"You are not going to stay," Rita broke in.

"Sitting pretty here in San Patricio, my dear, with two hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds and rubies and emeralds all bound together in platinum. Sitting here among the mountains while the police and insurance people search the cities and the highways and watch the usual fences. Sitting here while you go out and make the proper contacts for us, the ones Jennings arranged, the contacts you know about."

"I know nothing. I will do nothing. I am through with all that. Forever!"

"Nice acting, Rita," Ramsden smiled "You and I—when this is over—we can do some work in Europe. You've become very lovely, you know, and—"

"I am not acting!" Rita cried furiously. "I will not—"

"Stop it!" he said in a sharp low voice. "You'd better start acting. Horning and Boyle are not like the mob we had in Europe. They're Americans. They'll kill you in a second if they think you are double-crossing them."

"I won't have them here."

"You're not as dumb as you sound. They're bad, I tell you. They'll act on the least suspicion. And get that gun back from Pedro. They'll kill him if you don't."

"They wouldn't dare!" Rita protested. "The police—"

"What police? *In this wilderness?*"

RITA sat down and looked at Ramsden. She did not believe this. But as she considered it she knew she was only wishing it were not true. She had heard of American criminals and their proneness to homicide. She had heard her father's European friends speak of it with contempt and tell how they used brains, not force. And Rita remembered how quickly Max Horning had reached for his weapon. She remembered his eyes, and she knew he intended to use it.

Ramsden was watching her, and she felt he was reading her thoughts.

"So play along, old girl," he said. "It's the only safe way. And perhaps, biding our time, we can clean up handsomely on this—just you and I."

He stood up.

"Get that gun," he said. "And get some decent food."

"Why should I get food for them?" she demanded. "And how can I? I have not one cent. There is no way to get out to a town. Those two have a car. Let them go."

"That car can't leave here," he said. "They can't. That is part of Jennings' plan. How does Pedro get stuff in here? How about that chap who brought you?"

Rita had completely forgotten Cal Preston.

"Not him!" she cried instinctively.

"Why not?"

'He—he is busy on his ranch. He wouldn't understand."

She remembered her first sight of Cal, sitting his horse, smiling at her, looking so competent and dependable. She knew she could trust him, but she knew he would never trust her if he knew what these three men were like.

"I'll talk to Pedro about him," Ramsden said. "And you get that gun from Pedro. At once. Horning won't waste any time."

He walked swiftly away and Rita went out a rear door. She saw smoke coming from a chimney and found the kitchen at a rear corner. Mariana and Pedro were there. Pedro was examining the automatic he had taken from Max Horning.

"Señorita," he said, "I never see anything like this. I would not know how too make it shoot. It has no hammer."

He was handling it cautiously, pointing it down in a corner and trying to find something loose that he could move. Suddenly the gun went off.

Mariana screamed and she and Rita ran outside. Pedro carefully laid the weapon on the floor.

"It is too dangerous," he said when he joined the women. "I have used guns all my life, especially when I was young and a *vaquero* for Lorenzo de Azara. But I do not know that one."

The three visitors burst through a door from the patio. Horning and Boyle held automatics and swung them on Pedro.

"Who's shooting?" Max demanded.

"The gun went off in Pedro's hands," Rita said. "It is in the kitchen."

Max ran to the side of the door and peered in, weapon ready. After a moment he entered, and then he came out with the gun. He was grinning.

"Don't you know how to handle these things?" he asked.

"I shoot it but I do not know how I do it," Pedro said.

"Guess he's safe enough," Max said to Boyle. "And I've got my pet back. Next time, greaser, when I pull this you'll know how it shoots."

"It is a dangerous weapon," Pedro said.

Horning laughed. He thought that very funny, and it was obvious that he considered Pedro a droll character.

"You've said it, greaser," he said. "And keep your big paws off me. Next time I'll blast you. Look!"

HE PUT the gun in a holster under his left shoulder, and then he jerked it out and began shooting. The reports came swiftly. The first bullet struck a rusty dishpan thirty feet away. The fifth bullet struck it. The other four missed. Max grinned at Pedro.

"It is fast," Pedro said, "but that is a big pan."

Max snarled something but Boyle and Ramsden were laughing. They clapped Max on the back and pushed him through the door into the patio. Rita could hear them shouting, "It's a big pan!"

"That man needs to take lessons in shooting," Pedro said.

Rita did not see the three men again that night. Mariana brought supper to her rooms and she went to bed early. She wakened once in the night and saw a light at the other corner of the patio and in the stillness she heard voices that were loud and angry.

The men did not appear when she had breakfast in the morning and Rita went through the other part of the adobe house for the first time. It was a huge quadrangle with many rooms for guests and the once large family. The wing that had melted under winter rains was the old servants' quarters and Mariana and Pedro had moved into a room off the huge kitchen.

There was a big dining room, too, and a huge assembly room. The furnishings were complete, though in a sad state of neglect. There were quantities of silver and china. All the tables, chairs, beds and big chests of drawers were country-made, of hand-hewn oak.

When Rita went out the front entrance she found that the men's car was gone and she believed they had departed in the night. She felt suddenly free. The fact that she had no money, that Pedro had reported the rancho was practically bankrupt, meant nothing. At least it was hers and she was alone.

Rita walked out under the ninety-foot spread of the liveoak's limbs to look at her house, to plan for it and her life there, when she saw a horseman coming up the road. It was Cal Preston.

"Good morning!" she greeted him almost gaily. "It is nice to have the neighbors call."

"Neighbor," Cal said as he dismounted. "Didn't you know I'm the only one within twenty-five miles?"

"I like it that way."

"You won't get lonesome if you have friends visiting."

"I have no friends," Rita said. "And those three men have gone."

"When did they go?" Cal asked.

"In the night. When I woke their car was gone."

Cal looked where the car had been under the liveoak. He walked back to the road and then toward the corral west of the house. He seemed to be examining tracks most casually.

"They haven't gone," he said. "No one has driven out of the flat since I brought you in yesterday. I saw the tracks where my road forks."

"But their car is gone!"

Rita was frightened. She could not understand what lay behind this.

"They took the car out past the corral," Cal said. "See where they scuffed out the tracks."

He looked at her with troubled eyes. She did not speak. She was too frightened.

"I don't want to butt in," Cal said, "but you look as if you were in trouble."

Rita hesitated. She had an impulse to tell that she was in serious trouble. She even considered telling about her father, something about him.

"I know a little something about it," Cal said. "Pedro and I are good friends and he's told me. And besides that I have wanted to talk to you about—"

HE BROKE off at the startled look in her eyes. Rita scarcely heard him. She was looking past Cal at the patio entrance. Max Horning stood there watching them. And when Rita saw him he lifted a finger and crooked it in a significant command that she was to join him at once.

"No," Rita said hurriedly. "There is nothing, no trouble."

"If you need any help—" Cal began.

She could think only of the gun beneath Max Horning's coat and of the look in his eyes when he had threatened Pedro.

"No, no. Everything is all right."

"Those letters I wrote you," Cal said. "I sent them care of the bank. I want to lease some of your grazing land. I offered to pay twice what you're getting but the bank claimed I wasn't responsible."

"But I never got the letters," Rita said.

She was glad of this switch of subject. Or perhaps this is what he meant all the time. She smiled warmly.

"I would like to lease you my land," she said.

"You needn't be afraid of my not paying. The present lease expires in four months and—"

"That is fortunate!" she exclaimed. "I become sole owner in three months and then—"

She stopped. Max Horning was coming toward them. He came swiftly. His eyes had those cold flames. Cal Preston heard footsteps and turned.

"Get going, feller," Max said. "Can't you see the lady don't want you here?"

Cal stared in astonishment. He glanced once at Rita and, though she wished to, she was too frightened to give him any message.

"Miss Jennings hasn't told me I'm not wanted," Cal said.

"You hear me telling you," Max said.

Cal turned to Rita. "Do you want me—?" he began.

She screamed. Max had jerked the auto-

matic swiftly from under his coat.

"I'm telling you the last time," Max said. "When we came in here we saw some buzzards eatin' a dead calf. The buzzards will be living well in this country, if you get what I mean."

Rita watched in terror but Cal did not seem in the least impressed by the gun or by Max.

"Buzzards are good trackers," Cal said.

"If there was anybody to see 'em," Max said. "An empty country like this—where's the chances?"

"The country is empty."

"It'll be more so if you don't get moving."

Cal looked at Max, and he looked at the gun.

"You've got the argument—now," he said, and he turned to his horse.

"Don't come back," Max said.

Cal mounted. He took off his hat and bowed to Rita.

"This is a public road," he said to Max. "I use it to look after my stock. I pass here quite often."

"If you're wise you'll let your stock take care of itself."

Cal remained unruffled and unangered. "A good rancher looks after his stock," he said. "I'm a good rancher."

CHAPTER V

ONE WAY TO THE BRUSH

RITA stood watching Cal Preston ride away, and she felt that her last hope had gone. She had seen his contempt for Max, knew he could not escape the conviction that in some way she was connected with Max and the others.

"Come along," Max said. "We'll settle this now—some way."

"I won't have anything to do with you or the others," Rita flared. "I want you to leave here."

Max didn't speak. He just looked at her, and Rita understood what he meant by "some way." Then he jerked his head toward the patio and she walked to the entrance before him.

Eddie Boyle and Clifford Ramsden were waiting in one of their rooms. When Rita entered, Max shut the door.

"I'm taking no more chances," Max said. "I caught her talking to Preston. Looks like the rancher's in with her on this. We'd better bump him off."

"That is your method for solving any problem," Ramsden said. "Why start somebody smelling around."

"Who'd do the smelling?" Max scoffed. "We didn't pass a house for thirty miles when we came in here. Pedro says there's nothing but mountains and ocean between here and Japan. He says the nearest neighbor is twenty-five miles away, except this Preston."

"Sure," Boyle said. "We got nothing to worry about. Nobody comes into this country. Preston's the only one that could cause trouble."

"I don't see it," Ramsden said. "Supposing there are two men in here. One is found dead. That would make it rather embarrassing for the survivor. Seems to me it would be much safer to bump a man off in a large city."

"You're nuts, limey," Max said. "No cops in here. Nobody to see anything or hear anything. You could leave your trademark on a stiff and be playing safe."

Boyle nodded indifferently, and then he looked at Rita. She found something far more dangerous in the light blue eyes sunk so deeply in that fat face than she had in Max Horning's cold stare.

"Listen, you," Boyle said to her. "We're through fooling. You playing with us or not?"

"I don't want to have anything to do with you," she said.

"Dames mean nothing to us," Boyle said. "World's full of 'em. And a lot are better looking than you. Going to play square?"

Rita didn't answer. She looked at Max and then, in desperation, at Ramsden. Ramsden's stare was the bleakest of all.

"We've got the stuff here," the Englishman said. "We've done our part. Jennings was to hide us and get rid of it. You say

he's dead. All right then. Finish his job."

"But I tell you I don't know anything about it," Rita said. "He never told me anything."

They only stared at her and suddenly Rita saw that if she gave in now she would be trapped forever.

"And if I did know, I wouldn't do it!" she exclaimed. "I'm not a crook."

She started toward the door but Max shoved her back.

"We can give the buzzards a treat," he said.

"Yeah, don't be so dumb," Boyle said. "We don't figure on getting caught or being gypped. We're going to see that we ain't."

"In plain words, Rita," Ramsden said, "play along or get killed. It seems to be the way they work things in this country. You may as well understand it."

She drew back against the wall, staring at the three men. Her last hope had been in Ramsden.

"And play straight," Max said. "No talking to Preston. One phony move and you're through."

"No talking to Pedro," Boyle added.

"He's too dumb to count," Max said. "Now how we going at this? We got to stay here a month until things quiet down. And she's got to get in touch with that Chink. If there is a Chink."

"It's what Jennings told me," Ramsden said. "That was the beauty of it. A fat price and a new outlet, one the police and insurance people would never suspect. You know that Chinaman, Rita?"

RITA gasped. She did know a Chinaman. He had come to the apartment in San Francisco twice. She had heard her father call him on the telephone several times. It was a Chinatown exchange number and she remembered it.

"She knows him," Max said.

"That's settled," Boyle said. "But we ain't trusting her with the stuff. She can go see the Chinaman and tell him to come here."

"I won't go to San Francisco," Rita said. "I won't have anything to do with this, even if you kill me."

The three men looked at her with new interest. She seemed to mean it. But as Rita watched them she saw that they were not concerned with her death. They were wondering only how they could compel coöperation.

"I will not have anything to do with your robbing," Rita said. "I won't carry a message. I will do this. If you promise to leave the rancho I will tell you the Chinaman's telephone number. It is all I know. I heard my father call it."

"You saw him in your flat," Ramsden said.

Again Rita was startled. She felt as if she were choking, as if new bonds were confining her.

"I saw him twice," she said. "Just through a door before my father closed it."

"What's his name?" Max asked.

"I never heard it."

"What did your father call him when he telephoned?"

"My father did not use a name. He said, 'Sing a song of sixpence.'"

"You'd know him if you saw him," Ramsden said.

"There are so many Chinese in San Francisco," Rita said, "and they look so much alike."

"This is easy," Boyle said. "She goes to 'Frisco, calls this China number and—what is that number?"

He shot the question at her so harshly that Rita started. Boyle glared when she hesitated, but she gave the number as she remembered it. Boyle wrote it down.

"She calls the Chink," he said, "and tells him to come and get the stuff. That's easy."

"What if the Chinaman refuses to come here?" Ramsden said.

"He'll come. He isn't going to—"

Boyle broke off. The three men jerked toward the door. Someone had rapped on the big gate at the entrance to the patio. Now they heard a voice.

"Hey! Is anyone at home?"

Max drew his gun and slipped to a

window. Boyle drew a weapon and stepped back of the door. The voice sounded again. Rita heard Pedro answer from the rear and then come across the patio.

"Are you the caretaker?" the stranger asked.

"Yes, *señor,*" Pedro said.

"Mind if I fish the stream a bit? I've been trying it down below but there are bigger trout in this valley."

"Of course, *señor,*" Pedro said. "There are big trout. No one has fished here for many years."

"It is pretty far back in the hills, isn't it? And thanks a lot. Could you use some fish if I brought them?"

"We would be happy to have them, *señor.*"

"And do you mind if I stay a few days, make camp? I'll be careful about fires."

"You are the guest of the rancho, *señor,*" Pedro said.

Max was scowling and muttering curses. He started toward the door but Boyle jerked him back.

"Not now, you damned fool," Boyle said when Pedro and the stranger had gone. "Get him off in the woods."

"He's a dick. How'd he find out we're here?"

Max glared at Rita. "You tip off anybody in town? You been telling Preston something?"

"I did not know anything to tell."

MAX opened the door, peeked through, slipped outside. Rita went to a front window. She saw a man with high rubber boots, trout flies in his hatband, and a fly rod. He was stout, middle-aged, had a jolly face. He got into a small sedan and, as Pedro pointed directions, drove on up the valley.

Boyle opened the door and he and Max stopped Pedro.

"We don't want strangers here," Max said. "Why didn't you tell him to get out?"

"But a stranger has never been told that on the de Azara rancho," Pedro said. "Besides, there are many trout."

He said it with dignity, and when he had spoken he walked on.

"I know that guy," Max said. "He's an insurance dick."

Max looked at Rita. All three looked at her.

"He couldn't track us here," Boyle said. "He had to be told. The skirt told him."

"Who else?" Max said.

Rita knew what they meant when they looked at her, but even in her terror she knew how ridiculous the charge was.

"I did not know you were here until yesterday afternoon," she said. "How could I tell?"

"You tipped off the cops down in the valley," Max said.

"But I did not know you were coming."

"Something in that," Ramsden said. "She wouldn't have time, with her father just dead and all."

"If Jennings is dead," Max snarled. "Anyhow, I got to get this guy and get him quick."

He walked out. The others sat there. Rita had never known such terror. She wanted to scream. She wanted to tell Pedro to run and warn the stranger. After a few minutes the tension became unbearable. She jumped up and started toward the door.

Eddie Boyle leaped with astonishing speed for his bulk. He grasped one of her wrists and jerked her back, flung her toward a chair.

"One more funny move and I'll take you on a little one-way walk in the brush."

They waited. Rita saw that Ramsden's face was white and set. The Englishman smoked one cigarette after another. But Boyle settled back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. He began to whistle a simple little tune.

Rita thought she would go mad as he repeated it over and over. Boyle kept whistling until they heard a distant noise. The noise was not loud. It was repeated three times. There was no mistaking what it was.

Ramsden started to his feet. Boyle laughed.

"It is a big pan," Boyle said. "That Pedro is a card."

Rita began sobbing. She did not shriek but hysteria gripped her. She could not stop. Boyle looked at her.

"This skirt ain't going to be a bit of use to us," he said.

CHAPTER VI

ALONE AGAINST KILLERS

CAL PRESTON was sorry to see the stranger go on to the big flat instead of staying at Cal's little ranch in the canyon and doing his fishing from there. Cal had met the stranger when he was returning from his call on Rita Jennings and his encounter with Max Horning. The man had stopped his car at the fork of the road and was examining the tire prints.

His name was Ben Hunter. At least that was the name typed on the registration slip on the steering column.

"I'm headed," Hunter said, "for this flat the de Azara ranch is on. I've heard there's big trout in the creek."

Cal assured him there were. He also invited him to make the Preston ranch his headquarters. Hunter thanked him but declined.

"When I take a vacation I like to get off by myself," he said. "It gives me a sort of bath, a bath in solitiude, if you know what I mean."

"I ought to be pretty clean that way," Cal said. "I'm practically hide-soaked in solitude."

"You shouldn't be lonesome with the de Azara ranch close by."

"There's been nobody there for years except Pedro," Cal said. "Until yesterday. Now Rita Jennings has come."

He stopped, wondering what more he should say. Cal hadn't gotten that talk with Max Horning straightened out in his mind.

"I see someone has driven in," Hunter said. "Hope it's not fishermen."

"I saw three men there," Cal said. "I don't know whether they came to fish."

"I'll stop and ask for permission. You've driven a car up there," and Hunter pointed at tire tracks turning off to Cal's ranch.

"I took Rita Jennings in yesterday," Cal said.

Hunter drove on. Cal noted that for all the good humor in the man's face he had a grim mouth and his gray eyes had a hard glint when he asked questions. Cal noted, too, that the man's car had a new tire on the right rear wheel. He had seen a camping outfit in the back and in a side pocket was the tip of a gun-butt. A man who lives alone in the mountains doesn't overlook details when he meets a stranger.

Cal rode on up the canyon to his ranch, and he began thinking again about Rita Jennings. While he was arranging for the cremation of her father's body and making things as easy for her as possible, he had believed he knew the girl quite well. Accident, death, excitement and danger have a way of drawing people together as a year of ordinary existence cannot.

But the man who had ordered him away completely upset Cal's ideas. That fellow was a bad hombre. You needed only one look at his eyes to know.

Rita had seemed afraid of the fellow. Or maybe she was only afraid of a shooting. Come to think of it, she had acted queerly when she found the three men waiting. And she had acted queerly when he found her beside the road, with her father dead only a few minutes. Cal had thought she was cool, but he began to wonder if she were not cold. He hadn't seen her shed a single tear.

When Cal reached his ranch he decided to forget about her. She hadn't protested when the gunman ordered him away. And that gunman was plenty bad. Cal knew he would be wise if he stayed away from the de Azara place. Those were not the sort to get mixed up with. He rode on up the canyon to look after a few head of stock that grazed in the little flat where the stream began.

The stock was not there. Cal discovered, after much searching, that they had gone west in a side canyon and topped the

watershed. He knew they were headed for the stream far above the de Azara flat. He'd have to get them the next day.

CAL departed early in the morning, and he slipped his .30-.30 rifle into the scabbard. He didn't intend to back down again when someone pulled a gun on him. Cal had decided that he wouldn't have anything to do with the strangers at San Patricio, or even with the girl, but that he wouldn't let them interfere with his business.

When he reached the flat Cal saw at once that Ben Hunter, the fisherman, had departed. Wheel-tracks were plain in the mud where the car had forded a creek and the new tire was on the south side now. Evidently the men at San Patricio didn't intend to let anyone remain in the vicinity.

Cal pumped a cartridge into the barrel of his rifle and saw that the weapon was free in the scabbard. He rode with apparent unconcern, but beneath his wide hatbrim he watched the ranch house closely as he approached.

No one was in sight. Mariana had not yet started her morning fire. Pedro was not at the corral. Cal jogged on past.

Farther on he saw where men had been walking in the old road. One man had walked west and then back, and then west again. Another had accompanied him the second time. There was no sign of their having returned. Both men wore city shoes. One had very small feet. Cal had been reading signs all his life and he was sure of what he saw.

After a little while he found where the stranger's car had been driven off the road to the creek and back again. The footprints stopped there, too, and Cal believed he knew the story. The little gunman and another had gone up and ordered the stranger to leave. They had ridden back with him to San Patricio. Some day, Cal thought, that little fellow would order off the wrong man.

Cal found his stock at noon and started them back to the ranch. The sun was setting when he reached San Patricio. No one was in sight in the big house but as Cal passed the entrance to the patio Max Horning came out. He called.

Cal swung his horse to cover his action, lifted the rifle from the scabbard and cocked it. Horning came quickly and he carried one hand high, ready to dart beneath his coat.

"Stop!" Cal said, and he flung the rifle into view.

Horning halted and looked at the weapon, then at Cal's face. He scowled.

"Now turn and walk back," Cal said. "Don't stop until you get to the end of the patio."

"Then what?" Horning asked.

"Come running back with your popgun, if you want to."

"Next time I'll start shooting, soon's I see you."

"I'll pass often," Cal said.

"Once more is enough."

"I understand you, feller, but you don't seem to get much idea about what I'm thinking. You ain't figured on being buzzard bait yourself. You think I'll run as easy as that fellow who came fishing yesterday."

"What you know about him?" Horning demanded.

Cal read suspicion in the other's eyes.

"You mean Ben Hunter, the fellow who was looking for big trout?" Cal asked. "I know quite a lot about him."

Cal saw Horning's eyes shift to the rifle in calculation.

"This flat don't belong to you," Cal said. "Now start moving."

Horning turned and walked away. As Cal watched him he saw Rita come to a window. The window had not been washed for years and he could not see her face very well, but there was something in the way she stood there, something pleading in the way she raised a hand, that caught his attention. Then she disappeared, suddenly, as if she had leaped to one side.

"Wait," Cal said. "Tell Miss Jennings I'd like to see her."

"She's not here," Horning said.

"You're lying."

CAL stared at Horning a moment. "Come back here," he said. "I've shot a lot of coyotes, so it wouldn't bother me to plug you. What you lying about Miss Jennings for? What you chasing everybody out for? What right you got to be running the de Azara ranch? Maybe you're some big boss in a city but you don't count more'n any other man up here in the hills."

"I told you the girl's gone," Horning said.

He was cool enough. Cal saw at once he would not learn anything more. The man was bad, but he had courage of a sort, and there was no mistaking his purpose.

"I tend to my own business," Cal said. "I've got business with Miss Jennings about leasing some grazing land. Don't try to stop me, feller."

"What will you do?"

"Settle it myself or go out and tell the sheriff there's a hombre up here who thinks he's king of the coast range."

"You would run to the cops," Horning said.

"The rifle'd be easier. Do I see Miss Jennings?"

"No."

Eddie Boyle came to the entrance. He wore a coat and Cal knew at once he had a weapon in a holster under his arm.

And Cal caught a glimpse of a third man at the window in which he had seen Rita.

"Get going like I told you," Cal said. "Take the fat bird along with you."

When Boyle and Horning had disappeared in the patio, Cal wheeled his horse and galloped away. In a moment he was lost in the dust raised by his cattle.

It was dark as he drove the stock up the canyon and when he returned to his ranch house he did not light a lamp. He got some cold meat and bread and a couple of blankets and took his dog and went up the stream a way. He ate supper in the dark and made a bed on the ground in the black cave beneath a redwood tree's low branches.

The way Cal figured it, that little rat with the gun was likely to come prowling. Max Horning was the sort, Cal figured, who didn't take any unnecessary chances and who wouldn't mind shooting in the dark, or at a man's back.

Cal slept well enough. He wasn't worried. But sometime in the night Lobo, his dog, began to growl and then dashed off down the canyon, barking furiously. The dog was gone quite a while. Cal could hear him far beyond the house. But there were no other sounds and Lobo was unhurt when at last he returned.

"So that's the way it is," Cal said. "They figure to run me out too."

CAL PRESTON had spent his life in the hills and learned to attend to his own business. He began to attend to it the next morning by riding across the flat and on to another canyon where some of his stock grazed. Cal had small bunches of cattle scattered through the mountains, each with its own water and feed, and he was kept busy looking after them.

Being a cowman, he watched the ground as he rode and on a trail in the canyon he saw footprints in damp earth near the creek. Two men had walked there toward San Patricio. They were the same footprints Cal had seen beyond the rancho, going to the place where Ben Hunter had been with his car.

The footprints led only in one direction. Evidently the two men had ridden with Hunter to Mescal Ridge and then walked back to San Patricio on the trail, a short cut to the rancho. They had wanted to make sure Hunter left the flat.

Cal rode on into the hills and as he emerged on the side of a ridge he saw several vultures circling above the canyon on the south side of Mescal grade. The huge birds began dropping lower and lower. No mistaking what they were after; Cal decided he had lost another cow.

He made his way down. As he approached he saw the birds circle over the spot where Rita Jennings' father had been killed.

Cal realized that he had been thinking of Rita more than of anything else that morning. He had been thinking of her being alone in San Patricio with Max Horning and the other two men, of her face as he had seen it dimly through the window.

He had begun by thinking of her as being one of the gang that had taken over the deserted rancho, but when he remembered her as he had first known her he found he couldn't believe that. He did not think anyone with eyes like hers and a face so youthful and eager could willingly have anything to do with Max Horning.

He was thinking of this when he rode out of the brush onto the spot where Gregory Jennings' car lay crushed. Beside it lay another crushed car. It was the one the stranger, Ben Hunter, had driven past the rancho San Patricio.

Hunter was dead. Cal could see his body through a shattered window. And Cal saw that cuts and bruises on Hunter's head were not bleeding. They had never bled. Cal crawled into the car and examined the body. He tore the man's shirt away. Hunter had been dead when he went over the grade in his car. He had been shot three times in the body. He had been dead two days.

The vultures had disappeared but Cal knew they would come back. He cut brush and stuffed it into the broken windows of the little sedan and heaped brush over the top. He didn't think the vultures would break through.

This was murder and Cal's one thought was to get out to the nearest ranch with a telephone and notify the sheriff. But when he reached his ranch an hour later and entered the shed where he kept his light truck, the motor would not start. Cal lifted the hood and found the carburetor, distributor and spark plugs had been smashed with a heavy rock that lay beside the engine. And the license plates had been removed.

Murder had made it an affair for the sheriff but now, in his anger, Cal did not see why he should need a sheriff's help. And he would have to ride thirty miles in mountain country to reach a telephone.

Rita Jennings was still at San Patricio. Cal didn't think that influenced him; but he had not been able to forget the glimpse of her face in a window. What he told himself, when he mounted and rode down to the flat, was that he would make his own buzzard bait.

Anger did not drive him heedlessly and Cal kept to the north side of the flat where he was well hidden by liveoaks and broken ground until he reached a ridge where he could watch San Patricio.

The place seemed deserted. Cal remembered that he had not seen Pedro since the three men arrived; and he wondered whether his friend had been killed. Pedro was not the sort to accept their threats, and Pedro was always busy in the open.

An hour passed. Cal could get close to the big adobe house through the thick brush on the south side; and he was about to go back to his horse and make a circle when a man came out of the patio and started toward the corral.

At that distance it looked like Max Horning. He was small and he walked fast, quickly disappeared in a grove of liveoaks. But in a few minutes he returned, driving the car in which the three men had come to San Patricio. He stopped in front of the patio entrance and went inside.

CAL hurried back to his horse and rode eastward. He didn't intend to let any of that trio get away and he welcomed a chance to catch them in the open. When he heard the car coming he was hidden behind a rock close to the ford.

The car eased down into the creek and climbed slowly out on the other side, but Cal did not step out with his rifle. Ramsden was driving. The back seat was empty. And Rita sat in front. She was smiling. All strain and worry were gone. Cal stared after her as the car speeded up.

And the car bore his own license plates.

Cal scarcely thought of that, however. He was thinking that he was a fool to have believed in the girl. There was no doubt now that she was in with the gang, whatever its purpose. He'd wash his hands of the whole affair. He'd go home, and when it was cool that evening he would ride out and telephone the sheriff. He'd let the law take care of the gunmen, and the girl too.

Cal had not eaten since early morning. He cooked a big meal. He ate, as always, at the kitchen window, where he could look down the canyon to San Patricio Flat.

Lobo began to growl and went out. Cal could not hear anything. The dog became excited and Cal searched the canyon sides. He brought his rifle to the window as Lobo ran down the canyon and began barking at the edge of thick brush. Cal saw a bit of color move. It was the blue dress Rita had worn in the car.

She was lying on the ground when Cal reached her. Her face was red, almost purple, from the heat. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open as she gasped for air.

Cal picked her up. He looked down the canyon, listened. Again Lobo was excited. Cal heard the clash of gears as a car forded the creek down on the flat. He hurried back to the house.

Rita was not unconscious. She had been running so far and so long in the heat she was near prostration. Cal set her in a chair, and bathed her face with a wet cloth. She opened her eyes, smiled, and closed them again.

Her flimsy dress was shredded by brush and her light shoes were scuffed.

"You've had a tough time," Cal said.

Rita only nodded. Her eyes were still closed and she labored for breath. Cal gave her a little water to drink. In her distress she made an even greater appeal to Cal Preston. He carried her into the next room and laid her on a couch. She was so soft and frail and helpless.

Cal sent Lobo outside and told him to watch the house. Cal couldn't understand what the girl's presence meant. She had seemed happy to be driving away from San Patricio only an hour before. The more he saw of her and her companions, the stranger he found the situation. He wanted to believe she was not a part of that gang but his mind told him he was wrong. The only reason he could see for her presence on his ranch was that she had come to trap him.

Cal went outside to make sure Lobo was on guard and to look down toward the flat. He didn't see anything and the dog, though alert, was quiet. When Cal returned, Rita was in the kitchen.

"Feel better?" he asked.

His voice was without expression and she looked at him quickly. His eyes were steady and questioning and he saw her own gaze quickly lowered.

"Yes," she said. "I was only tired from running so far."

"That's a bad bunch you're mixed up with," Cal said.

"You don't think—"

"I don't know what to think," he said. "About you. I know about them."

SHE didn't say anything. She only looked hopelessly at the floor. Cal felt brutal. He remembered her as she had been when he first knew her, and he remembered Max Horning and the others at her ranch.

And her having him gather up the little white signal flags at forks in the road! She wouldn't have had him do that if she hadn't known Horning and his pals were already at the ranch. She was protecting Horning then. She was playing Horning's game now. Cal found he didin't want to think that. But he had to.

"I'm not taking chances with that gang," Cal said. "I'm getting out of here before they try to trap me in this canyon. And I'm taking you with me."

Rita looked up swiftly, her eyes glowing.

"But that is why—"

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe. I'm alone against the bunch."

He was looking at her torn dress.

"I've got a new pair of overalls," he said. "And boots I had when I was a kid."

"We're going to ride down to the valley?" she asked quickly.

"Farther into the hills. And I'm in a hurry."

"But I must tell you," Rita began desperately.

"It won't do any good," Cal said. "You're going with me. Later—you can talk then."

He was thinking what he meant by later. He was going after that gang. He'd go into the mountains and come down from the west. They were city men with pistols and he was a rancher with a rifle, and he didn't have any doubt as to the outcome. After he'd cleaned them out he'd go tell the sheriff. Then he'd let her talk.

Cal got the overalls and boots. He gathered food and placed it in two blanket rolls. Every little while he stopped and went to the door and listened and made sure Lobo was on guard. When Rita came into the kitchen, dressed in the overalls and a shirt of Cal's, he had gone to get the horses. He was tying on the blanket rolls when she stepped out.

"Climb aboard," he said, "and I'll adjust your stirrups."

She swung up easily. He liked the way she did it. She knew horses. She smiled down at him—

Then Lobo growled. It was no ordinary growl. The dog had sensed Cal's excitement and was giving a real warning. Cal saw that Lobo was looking up the side of the canyon.

"Get going!" Cal exclaimed. "Past the corral!"

He struck her horse and pointed up the canyon, then leaped for his own horse.

A shot sounded. Cal saw a puff of dust close by. More shots came. Cal was in the saddle now.

"Come on, Lobo," he called. "We'll get 'em later."

A last shot sounded but they were quickly out of range.

Rita was riding perfectly. She seemed to have recovered entirely from her run up the canyon—so quickly that Cal wondered how far she had run, if it were all part of a scheme to trap him.

But they wouldn't trap him now. He was alert to all they might do.

"Anything I hate, it's a crook," Cal said hoarsely. "They're all like that. They've got no nerve."

He saw Rita's face go white.

"You are so sure," she said.

"I'm plenty sure enough!" Cal broke in hotly. "I found that trout fisherman they killed. They even tried to cover that up by driving him to the top of Mescal grade and running the car off the road right where—"

Cal stopped then. He didn't want to remind Rita of her father's death, but that wasn't all that stopped him. Cal wondered if that were her father. She hadn't wept. She had acted strangely. And the dead man had been a fine looking chap. He hadn't looked like a crook.

"We got to be moving," Cal said roughly. I've got a lot to do before dark."

CHAPER VII

STEP CAREFULLY, COWMAN!

CAL PRESTON rode ahead, keeping at a trot wherever the grades permitted. Rita made no attempt to speak to him. Occasionally when he turned to see how she stood the ride he found her watching him with a dead, hopeless expression.

Lobo trotted ahead to keep out of the dust. But when they halted to rest the horses and Rita was sitting on a rock, the dog approached her, sniffing suspiciously at first, then wrinkling his nose. When she reached out a hand he wagged his tail and went closer to have his ears rubbed.

Cal didn't understand that. Lobo rarely saw strangers and would have nothing to do with them.

"You like dogs?" Cal asked.

"Dogs and horses," Rita said. "I love them, but I have never had—never lived—"

She broke off with a tragic, hopeless shrug. Cal stared at her. He had never felt so sorry for anyone in his life. He wanted to trust her, and he didn't dare. While he rode he had reviewed all their contacts, all he had seen and learned about her, and he wasn't sure now that she was even Rita Jennings. When he looked at her Cal could think only of Max Horning and of Ben Hunter.

"That little bird with the gun," Cal said. "He and his kind couldn't like a dog. He could like only a rattlesnake. And I'll bet one wouldn't poison him."

Rita did not speak. Lobo trotted beside her as they went up and down ridges and into deep canyons where timber was thick and the trail led along mountain streams. In a little flat they found a small cabin beneath giant redwood trees.

Cal dismounted and undid his blanket rolls and unsaddled Rita's horse.

"I probably won't be back until tomorrow," he said, "but nothing will happen to you here."

"Where are you going?" Rita asked.

"San Patricio."

Cal did not say any more than that. He was examining his rifle as he spoke and his meaning was clear.

"You mustn't go there!" Rita cried.

All her weariness and despair were gone. Cal stared at her curiously.

"Leave them alone," she insisted. "They won't stay long."

"Not long," Cal said.

"You mean you are going to—"

"Nothing else."

"But they won't harm—"

This defense of Max Horning maddened him.

"I'm running cattle in these hills," Cal said. "That little rat told me he'd kill me if he saw me again. He wrecked my truck. He killed a man in cold blood."

Rita gripped his arm with both hands.

"You mustn't risk it!" she cried. "They won't trouble you if you stay away. And they'll be gone so soon."

" 'Fraid I'll hurt 'em, eh?"

"I'm afraid they'll kill you," she said.

"You know I can pick 'em off with a rifle," Cal said. "You don't want your pals killed. But you've got the wrong kind of pals."

Rita stood looking at him, and he saw that she was desperate and terror stricken, and struggling against something. He laughed, because he was angry with himself for being touched by her terror.

"I want to tell you something," Rita said.

"Save it," Cal said, and he swung into the saddle.

He started away at once, leaving her standing there. She called to him, but he did not look around. At the edge of the little flat Lobo darted ahead and Cal called the dog.

"Go back," he said. "Watch her."

The dog turned obediently. Cal saw Rita standing just as he had left her. She didn't call to him again.

ALL the way over a ridge and down into another canyon, Cal thought of the girl. That was too obvious, her attempt to dissuade him from wiping out the gunmen at San Patricio. He felt sure that she had tried to keep him away, to protect them. The strange death of the handsome chap in the big car, the removal of the white road markers, her smile when she sat in the car at the creek—Cal had no doubts as to what she was.

He had led her to the cabin by a devious route which he felt sure she could not retrace, but the cabin was not far from the head of San Patricio flat. An hour after he had left her, Cal was working along the south side toward the rancho.

Half a mile from the ranch house he dismounted, hobbled his horse, and went forward on foot. He knew the ground well and was able to get within a hundred yards of the kitchen and still keep well covered.

No one was in sight. Cal worked around until he could see the front entrance. The car with his license plates stood there. He returned to the rear, went to Mariana's pigpen and caught one of her young pigs.

Shrieks broke the stillness of San Patricio as Cal held the animal by a hind leg. After a few moments he dropped the pig and hid in the brush. Soon Mariana came running, her fat face contorted by exertion and anger. Cal waited until he was sure she had come alone and then stepped out.

"Where is Pedro?" he asked.

After a quick glance, Mariana pretended not to see him. She scolded the pigs and then walked over to the brush.

"They are mad men," she said. "They lock Pedro in a room. They talk all the time about killing someone. They have taken the *señorita* away and killed her. Now they fight with themselves."

Mariana was very angry and she talked swiftly.

"What are they doing here?" Cal asked.

"We do not know at first," Mariana said. "But when they tell Pedro they will kill him he crawled outside a window at night and heard them talk. It was about stealing jewels and hiding from the police, and a Chinaman in San Francisco."

Cal had thought it would be something like that.

"Can I get Pedro out?" he asked. "Has he got that old .45?"

"They lock him in a room beside their room and they watch the door," Mariana said. "And Pedro is big and the windows are small."

Cal learned in which room Pedro was held and where the men ate and slept. Mariana talked on. She was angry and very much afraid. Cal could not catch more than half of the tumbling words and he was considering a campaign.

He didn't want to expose himself needlessly. The three men were armed, he knew, and dangerous; and Cal wasn't going into this with any quixotic spirit. He was protecting his ranch and he wanted to stay alive to benefit thereby.

"Go back before they smell something," Cal said. "Tell Pedro I am here. I will make the pig squeal again."

As soon as Mariana disappeared, Cal went back through the brush and found a place from which he could see the front entrance. The ground was open there and he could not get nearer than a hundred and fifty yards. It was too far for accurate shooting but at least he could break up any attempt to leave in the car.

Cal had no idea whether the three crooks intended to remain in San Patricio. From what little he had been able to make out of Mariana's excited report, they planned to remain some time. Their attempts to eliminate him indicated that, but after he had escaped their bullets at his ranch they undoubtedly would think he had gone out to warn the police.

CAL was not surprised when two men came out from the patio and walked toward the car. One was Max Horning, the other Ramsden, who had been in the car with Rita. Their voices did not reach Cal but he could see that they were arguing and that Horning was angry. At last Ramsden got into the car and started the motor. Cal cocked his rifle. If they turned away he would begin shooting.

But Ramsden drove toward Cal. The car swung around the corral and disappeared in the brush. Max Horning watched it and then went back into the patio.

Cal ran through the brush after the car. It had been hidden there before. He hid when he heard the car stop and as Ramsden appeared Cal stepped into the trail with rifle ready.

Cal was prepared for a quick movement toward a holster but Ramsden only stopped and looked at him. Then the Englishman smiled and came forward.

"Horning was right!" he exclaimed. "He said you wouldn't run for the police."

Cal didn't speak. This man didn't look like the others. He didn't even look like a crook. His smile and manner were disarming.

"Please let that hammer down," Ramsden said. "I never carried a weapon in my life. Only gets a man into trouble."

He took off his coat, emptied the pockets, turned slowly around with hands held high. The man certainly was not armed.

"Now," he said, "don't you think you and I could go somewhere and talk?"

"About what?" Cal demanded.

"Many things—of interest to both. Unpunctured hides and the blue sky above us. Full pockets and the pleasure that comes from a deed well done."

"You sound loco to me," Cal said.

"Perhaps, but I am sure I can explain to your satisfaction—and benefit."

"How about the other three?"

"There are only two others," Ramsden said.

"And the girl."

Ramsden smiled. "Our minds have been quite thoroughly disabused of any expectation that Rita is one of us," he said. "My cajoleries and the threats of Horning and Boyle have been equally unavailing. But surely Rita told you that."

"Then what was she doing in the car with you this morning?" Cal demanded.

"Fooling us completely. She even fooled Max Horning, who doesn't trust anyone. If I don't get back soon, he'll be after me with a gun."

"Let him come," Cal said. "How'd Rita fool you?"

"That place where her father was killed —she got out of the car while I drove past. Only the little devil ducked back. Gave me the slip completely. I had to go to the bottom of the grade before I could turn around. I guess you know the rest."

Cal did not comment. This fellow talked too glibly. He smiled. He was perfectly at ease. He most obviously had some scheme afoot.

"I suppose Rita has told you all about us and the couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of gems we are trying to get rid of," Ramsden said. "But really, we can't stand here talking. Max Horning is really bad and he's just aching to shoot someone."

"I've got a few aches myself," Cal said.

He was sure Ramsden planned a trick. Nothing else was possible. But Cal felt he could handle the situation and he didn't want to meet Max Horning alone. He wanted Horning and Boyle together.

"Turn around," Cal said. "Keep a close eye on yourself because I've got a slippery finger on this trigger. Walk to the car."

Ramsden obeyed. He lifted the hood at Cal's command and removed ignition wires and distributor head, thrust them into a coat pocket. They went on then, to where Cal had left his horse. Cal could get a rope now and tie the man to a tree while he went back to attend to the other two.

"You can't frighten me in the least," Ramsden said as he stopped. "If you don't kill me, the other two will."

CAL didn't pay any attention to that. He didn't believe it. Ramsden was too glib, and he was caught and would try anything to get free. He was even pretending that Rita was not one of the gang. Cal decided that Ramsden was the brains of the outfit and the other two did the killing.

"They'll shoot me as soon as they get rid of the loot," the Englishman said. "A half is larger than a third. Also, a dead man doesn't talk. Queer viewpoint some of you Americans have."

"It's not mine," Cal said.

"I dare say. How'd you like to have twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"You're wasting your breath."

"Perhaps, but Max and Eddie are planning to do me in, so I should be permitted a bit of plotting myself. How do you intend to capture them?"

"Feet first," Cal said. "Like they took that trout fisherman."

For the first time, Ramsden was startled. "You get around," he said.

"Buzzards," Cal said. "I told Horning they were good trackers."

"The fisherman was an indemnity detective. And in a little while the buzzards would have led you to Rita and me."

"They plan to kill her?"

"Why not?" Ramsden said. "She ordered them off her ranch. She refused to have anything to do with them. She'd have turned them in the first chance she got. They'd have killed her two days ago if I hadn't talked them out of it."

Cal's fingers trembled as he removed his rope from the saddle horn. For a moment he forgot to keep an eye on Ramsden. He didn't know how much he had been wanting to hear that about Rita Jennings.

"You mean she's not one of your gang?"

Ramsden grinned. "I wondered if your interests had not been aroused," he said. "Supposing we make a trade."

"You've got nothing I want," Cal said, and he made no attempt to keep the exultation from his voice. "Turn around. I'm going to hobble you."

He was surprised when Ramsden did not protest and he quickly bound the Englishman's wrists behind him and then tied his ankles.

"Good luck," Ramsden said cheerfully as Cal started away. "And be careful. They'll be prowling around, wondering what happened to me."

Cal knew that. He thought Horning and Boyle might be at the car and he approached it carefully, found they were not, and then cut through the brush to the pigpen. He reached it just ahead of Mariana.

"Come quick," she said. "They have gone. You can get Pedro out."

Brush had grown close to the rear of the house in the long years of neglect. Cal crouched and ran. Mariana waddled after him. He waited only a moment at the edge of the clearing before dashing on to the kitchen.

Cal didn't like being in the house. It was no place for a rifle but he wanted to free Pedro. With a battle on, those killers would make a clean sweep of things. They'd let Pedro out and shoot him in the door.

Mariana brought an axe and told him in what room Pedro was imprisoned.

"Get outside," Cal said. "If you see them, come and tell me."

He went into the patio and down the east side. Cal liked it less than ever now. Windows looked into the enclosure from the four points of the compass. Each room had a door. And he could not see anyone approaching the house except through the entrance to the patio.

Cal found Pedro's room and knocked softly. The door was fastened with a chain and heavy padlock. He set the rifle down and lifted the axe. One good blow should break the lock.

The axehead was descending when a shot roared in the patio entrance.

CHAPTER VIII

EMPTY VICTORY

CAL felt the hot sting of a bullet creasing the skin on his shoulder. Another shot came as he picked up his rifle. He fired from the hip and Max Horning ducked back behind the thick adobe walls. But Horning's third bullet struck the adobe wall and blinded Cal with a shower of fine dust.

The pain was so great that Cal could not open his eyes. He tried desperately to see. He didn't want to stand there and be killed. As he started to grope his way back along the wall to the kitchen he felt Mariana's arm around him.

"You're killed!" she cried hysterically. "They will kill everyone!"

Another shot came as they entered the door. Cal heard it strike the wall beside his head. Then he was inside and the heavy oak door was closed.

"You will die!" Mariana sobbed. "Pedro will die. The blood runs down your back. They killed the stranger. They killed the *señorita*. They are devils from hell, those two."

"I'm not dead," Cal said. "Get me some water to clean out my eyes."

Tears were running down his face. He had forgotten that whitehot iron across his shoulder, his eyes hurt so. Mariana brought a basin of water and Cal told her to take the rifle and stand guard at the outer door.

The water relieved the pain but he could not get his eyes open. He lifted the lids with his fingers and plunged his face into the basin.

The rifle roared behind him. Mariana jabbered shrill Mexican words. Shots sounded in the patio and Cal heard bullets thudding against the oak door. He kept

his eyes in the water. The pain was growing less.

The shooting ceased. Cal could not hear other sounds. He knew what had happened. Horning and Boyle were back in the ranch house, behind thick adobe walls. They knew where he was. They could stand a longer siege than he could conduct.

If he could see. The pain was less but when Cal lifted his face from the basin he still could not open his eyes.

"Watch 'em," he warned Mariana.

Two windows and a door opened to the rear, a second door to the patio. If Horning and Boyle separated they could approach from two sides. Cal knew he could only stand there helplessly while they killed him.

And his horse was hobbled and would starve. Rita was back in the mountains and would be unable to get out. She did not know the trails, did not know where she was. And there was no one to look for her.

"Mariana," Cal whispered, and he groped toward her. "You know the cabin in Redwood Canyon. The *señorita* is there. My horse is half a mile past the pigpen. Go get her and see that she is safe."

"But you are blind," she protested. "They will kill you. And you're shot in the back."

"I'll be all right soon. When I can see, you go for the *señorita*. But do not bring her here."

Cal bathed his eyes again. The lids felt as if they were sandpaper and he could barely pry them apart with his fingers. Even then he had only blurred images.

And the quiet continued. There was not a sound.

"They did not kill the *señorita?*" Mariana asked.

"She got away from the automobile and came to my ranch," Cal said. "They shot at us there but we rode fast."

"She is well?"

"Yes."

"She is like her mother," Mariana said. "I knew her when she was a little girl. Like all the de Azaras, she is an angel. Would oil help your eyes?"

Cal was ready to try anything. He pried the lids open and Mariana dropped cooking oil on the inflamed eyeballs. The relief was instant but Cal's vision was still blurred.

THEY waited, listening for any sound, and there was none. The sun was going down, and when darkness came it would be possible for anything to happen. Cal blinked his lids to clear the sharp particles of dust. He wanted his sight before the night. He had to get Horning and Boyle before then.

After a while he found he could open his eyes a little. He could see the daylight through the door. Soon he could make out Mariana's shapeless bulk.

Mariana came to him and whispered.

"Someone is moving on the west side," she said. "A hinge squeaked. They opened a window. If they should come together, both shooting—"

Cal went to the door and listened. Someone was in the dining room, next to the kitchen. Cal reached for the rifle. He had to see now.

"They come," Mariana whispered.

Cal knew how they'd come, with the automatics spitting.

Then he heard a car. For a moment Cal believed someone was driving in from the valley, but the sound came from up the flat.

"That other one, the tall one who does not shoot, is in the car," Mariana said.

Ramsden had worked himself free. And Cal had forgotten about the ignition wiring. Swift steps sounded on the patio flagging. Mariana opened the door a crack. Cal had a glimpse of Horning running to the entrance and jerked up his rifle. But his eyes would not stay open. He had caught only a blurred vision of Boyle joining Horning and of both running into the open.

Cal followed. He would open his eyes a moment and run, slow down until he could see again. He had to get out there. He had to keep the three from getting back into the house.

The car was passing the corral. Cal stopped at the entrance and caught a glimpse of it. He saw the blurred shapes of Horning and Boyle running among the liveoaks out in front. The car went faster, off the road, weaving among the trees. When Cal looked again he saw that Ramsden was making a dash for freedom.

Then the shooting began. Cal's eyes hurt too much for him to watch. He heard a crash, and the sound of the car ceased. When he looked again he saw the car against a tree and Horning and Boyle running toward it.

Cal fired, quickly, while he could still see. As he stood there, blinded by the effort, he heard a step behind him and Pedro's voice.

"They have shot you!"

"No," Cal said impatiently. "Watch 'em. Can you see them? Take the rifle."

"Mariana is bringing my gun," Pedro said. "She finished breaking the lock. I have had no water since morning. The gun was hidden in a basket of red peppers in the kitchen. They would not let me talk to Mariana, or I would have had it before. I see the little one, Max, look from behind that tree."

Mariana came with Pedro's long .45 revolver and he snapped out the cylinder.

"Now I feel like a man," Pedro said. "I have not felt like one since they came."

Cal explained about his eyes. "I'll see better soon," he said. "Then we'll separate on them. Come in from two sides. We've got to get them before dark, Pedro."

Horning and Boyle were behind trees nearly a hundred yards away. Mariana jabbered excitedly as she caught glimpses of them. Pedro reported that there was no movement in the car, that Ramsden must be dead.

Cal did not try to see. He lifted his upper lids to let the tears wash out the grit.

"If they would shoot their own friend, what would they do to us?" Pedro said. "Give me the rifle."

He jerked it to his shoulder and fired. Horning was running to another tree, then Boyle. They were working up the flat, toward the west. Cal kept his eyes open long enough to see.

"Come on," he said. "We've got to go after them. It's too far for sure shooting."

Cal started, blindly, but Pedro held him back.

"Wait," Pedro said. "Something is coming."

Cal heard hoofbeats and strained his burning eyes open. He did not close them again, though tears ran. Rita Jennings galloped down the road, straight for Horning and Boyle, and when she reached them she jumped to the ground and joined them behind a tree.

CAL shut his eyes and did not try to open them again. Pedro and Mariana did not speak. They could see Rita standing beside a big liveoak, talking to the men behind it. As far away as she was, they knew she was talking swiftly, arguing, begging.

Minutes passed. Cal opened his eyes again and saw her. He had been stunned and angered that morning when he believed she was one of this gang of murderers, that she was trying to trick him; and now he was stunned but not angry. He had believed Ramsden, and he knew now it was because he had wanted to believe.

Now she was talking to Horning and Boyle. She had ridden up to them without hesitation, without fear of being harmed; and as Cal looked at her she turned suddenly and came toward the house.

She came steadily but without looking up. Fifty yards away she stopped.

"I want to go into the house," she called. "Just for a minute. To get some clothes. If you will let me pass, and return, we will go away. We will not come back. There will be no more shooting. No killing. I promise."

Cal considered that. He knew it was more than that, that she wanted to get the loot of their robbery so that the three might escape with it. Rita, Cal suddenly

told himself, was the brains of this outfit—not Ramsden.

"You mean you want to get that jewelry and skip with it," Cal answered her.

His tone was bitter, not angry.

"Yes," she said at last.

"She is crazy mad!" Pedro muttered. "She is not one of them."

"Let her come," Cal said. "The whole thing's none of our business. It isn't our battle."

Pedro did not speak. Cal waved a sign for her to come.

"You must promise not to shoot," she called. "The men are going to the car to get it ready."

"Let 'em go," Cal said.

He wasn't watching her now. His eyes were closed. They had begun to hurt again. He stood there, listening to her feet in his boyhood boots on the hard earth.

But when she was about to pass he looked at her. Her face was white and her eyes were dead.

"Rita!" he exclaimed.

She did not answer or stop. She kept on walking into the patio, and she went to the room where the men had lived.

"She is getting the jewels for them," Pedro whispered in amazement.

Rita came out. She carried a small parcel in as she went across to her own room.

Cal turned and watched the two men. He could see fairly well now. Horning and Boyle were standing beside the car. They examined the radiator and stepped back. Several times they looked toward the house.

Rita came out soon with a suitcase. She walked past without looking up or speaking, walked out through the entrance and on toward the car.

They watched as she joined the men. The three talked for a few moments. Horning and Boyle argued and she protested. Suddenly each grabbed one of her arms. She struggled but they marched her toward the house, holding her up, pushing her before them.

"We want to talk some more," Horning called when they were fifty yards away. "The radiator is smashed. We've got to find a way to get out."

"No! No!" Rita cried. "It isn't that. They are planning to—"

CHAPTER IX

FAREWELL TO DOUBT

MAX HORNING struck her on the side of the jaw with his clenched fist. Rita dropped, and before she struck the earth the two men had snatched out their automatics and were charging toward the house, shooting as they came.

Cal had started to run toward them and now he stopped and threw up his rifle. If his eyes hurt or blurred, he did not know it. Eddie Boyle was shooting at him, and Cal pulled the trigger.

Boyle went down and he did not move. Cal pumped the lever down but he could not get it back. The weapon was old and the magazine spring had been broken. It was too weak to shove the last cartridge back.

Max Horning stopped. He laughed when he saw Cal struggle with the rifle and he raised his automatic to take deliberate aim.

Pedro had run up with Cal and he stopped and raised his old revolver. He did it deliberately, was unhurried even when Horning swung the automatic toward him, even when Horning fired.

Cal glanced at Pedro. The big man was grinning as he took steady aim. Horning fired again, and Pedro winced a little. Then he fired.

Horning sank into a little heap in the dust.

"I tell him once he need to take lessons in shooting," Pedro said.

"But he hit you!" Cal exclaimed.

"No, but I lose my pants. See! He cut my rope belt here on the side. Even I wasn't big enough for him to hit."

Cal ran on to where Rita lay. He picked her up and carried her into the patio across to her room. Mariana went ahead and they laid her on the bed.

She lay there, white, unconscious, like a little child. Mariana brought water and

they bathed her face. Rita opened her eyes and when she saw Cal she smiled.

"They didn't kill you," she whispered. "I couldn't let them do that."

Pedro had come in. He had heard.

"Señorita," he said, "you get the jewels for them so they will go away and not kill. I cannot believe you want to help them."

She didn't answer. She cast a startled glance at Cal and turned away.

"The two are dead," Pedro said to Cal. "But the one in the car is living. They shot him. We should bring him in so he can die in a bed."

Cal walked with Pedro to the car. Ramsden's face was deathly white and his eyes were closed; but he smiled when he heard footsteps.

"You got the scum, eh?" he whispered. "They're worth a lot dead."

Cal knew he meant in rewards but he wasn't thinking of that.

"And my getting loose," Ramsden said. "Don't blame yourself. You'll find the little knife in the ring. Made in Turkey. A handy gadget, eh? Rita's father gave it to me."

He was silent for a moment. Pedro took off his hat.

"Well, ta-ta," Ramsden whispered, and he died.

Pedro rode out that night to telephone for the sheriff. Rita was up and dressed. She ate supper with Cal and Mariana in the kitchen. Lobo lay beside her chair.

"Lobo knows so much," Rita said. "I told him to follow you, and he brought me here."

"Why did you come back today?"

"I couldn't have you killed when this was not your affair."

"But why didn't you tell me? I know you offered to get the jewels to stop the fighting. But you could have told me when we rode to Redwood Canyon. Because you weren't one of this gang, Rita. You couldn't be!"

He was leaning across the table, pleading. She looked at him a moment.

"You were so honest," she said. "I never knew anyone honest after my mother died. Today you told me how you hated crooks. But my father was one. He was in this gang. If I told you that, I knew you would never speak to me again. And I wanted you to speak to me."

She had forced out the words and at the end she sat stricken and hopeless. Cal jumped up and went around the table. He knelt beside her chair and put his arms around her.

"I can make it up to you," he said. "Make up for my doubting you. Because I never did doubt you—down at the bottom."

That night the California moon rode high over San Patricio flat and lighted the patio where Rita and Cal sat on a bench and listened to Mariana singing a Mexican love song.

"I did not know the world could be so beautiful," Rita said.

THE END

Two minutes before sailing time; I sprinted

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By WILLIAM DU BOIS

Start now this glittering mystery novel of Manhattan's Man-at-the-Keyhole

BROADWAY'S bright boys and gals are jittery because very soon Lawrence Ray, the master columnist of them all, is to publish his confidential diary. Crammed with stuff that even Ray never dared to print before, it will appear in the *Star;* and Jack Jordan, the veteran reporter who is telling the story, has had the job of blurbing the diary, though he has read no more of it than the chapter headings. But the celebrities, quaking in their evening clothes, are after Jordan to find out what the Devil will whisper about their lives.

There are plenty of them. Mark Evans, the gin-soaked Hollywood Adonis, who takes a poke at Jack Jordan because of remarks published in the *Star*. . . . Nancy Janeway, known as Miss Gossip to a million readers; she's frightened of her own weapon turned against her. . . . The ageless torch-singer, Rita Arden; the shrewd young politician, Senator Anthony Parsons. . . . And finally there is Jordan's best friend, that brilliant surgeon, Dr. Joseph Piccari; his fine medical reputation and his engagement to a society girl may both suffer, for Ray promises to reveal dynamite about Dr. Joe's father, old Joe Piccari. Old Joe, retired now, once wielded enormous power as a rum-king in the prohibition days.

JACK JORDAN is present when Lawrence Ray, accompanied by his streamlined blond secretary, Daphne, delivers the diary to Owen Cary, the owner of the *Star*. Cary, controlling thirty newspapers, two movie companies and countless other interests, is the kind of ruthless tycoon who will make the Devil's Diary pay dividends.

Later that evening Jordan writes his last stint for a month; the next day he is to sail

This story began in last week's Argosy

for Bermuda on vacation. But he has been at home with his wife Trudy only a short time when the phone rings—and he hears the most sensational news story of the year. Owen Cary is dead, fallen—or pushed—from his fifth story office window; and the manuscript of Ray's diary has disappeared.

AT THE *Star* building the presses are grinding out an extra, and smooth, deceptively polite Lieutenant Hurlbut has begun the investigation of Cary's death. Jack Jordan can give him no information of value, but he realizes that the lieutenant suspects him of knowing more than he has told. So Jordan is not surprised, when finally he returns home that night, to have his taxi followed by a police car. Tomorrow his holiday begins—neatly tied up in a mystery. . . .

CHAPTER VII

FRIDAY MORNING 9:00

NEXT morning, of course, with a ladder of autumn sunlight shining through the Venetian blinds, and Trudy burning bacon in the alcove, there wasn't any problem at all. I looked at the boat tickets on our mantle. There were our bags, waiting for a taxi to take them to the pier. . . . Yes, it all seemed like one of those nightmares you felt better for having slept off.

"Still worrying, darling?" said Trudy, groping through the smoke for our plates.

"Never before noon; it's against my principles."

"Was it murder, accident, or both?"

"Didn't I just say I'd rather not?"

"I'm getting this out of your system before we go aboard our boat. I want exclusive rights to you from then on." She put toast on the table. "Murder or accident, Jordan?"

"Since you insist—it *could* be either."

"Why?"

"There was some kind of struggle, before it happened. Carey might have been pushed out of that window—or reeled out, from the effect of a blow. Even our extra calls attention to several body-bruises that must have been made by fists. . . . Open the windows, and let out the smoke."

I pushed open the front one myself, and took a quick look into the street. Sure enough, that car was parked by the Greek grocery at the corner. Just to reassure myself, I picked up our tickets from the mantle. A sundeck cabin to the Isles of Rest, thanks to my connections in ship news. I tucked the tickets into my wallet, shoved the wallet into my vest pocket, and buttoned my coat over it tightly. Lord knows why, I felt better at once.

"What about breakfast, little woman?"

Trudy put the eggs on the table—hard-boiled. "Still deducing?"

"If you must know, I'm working on several angles."

"Well?"

"Well, for one, I'm wondering how I can keep you to myself, when you appear at the ship's pool this afternoon, in that zebra-stripe bathing suit. For another, I hope you'll like rum swizzles for cocktails tonight, because if you do, you're sure to like Bermuda. Then I'm praying you can sit on a tendem bicycle without breaking your ankle—"

"Darling," said Trudy, putting down the marmalade to kiss me. That was when the phone rang.

"The company promised to disconnect it this morning," she wailed.

"Let's pretend it's disconnected now."

"No, I don't dare. Just remembered I told Mary Deacon to call me here. We're going shopping at eleven. I've still some accessories to pick out for my boat tweeds, you know."

"I didn't, but if it's that important—"

"Mrs. Jordan speaking," murmured Trudy into the mouthpiece. Then she made a face at me. "It's for you, and he sounds anxious. It isn't Mac, trying to get you back to work?"

"Listen, darling, when we go up that gangplank at three, we're on British soil. Not even the Marines can touch us," I added, wishing I knew a little more about international law, as I sat down at the phone. It would be nice to find a spot where you'd be safe from your city editor. Not to mention the homicide bureau. . .

"Is that you, Jack?"

"Speak up, Joe," I said, "it's reasonably safe."

"How soon can I see you?"

"Whenever you like. What's happened?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"Ask me what you like. No one is listening but my wife, and I don't dare have secrets from her."

There was a pause at the far end. "I'm at the hospital," said Dr. Joe. "It's rather difficult to take the time now. Could you meet me at my office in half an hour? I'll cancel my morning appointments."

"So it's that important."

"Please, Jack."

I made my voice as professional as his. "Five eleven Park, in twenty minutes. You may rely on that."

"Thank you so much," he said, hanging up sharply.

TRUDY'S face had fallen a mile when I turned back to her. "It was the city desk giving you an assignment. I heard them."

"On the contrary, it was a friend, asking a favor."

"What sort of favor?"

"Darling, I wish I knew."

She listened carefully while I explained. "Suppose Dr. Piccari gives you a new slant on this case? Won't you consider it your duty to report to Mac?"

"Now that you pin me down, I did intend to drop into the shop, around one, and say goodbye."

"Jack Jordan, once you go out that door without me, you'll never make our boat on time—I know it."

"Meet me on the Furness Pier at two-thirty," I said. "You can make the next stop Reno, if I'm more than fifteen minutes late."

"Suppose I come along, and make sure?"

"Suit yourself, darling. There's no one I'd rather ride in taxis with than you."

She handed my hat to me, with ceremony. "All right, I'll trust you one more time. Don't think I'd risk it, if I didn't have to go to the stores with Mary. After all, you wouldn't want to go aboard with a wife who didn't wear the right shoes and handbag."

"If I can rely on my sensations at this moment," I said, with both arms around her, "I'd go up that gangplank with you if you wore a grass skirt and had a ring in your nose."

That got me into the street with good will to spare. I stopped on the bottom step of our brownstone to take out a cigarete, reach for a match, and pretend I hadn't any. It's about a two-minute stroll to the corner, and I made it only a little brisker than that. The chauffeur under the wheel of that straight-eight sat up sleepily when I asked for a light. From the corner of one eye, I watched his pal come out of the Greek's, as I continued on to the taxi stand.

Dodging them turned out to be easier than I expected. I'd planned to go to the Grand Central and make a run for the subway, but it wasn't necessary. My taxi got into a jam just this side of Fiftieth with a brewery truck on the back bumper and the signal nipping Hurlbut's boys at the far corner, for all their slick driving. I didn't even have to look back to tell I was screened for the moment. Slapping a quarter on the meter, I weaved through mudguards to the curb, just as the light was changing. It was more fun than playing hookey from an assignment, standing in the shelter of the corner newsstand and watching that straight-eight dart out of its pocket on my empty taxi's trail.

Even with window-shopping, I had five minutes to spare when I rang Dr. Piccari's bell on Park Avenue.

CHAPTER VIII

FRIDAY MORNING: 9:30

JOE'S receptionist — who looked as though she'd been an operating room special long before they used ether—had her hat on when she came to answer my ring. Over her shoulder, I saw the much photographed Piccari waiting-room muf

fled in cheesecloth from chandelier to chromium chairs.

"Was the doctor expecting you?"

"I think so," I said, walking past her disapproval. Sometimes, it doesn't pay to state your business straight-off, especially if you're feeling your way in the dark. "Look's as though I'm the last patient, doesn't it?"

"Dr. Piccari is going on a little vacation." Even the highlights in her spectacles mistrusted me now. "What was the name, please?"

"Jordan. I'll wait, if I'm early."

"Why didn't you tell me, Mr. Jordan? The doctor's ten minutes ahead of you. Won't you go straight in?"

An electric eye opened the door to the second ante-room, which didn't help my peace of mind in the least. Listen—I've covered my share of misery, from burning tenements to penthouse gas cases. I've crawled through a tunnel cave-in to interview trapped commuters. Yes, and stood on a cornice at Radio City, watching firemen talk a girl out of jumping. Just the same, I can't walk into a doctor's office without a touch of goose pimples.

The door whispered shut behind me, and I found myself facing several hundred bright knives in a glass cabinet.

"Come along, Jack," said Joe's voice, somewhere at the end of an antiseptic white corridor. I walked into the consulting room with my chin up and my knees quaking.

Dr. Piccari was sitting on his table, swinging his legs. All his boyish charm drained out in that hard, white-tile light. He looked tired and competent, all at once, and ready to take me apart at a moment's notice.

"Hard night?" I asked.

"Patient. I didn't get much sleep. Didn't get any, in fact. . . . It's more comfortable in my study. Shall we go in there?"

"This'll do. I always prefer to interview a specialist in his proper setting."

"You know you aren't here for an interview."

"Keep on talking anyhow. It was your idea."

"Tell me what happened last night, Jack. I've got to know."

"Well, let me see. Berlin and Bucharest are still at an impasse. Tokio has sent a second note to London. The White House spokesman has warned Congress that unless relief appropriations are increased we will—"

He grabbed me by both shoulders, and shook me, hard. "Be human, can't you?"

"The same to you, Doctor."

Joe slammed across the room. "I don't know what you mean."

"You understand me perfectly. How can I come clean with you, if you won't return the compliment?"

"Why else would I ask you here, at this ungodly hour? Believe me, Jack, I wanted to talk last night at the Miramar. Not just to ask stupid questions."

He was a lot calmer when he turned back to me, but his eyes hadn't quite met mine, even after the outburst.

"Tell me what you know, Jack, please."

"There's very little to tell. Apparently, Carey was pushed out of that office window, though even that can't be verified. In any case, the diary's stolen. Anyone might have done the job—for any motive—including blackmail."

"Does the *Star* have any facts it didn't print?"

"None so far."

"Have you any of your own?"

"I'm a reporter on vacation, Doctor."

"You must have some opinion."

"Well, since you insist, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that manuscript in your desk drawer. After all, I can see by your reception room that you're ready to blow town."

"Stop it, Jack. I said I'd tell you everything."

"I'm still listening."

"Odd, isn't it, that the only person I dare confide in is a newspaper man?"

"Have I ever let you down?"

"No, Jack. For better or worse, you happen to be my oldest friend." He shrug-

ged. "There have been others, of course. People I have used to bring me where I am today. Those people do not matter now. I have a need to talk, too great for caution. Promise you'll tell no one."

HE SAT on the table beside me, looking straight ahead. When I interrupted, which wasn't often, he answered tersely, without changing position. There was an x-ray apparatus against the far wall, and he didn't take his eyes off it once. I felt sure I'd be spread-eagled the moment he had finished. Just to make sure I wasn't holding anything back.

"Do you think I'm a good doctor, Jack?"

"One of the finest."

"Would you say I wanted more from life than a chance to go on being—a doctor? Have I asked for time out, ever?"

"What about time out for night clubbing, or doesn't that count?"

"You mean my party last night for Miss Cummings?"

"What else would I mean?"

"Last night at the Miramar," said Joe, "I was attending an ex-patient, at the request of her father. Look at me, Jack. Look at my clothes, this office. Do you know who put me in the way of all this?

"When I left medical school, I was without an honest contact in New York, and worse than broke. For a while, I faced a hard choice—to go back to my father, or to starve. Then I remembered the board of directors at the Putnam Hospital, where I had interned. The president of that board was Gardner Cummings.

"I wrote to him, asking for an interview. Weeks later, he gave me five minutes to state my case. I laid my cards on the table. Told him that I was the son of a bootlegger, had gone through medical school on a scholarship, graduated cum laude.

"My father, I explained, could buy me a dozen practices. But I meant to succeed on my own. I said that I would do any sort of work leading to a career in medicine.

"When I came out of Mr. Cummings' office that day, I had his promise of a residency in Putnam. Three months later, after a subway crash, they brought in a motorman with a crushed spleen. I performed a successful operation that got me my first headline, thanks to you."

He smiled briefly, without a look at me. "By the end of that year, I was operating day and night, and turning down more offers than I can remember today. A career, built on one generous wave of a rich man's hand. Call him quixotic if you like. I have never ceased to be grateful.

"Perhaps you will also call me practical—for a doctor. When the rich began to bring their ills to me, I charged them what they could afford—sometimes more. When Mr. Cummings made another gesture—a grand one, this time—and founded my Children's Clinic, I accepted readily. You follow me so far, Jack?"

"Sorry, I'm still back with your lovely patient. She looked sound as a dollar at that night club."

"I SAID she was an *ex*-patient, didn't I?" He paused for a long time. When he began again, there was a new strain in his voice. "Did you know that I rescued Claire Cummings from a mental hospital, two years ago?"

"Dr. Hall's sanitarium, you mean?"

"So you know part of the story already. When you have a father as rich as Claire's, you do not always call a neurosis by its right name. She had been sensation-mad since boarding-school. Then bored with most sensations—at twenty-five. Then burning out her nerves for want of a better pastime. Finally, she went in for psycho-analysis. It was fashionable at the moment. . .

"You'll remember the charges brought against Dr. Hall a year ago. I was largely responsible for that exposé, Jack. When Claire's father brought her to me—after she had gone from bad to worse in Hall's country club—it took courage for me to brand him as a quack. To insist that Claire

was suffering from a cerebral lesion, nothing more or less.

"That was the neurosis Hall had been pretending to cure with hypnotism—and an occasional cocktail. I cured it in four hours of surgery.

"You were right about Claire: she's sound as a dollar today, and still an irresponsible child. No psychiatrist in this world could make her more than that, ever. She is still happiest at a night club opening—shocking her father—smashing cameras—"

"So you were just a restraining influence last night?"

"Precisely. I am one of the few escorts whom her father trusts completely. Understand me, nothing could have saved her life a year ago but that operation. Nothing can keep her off the front page in the future, unless it is a happy marriage. Are you with me *now*, Jack?"

"I'm one jump ahead."

"Claire seems willing," said Joe, without a flicker of a smile. "Or so she says—whenever she can pause long enough to consider the subject. Her father is more than willing. He is self-made too, you know, with few prejudices. Of course, the name of Piccari must retain its *status quo*. That is an obvious condition to the match."

He got down from the table. "Perhaps you are beginning to understand my interest in that missing diary, and in Mr. Ray—completely?"

"Why couldn't you tell me this last night?"

"Last night, I still had hopes of making Carey listen to reason."

I let that sink in without comment. "Quite aside from your own family pride," I said, as gently as I could. "Isn't old Cummings pretty worried about what Ray might pin on his daughter?"

"He is frantic, of course. Have you any idea what it has cost him, keeping her out of print in the past? Do you know what really happened on that liner, the time she pushed the photographer overboard?"

"What reporter doesn't know?"

He put one hand on the x-ray machine. "Tell me what to do next, Jack."

"I wish I had some advice that made sense. Have you thought of going to your father?"

"After all these years—to ask his help? My job is to protect him myself, if I can."

"The field's yours," I replied. "All you need do is find that original manuscript and destroy it. Spike Ray, if he's thinking of an encore down there in Florida. Maybe it's be simpler all around, if you eloped with your endowment fund—while you can."

I waited for his reaction.

"Much simpler," said Joe, in a voice that sounded very far away. "Sometimes, I wish I were more ruthless, Jack. God knows I could lay claim to the quality honestly."

Well, there wasn't any very special answer laid out for that.

"Get this straight," I said, "I'm broad minded. Marry all the money you like, if it's what you really want. . . . Are you sorry you told me so much?"

"Didn't I say I had to talk to someone? I am grateful that you have listened so—so tolerantly."

I reached for my hat. "Let me scout around for a few hours, and see what I can pick up. Could I reach you by telephone around two-thirty?"

"I'll be working here all afternoon." He hesitated. "Claire and her father go south early this year. In fact, the plan was for us to go together tonight."

"Be sure to give the *Star* an inside track on the wedding," I said.

He gave me one of those quick, burning looks. "If and when, my friend."

"Good luck, Doctor," I said, holding out my hand.

"You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. Be sure to stay on your phone until two-thirty—one never knows what I might pick up. I'll probably call you at the last minute, from the Furness Pier."

CHAPTER IX

FRIDAY MORNING: 10:30

I LEFT him sitting on his table, with his thoughts a thousand miles away from me. Even now that I'd learned the doctor was human, this display of cutlery in that ante-room wasn't a bit easier on my nerves. Especially, when the electric eye swung the reception room door open, just in time for me to hear the buzzer sound in the foyer.

If Joe's receptionist was still on the premises, she wasn't giving any signs of life. I started for the foyer myself—then pulled up sharply in the midst of that shrouded furniture, wondering why Joe didn't come out of his consulting room and let in the visitor.

The buzzer repeated. After all, I had to use that hall door, if I meant to get about my chores. I went over briskly and turned the knob. Daphne Carter was standing on the doormat.

"Sorry," I said, "the doctor has gone South."

"So have I, officially," she said. "But here I am."

She breezed past me, taking off both her hat and gloves, fluffing out her hair at the mirror over the fireplace. She had come to stay, that much was clear.

"Did you have an appointment, Miss Carter? What seems to be the trouble?"

"I might ask you the same question, Jack, but I'm much too polite."

"Dr. Piccari and I have just been psycho-analyzing each other. That's all I can tell Larry Ray at the moment."

"But I'm not working for Mr. Ray at the moment, Jack. If you must know, Mr. Ray is safely in Florida. I've a telegram in this purse to prove it." She was still wearing mignonette—you could tell when she stood that close. Furthermore, she looked as though she'd just put in ten hours tranquil sleep, and was ready to face anything.

"D'you mean, you left him last night at Newark?"

"Yes, Jack. Saw him safely aboard his plane, drove his car back to its New York garage, and was in my bed at the Barbizon by one-thirty. Now do you mind if I ask the doctor to have a look at my inhibitions?"

Thirty seconds later, she had walked through that electric eye, with the assurance of a visitor who had seen it function before, and I was left standing in that foyer, with my hat in my hand, and no place to go.

I didn't remember Trudy's forebodings until I found myself headed across town in a cab, and realized I had told the driver to drop me at the *Star*. After all, my head was pretty full of cotton-wool for ten in the morning. I had to get my brains in order somehow, if I meant to enjoy Bermuda.

THEY had crape over every entrance to our shop that morning, and I took my hat off going into the elevator for the first time in years. Maybe you've never visited the city room of a morning newspaper before noon. May I inform you that it looks exactly like a surrealist picture of Death Valley with a hangover?

Old Pop Walsh was still asleep in his chair just inside the wire cage of the morgue when I went over to his card index on tiptoe to look up numbers. There were a dozen fat holders of clippings on both Carey and Ray, of course. I needed a basket to lug them back to my desk again.

You can read a lot of yellowed newsprint in an hour, and learn damned little. A clip-file on any big name always turns out to be a magpie's nest in the end. The only cuts that really made sense were a few photos, our standing obits, and the *New Yorker* profiles. Purely from force of habit, I found myself taking notes. If you want a picture of how I spent that hour—here you are:

Owen Carey: (Should have taken a look in that mail truck last night, just to round out the picture.)
Lots of Harvard. Then lots of Paris on his o.m.'s money, in the gaslit nineties. Pictures of him in early twenties,

with a beard like Manet's. Funny, to think of him trying to paint. Not much line here—until the o.m. ordered him to come home and get to work.
Thirty odd years of yellow-dogging. Lived on libel and loved it.
Butchered his way through two (2) marriages:
(1) Blanche Kirby, m. in Frisco in 1901, rich lumber interests. Used freely by Carey to promote his newspaper chain. Divorced by him in Paris, 1911, when he found he could get on nicely without her. She has since devoted herself to Greek mysticism. No issue.
(2) Anita Ames, the movie moll. Carey married this one abroad, midway of one of his famous parties. Divorced her personally three years ago, for flagrant infidelity. No issue, no alimony. Anita now wed to Duncan Green, the H'wood producer.
Carey has since steered clear of matrimony. Apparently retained full possession of faculties until the last, complete *joie de vivre*. Principal pleasure: collecting every scandal he could verify, just to watch his victims writhe. Principal hobby: giving Young Things picture contracts, and consoling them when they found they couldn't act.
Also has the finest collection of French impressionists in East.
Perhaps 1000 people would have had a perfect excuse for killing him.

If you think that sounds opaque, here are my notes of Ray:

Lawrence Ray: *Times* has him born in London. *Trib* says Cape Town. *Star* prints birth certificate dated Omaha 1890, name of Larry Wright. Indignant subscriber writes to express conviction hinges of hell loose one afternoon, and Larry popped out.
His whole life is like that. No way of telling where fact leaves off and apocrypha begins.
Leg-man on Chi *Trib* when war broke out . . . name of Lester Ralph. Turned up abroad, after hiatus of several years. Continental vaudeville. A croupier at Monte. A Cook's guide in Cairo (all unverified).
However, he admits arrest in Paris, 1920, for trying to rig the races at Auteuil.
Second disappearance occurred, 1921. Story of sojourn on Devil's Island is pure fable. Tahiti ditto. He did spend three years in Australia, editing a racing form in Sydney.
Turned up in Los Angeles newspaper work with name of Lawrence Ray, which has stuck. Did a lively business scandal-mongering among the silent stars of H'wood, which first brought him national notice. Turned Carey's offers down for a long time, and went to the *Record* instead. When the *Record* changed hands six years ago, he came to us. The rest is history, more or less.
Retired from active newspaper work, age forty-nine, shortly after midnight of October 27th last. At this moment, said to be rusticating in Florida.

One thing was certain, this kind of research would get me nowhere fast. Or perhaps I was just having trouble thinking in the office with my hat off.

I went out into the street again fast, without stopping to see if anyone was stirring in that shiny-brown desert of desks. The straight-eight—familiar as an old friend, now—was just sliding into a parking space at the far curb. Such a nice parking space, it seemed a shame to make them follow me around the corner to the Royal Hotel.

RITA was still in bed when her maid let me into her suite at the hotel. What's more, she had the blinds down, and every paper in town snarled up with her toast and marmalade. You'd have sworn it was already night, when you walked into that little frowsy bedroom—and when you got a good look at Rita, in a frou-frou bed jacket right out of Zola, and makeup half a century too young for her, you knew time had done a real back somersault. When you've been singing after dark as long as Rita Arden, you can afford to ignore the sunlight. From her point of view, the day was made for slaves. Why should she share it with them?

"Didn't I tell you to leave town, Jack?"

"Give me time; my boat doesn't sail till three." I sat down on the edge of the bed, just to see what she'd been reading. All of the papers were open at the theatrical page. "Well, Rita, did you get over?"

"Don't I always? Your boy from the *Star* gave me a nice write-up. I've already sent him a wire."

"Congratulations. Now tell me who killed Carey."

"I didn't think you'd call on me this morning, Jack. I hoped you'd be out of harm's way long ago."

"Listen, Rita, two detectives are sitting in a car outside this hotel, waiting to see where I'll go next. If you know anything you aren't telling—well, you'd better stop dropping hints."

She gave me a look old as original sin. "Darling, could I keep anything from you for long?"

"You must have had some reason for warning me."

"Just a woman's intuition, Jack."

"Didn't you have enough left over to warn Carey, too?"

"Carey must have known he was playing with forked lightning. I hardly think he's surprised at this moment—do you?"

"Rita, will you answer just one question frankly?"

"I'll try."

"When you talked to me in your dressing room last night, had someone told you Carey's number was up?"

"No, Jack."

"Then all you had was a hunch?"

"Can I help it if I'm a good guesser?"

"What d'you base your hunches on?"

"Human nature versus divine law. An eye for an eye, a push for a push. You can't ruin people's lives in print for all those years, and expect to die in bed."

"You wouldn't have a hunch who took that diary?"

"I think there's a New York phone book under my bed, darling."

I decided to open up a little more. "So help me, Rita, I'm not asking this for publication. Just to oblige a friend."

"Dr. Joe?"

Don't ask me how I kept my poker face intact. "What made you think of him?"

"He was on my phone five minutes ago, asking me to help him out. So, for that matter, were your friends from the police, and your own city editor." She held her nose, and shuddered. "And that hussy of a columnist who calls herself Miss Gossip—"

"Nancy? What did *she* want?"

"I didn't wait to find out, Jack. There are only a few things in this world that shock me, really. One of them is a woman who drinks before lunch—"

"Anyone else annoy you?"

"Dozens. Names I wouldn't dare mention even to you, darling. Now d'you see why I've run out of answers?"

"You must have known Carey well."

"I know everyone too well," said Rita. "That's why I stay indoors as much as possible."

"In that case, my dear—" I murmured, getting up.

"You know you're always welcome, Jack; provided you don't stay too long. And please believe I'd give you a lead, if I could."

"Have I stayed too long now?"

"A little." She pushed aside the welter of newspapers, and held out her hand. "Rudeness is a privilege of age, darling."

I kissed her hand with all the flourish I had, though it was hard to tell where rings left off and flesh began. "*Au revoir, femme sage.*"

"*Au revoir,* Jack." She watched me start for the door. "But if I were a reporter asking questions, I shouldn't waste time on the *femme sage* of Broadway. I'd start with Carey's first wife."

"Don't tell me Blanche Carey's in town?"

"She kept me on the wire for twenty minutes this morning. Surely you remember her prediction when she started that cult of hers in California? That Carey would die by a fall?" . . .

CHAPTER X

FRIDAY MORNING: 11:15

MRS. CAREY kept a house on Washington Heights for her infrequent visits East—a pure example of the Gen-

eral Grant school of architecture, if you can imagine the general that far uptown. Don't ask me why the first Mrs. Carey picked that site for her mansion, unless she enjoyed looking at the coal-dumps on the Jersey side of the river. When a lady is divorced after forty, and founds her own religion shortly afterward, it's hardly fair to judge her by ordinary standards.

I went up to the Heights on the subway, letting Hurlbut's boys arrange their itinerary to suit themselves. Feeling reasonably sure that one of them had boarded the same express as mine, I set a killing pace crossing from upper Broadway to the Drive. It gave me a pleasant glow about the chest, knowing that someone besides myself must be getting a good workout that morning.

I'd called on Mrs. Carey for interviews in the past, so I wasn't too depressed when I turned under her damp porte-cochere on the Drive. The neighborhood hadn't changed much in the past few years, though they had torn down the mansion next door to make way for a self-service apartment building yellow as a fresh picked lemon. Mrs. Carey's butler hadn't changed much either. He was wearing an outfit which looked like a cross between a garageman's smock and a toga, the standard garb for all Friends of Apollo since their shepherdess switched to a milk and vegetable diet.

"Have you an appointment, Mr. Jordan?"

"Decidedly not," I said, "but I'll bet you a dollar Mrs. Carey will see me anyway."

Apparently those togas had pockets. At least, my dollar vanished fast enough.

"Sit down in the morning room," he said.

Don't ask me why they called it a morning room—it looked more like a sheik's tent minus the camels. Liberty silk drapes made a canopy on the ceiling, and dropped in double folds across the tight-shuttered windows. The only illumination was a twenty-watt bulb dying in a porcelain urn; the only parking place, a Victorian love-seat under a potted gardenia tree. I stayed right on my feet, with one eye on the hall door, waiting for the lady of the house to make her entrance. The purr of traffic on the express highway outside sounded as far away as an auto race on Mars.

I knew she was in the offing when the big ceiling lamp went on.

Next came my friend the butler, who threw the hall door wide. Then the priestess herself swept in—six feet two from her flat-heeled sandals to her hennaed topknot, trailing clouds of musty glory. Balmy Bess, they call her, on every city desk from here to Hawaii. Of course, she hasn't been news for years.

"So you are from the *Star*?" she murmured, in a voice like ashes-of-roses.

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Carey?"

"I expected you hours ago. Where's your photographer?"

"I'm sure we have a recent likeness on file, Mrs. Carey."

"That picture you used last time? It doesn't do me justice at all. I've written the editors, complaining of their lack of courtesy when I arrived in New York yesterday. Not a reporter at the station when my train got in—"

This went on for some time, before I could make myself heard. "If you have any statement to make on Mr. Carey's death—"

PRAISE the Lord, Trudy made me learn short-hand a year ago. Apollo's priestess had a thirty-minute statement to make, and ordered each paragraph read back to her, just to be sure I'd left nothing out. We were seated under the gardenia tree, and her butler stood directly behind us, breathing down my neck as my pencil flew. I thought of Rita Arden in that hectic half-hour—comfortably in bed at the Hotel Royal, and laughing at me. Very well, Arden, I'll make a color story of this yet, just to show you. . . .

"Why did you predict your husband would die of a fall, Mrs. Carey?"

"Because pride and evil go hand in hand. The wicked shall flourish like a green bay tree, until the axe of corruption lays them low. We were divorced because of his evil pride. Almost from the first, I knew he was using me to pyramid his ambitions. I tried to pray for him, even after we were separated. But—"

Does that give you some idea of the sort of notes I was taking? Her sentences squeaked off into a long tremolo, like an old-fashioned melodeon gasping for air. But each time I started to fold up my notes, she came back with the true evangelist's whine, and more power than ever. Her face was much too close for comfort. It reminded me of nothing so much as a reptile house at the zoo. You wouldn't believe so much venom could be concentrated in one faded hag. Not until you'd sat on the same love-seat with her for the better part of an hour, and tried to make sense out of her maundering.

I don't think I ever pitied a person more in my life.

You see, I'd been studying a picture of her only that morning taken on her father's ranch in California just before her marriage to Carey. Not an attractive girl, to be sure, but a wholesome one, with the poise of a thoroughbred, and a face innocent of the world. Carey had shown her that, with interest; now I was looking at what the old vandal had left behind. Milk and honey distilled into vitriol by a quarter-century of loveless brooding. No wonder I hadn't felt sorry, when I heard the news of his death.

"Would you mind repeating what you said this morning, Mrs. Carey, when you phoned Rita Arden?"

The melodeon squeaked, but no words came. Perhaps she was out of breath at last. Then I noticed that her eyes were blank as marbles, that her henna mop had lolled back against the love-seat, as though a spring had broken in her neck. The butler tapped my shoulder.

"Our priestess is tranced," he whispered. "Your audience is over."

We backed into the hall on tiptoe together, and he closed the door carefully behind us. "Better leave, mister. She's hard to handle, sometimes, when she comes out of it."

"You're sure she'll be all right?"

"I've managed the lady for nine years. Want to see my diploma?"

"I thought you looked like a male nurse."

"Don't you worry, mister. She'll be fit as a fiddle, if you give her a break in tomorrow's *Star*. Publicity's a shot in the arm for her, you know." He hesitated a little. "Maybe I ought to give you back your dollar."

"It was worth the price of admission," I said, grimly. "So sorry I can't stay for the feature."

THE straight-eight was on hand by now, parked near the ramp that led down to the express highway. Both the boys lolled in the front seat, looking happy and relaxed in the warm autumn sunshine. Clean as my conscience was, it did set my hair on end when they gave me the horn, just as I was turning off the Drive to Broadway. I got the point when Hurlbut stepped out of the back seat and waved to me.

"Well, Lieutenant, aren't you pretty far uptown?"

"Fresh air and sunshine, Jack. Even policemen can't last without them. Can I drop you somewhere?"

"The subway'll do," I said. "I'm in a hurry."

He gestured toward the express highway. "Thanks to an efficient Park Commissioner, we can beat the subway down. Besides, I do want to talk to you."

"Can you make Times Square in thirty minutes?"

He held the door open with elaborate politeness. "The boys brought me up in less than that."

We sat on the back seat together, as the car sighed down the ramp into the stream of southbound traffic. I expected

anything from a rubber hose to handcuffs. . . . Hurlbut picked up a book that had fallen to the floor between us. Spinoza's *Ethics*.

"Indian summer and philosophy, all to myself," he said. "Trailing you is a positive pleasure, Jack. Is your destination the *Star?*"

"If you're sure it's no extra trouble."

"Don't tell me you've a story to write for Mac? I thought you were on vacation."

"I am. This is a present, from the goodness of my heart."

"You were interviewing the first Mrs. Carey?"

"I've an orderly mind, Lieutenant. When I write human interest, I begin at the beginning."

"Learn anything?"

"Yes—that nothing ruins a woman faster than marriage to the wrong man."

"Is that being loyal to your ex-boss?"

"Not particularly. I do hope there isn't a dictaphone under this seat."

"Believe me, Jack, I'm out to clear my head this morning. If you can help, so much the better. Incidentally, I hope you didn't mind the boys trailing you?"

"On the contrary, I was highly flattered."

"Too bad we lost track of you around ten. On Lexington Avenue, just north of the station. Were you assembling a story then?"

"If you must know, I was doing a last-minute chore, before I sailed."

"We were afraid you'd disappeared, without warning. Things like that do happen, to people as well informed as you."

I DIDN'T answer that one. Just leaned back to enjoy the salutes of the motorcycle cops we were passing right and left. Not to mention the spectacle of a lieutenant of detectives whistling in the dark.

"Rita tells me you phoned her," I said, finally. "Did she give you lots of clues?"

"Miss Arden, I regret to say, can be almost as exasperating as you, Jack."

"Would you like me to tell you why? Both of us have reputations to keep up, in our fields. Either we're in on the ground floor, or we're nobody. Don't take us at our face value, please. Look behind our front, and you'll probably find we know less than you."

I smiled, right in his teeth. "Of course, I wouldn't be this frank, if I weren't sailing for Bermuda in just two hours."

"You couldn't know less than I do at this moment, Jack," he murmured, in his gentlest tone. The sort of tone that warned me it was time to stop kidding him, and give.

"Surely you'd like to make a short statement for the press?" I said, ignoring the warning.

"That's why we're riding downtown together, Jack. I've an announcement, for your ears alone."

Remember the way the Cheshire Cat smiled in *Alice in Wonderland?* That was Hurlbut, now. "The police are following a new lead," he went on. "They hope to announce an important arrest in twenty-four hours."

"So you're really barking up a blind alley?"

"So blind, I've come all this way uptown, just to plead with you."

"Don't tell me I'm the lead you're following?"

"To be frank, Jack, you might even be the important arrest."

"There's nothing you can hold me on, and you know it. I'm certainly not a material witness—" I stopped abruptly, hoping I didn't sound as scared as I felt.

"Perhaps *arrest* is too strong a word, at this moment," said Hurlbut. "Perhaps it's even an example of wishful thinking. Suppose we let time decide that for us, Jack. Not to mention your spirit of coöperation."

"Would you mind explaining just what you want?"

"I think you could help me, if you would. I think you're sitting tight on information of your own, and hoping to beat the town when it breaks."

"And I say I'm going to the office to

write my last story for a month. Everything I know about Carey's murder is public property. Surely you don't think I'm going to Bermuda to solve it?"

"To be frank, Jack, I don't think you're going to Bermuda at all."

"My wife is meeting me at the Furness pier, at two-thirty. About fifty friends will be on hand to see us off. Want to join the party?"

"Not today, Jack, I'm a bit too busy. One of my staff will be glad to stand in for me. In fact, he has the invitation now." Hurlbut flipped open his notebook. "Buckingham suite, sundeck, Queen of Bermuda —right?"

"You do keep track of everything."

"Just being frank with you for your own good. Why won't you return the compliment?"

"Why should I—if I'm to be watched right up to sailing time?"

"You'll be watched until that boat drops her pilot, Jack."

"You simply won't believe it's a waste of man-power?"

"Not while you keep getting lost in traffic jams. Incidentally, I wouldn't try that again, if I were you."

CHAPTER XI

FRIDAY AFTERNOON: 1:00

WE HAD more of the same, right into Forty-second Street. Then Hurlbut hopped into a taxi to go downtown, and the boys took me on to the *Star*, parking right at the door without making any bones about it. Well, it was considerate of Hurlbut, giving me a blueprint of their minds.

Our city room looked almost bearable, now. At least a half-dozen staff men were at their desks, browsing through the bulldogs, and Ike was already at the copy-control, setting out paste pots and shears. In fact, all that office needed now was a city editor to start the wheels turning.

My story on the first Mrs. Carey slipped through my typewriter like a dream. When you've handled that kind of human interest story for ten years or so, you get so you can do them in your sleep—I almost have, on occasion. As I say, this one about the lonely grass widow and her prophecy of doom really turned out well, even with the sting removed. After all, a frail little woman, a charmingly rococo drawing room, and a scriptural curse make a combination that's hard to beat, I don't care whose mast-head you work under.

I slugged it "can-go-over," typed my by-line under the space for the copy-reader's head, and tossed it on Mac's still-empty desk, just as the clock struck one. I knew he was due in any minute now, so I had to move fast. Listen—if I'd used my head and gone to lunch down the street, I could put end-mark on this story now.

Of course, I would get in one more lick on my own—leave my hat and overcoat tumbled on a chair in plain view of the bull-pen—and take the elevator to our cafeteria on the fourteenth floor. Nancy Janeway's office opens off the corridor leading to the restaurant—and if you accuse me of being bent on a little quiet snooping, I'll admit it, with downcast eyes. Don't ask what I expected to find, either. After the morning I'd just put in, I had given up expecting.

You can imagine my amazement, when I stopped beside the ground-glass door, and heard Nancy shouting on the telephone inside. Miss Gossip had never used her office in the daytime before, since it was assigned to her by an upright managing editor, who said he'd be damned if he'd have a society gal crossing her legs in his city room and upsetting the copy boys. . . .

Not that I'd have paused for long, in any case. Even if I hadn't felt ashamed of myself at once, for trying to be an amateur detective. The language that was rattling that ground-glass portal was much too strong for my delicate ears. In fact, you'd never believe that a well brought up girl could use all those words, even after three years' contact with a morning newspaper. Especially when she was ar-

guing on the phone with someone who might be classified as a next-door neighbor. Someone who probably had a perfect excuse for getting out of a date with her that afternoon.

Safely in the nearly empty restaurant, I brooded over my scrambled eggs and coffee a long time, hating myself for remembering my parents' hints that it is bad form to listen at keyholes. Hurlbut wouldn't have been so squeamish, Lord knows; but then, Hurlbut had a badge under his coat, which gave him the license to snoop. Who was I to be sitting here, wondering? Why shouldn't I push aside this newshawk fodder, track my wife down, and have dessert with her? Why, in short, should I be so needlessly excited, just because Nancy Janeway had turned up in her office by daylight, to swear over a telephone at Senator Anthony Parsons?

I LOOKED up sharply. The restaurant cashier was standing at my elbow. "Guess you must have been day-dreaming, Mr. Jordan. I've been shouting at you for the last two minutes."

"What's wrong?"

"City room on the wire."

I got up in a rush, until I remembered they had no authority to hurry me now. The phone was off the hook in the wall booth; the cashier had even put on the light over the scratch pad for me. Everything was set for me to take another assignment, only I wasn't taking any. Trudy had been right, I groaned, as I snatched up the receiver. You should always give the scene of the crime a wide berth, especially when you do reporting for a living.

"What's the idea, keeping me waiting?" bellowed Mac from downstairs.

"Listen, Simon Legree, I'm not one of your hound dogs now. If I'm in the mood, I can keep you waiting a month."

"Like hell you can. Not when you leave the first half of a swell story on my desk."

"What do you mean, first half?"

"Listen Jack, did you leave a c.g.o. interview on my blotter this morning?"

"Yes, about fifteen minutes ago. I'm beginning to be sorry."

"Know where it's going tomorrow? In a two-column box on page one, right beside our running story on the murder itself. Furthermore, you're going to finish it for me, before your boat sails."

"It's finished now."

"Use your head, Jack. You know Carey had *two* wives."

"Is the lovely Anita in town, too?"

"At the Waldorf, with her husband. Isn't that a nice coincidence? All I'm asking you to write is a shirt-tail—"

"With a boat to make in an hour and a half? Haven't you got a few other reporters working for you?"

"I had told them I'd send Nancy Janeway," said Mac. "But she's pie-eyed in her office. Besides, it'll be a better story if it's all under your by-line—"

"Look here, MacDonald—" When I got my breath, I told him about Hurlbut, and the boys waiting outside to follow me.

"Watching our door, is he? Just hoping he'll pick up something. That means he's bushed."

"Suppose he gets too bushed and decides to hold me in New York?"

"I'd like to see him try."

"Okay, boss," I growled. "But this part of the story comes over the phone."

Mac was almost purring now. "Send it by television if you like, Jack. I love you."

ANITA AMES and her husband lived almost at the top of the Waldorf Towers, as befits a wonder boy when he makes a flying visit to New York. Duncan Green had earned the Waldorf. I could remember him when he ran a burlesque wheel from a roll-top desk on Seventh Avenue, and slept in the same. Anyhow, it always pleases me to see a midget come up in this world. It pleased me far less when a synthetic English butler bowed me into the big peach-bloom salon of Green's suite, and Mark Evans got up from a divan with his hand held out.

Of course, he's been one of Green's stars for a long time, and had a dozen reasons for being there. Accepting his apology for last night was just one complication too many. My watch felt heavy enough in my pocket now.

"Naturally, I'd been drinking like a bloody fish—"

"You don't mean it."

"You've a living to make, Jordan, and I was rotten nasty—"

"Don't be so damned truthful or I'll poke you one now, I thought, listening with half a brain to the odd Australian-cowboy accent he could never quite overcome, even when sober. Aloud, I said, "Save it for the mikes. I've ducked harder punches than yours, and liked it."

He drew himself up, as only a ham actor can. "Really now, when a chap tries to be decent—"

But I was stepping on all his lines this afternoon. "Nothing has changed since Nancy put you in your car last night, and you know it. You've just got a breathing spell until that diary turns up again. Or perhaps this time it'll be a personal note, asking for a little hush-money?"

The turkey flush had been spreading up from his collar for some time now.

"Very clever, aren't you, Jordan?"

"Not particularly. Just careful in my choice of friends."

Fortunately, Anita picked that moment to make her entrance, both her famous pale hands held out in greetings to the press. All Evans could do now was snort up to a window, clearing the stage for her act.

For want of a shorter title, you might call this act *Glamour Girl Sends Message to Public.* Anita had memorized it too well to change a comma. The fact that she was expressing regret for an ex-husband's demise, instead of discussing plans for her next picture, didn't alter the performance in the least.

Even then, she must have been hard on forty—and she still looked too beautiful to be real. Mac's instinct for a story had been right, as usual. Here was an indestructible doll that all the Careys in the world couldn't break, no matter how often she fell out of the carriage on her nose. A perfect contrast to Blanche in the shirt-tail I was going to phone in, the minute I could turn off her record, and edge out to the hall for my hat.

THEN Green walked in behind his cigar, and she stopped dead. He'd been yelping on a phone somewhere behind closed doors, ever since his butler let me in; and a cloud of megalomania still hung over his head, along with the smoke from that fifty-cent cigar. I don't care how many careers he's made and broken since those days on Seventh Avenue; every time I lay eyes on him, I remember that roll-top desk and burst out laughing. No tailor in this world could make him look like anything but a jockey who has been dropped on his head once too often.

"Hello, Pasha," I said, "sorry to be leaving."

He looked at me from a great distance—though it's always a disadvantage having to look up, instead of down, when you want to be haughty.

"Who is this young man, my dear?"

Yes, it came out in English. Such good English, you just knew he'd never learned it at his mother's knee.

Anita started to explain, but he wasn't listening. He remembered me now, all right—far too well.

"Why wasn't I warned that you were being interviewed?"

"Sweetheart, you know you can't be interrupted when you're talking to the Coast."

Green had already stepped between me and the door. From the corner of one eye, I saw Evans moving out of the window-frame.

"Give me those notes, young man, at once."

"No good, Pasha. This interview's as good as printed."

"I permit no unauthorized material on my wife to reach the press."

"In that case, Pasha, it's a good thing Mr. Ray's diary has been stolen."

All right, I said I felt mean, didn't I? Funny, how easy it is to pick up a movie producer and set him to one side, once you put your mind to it. Funny how Evans stepped back, with his mouth open. I guess no one had laid a finger on that ex-Levantine in a long time. So long, in fact, that all his little yes-world figured he was just about untouchable—including Green himself.

So help me, he kept both elbows stiff at his sides when I picked him up by the arms and sat him down on the nearest chair. Just hard enough to bring back his sense of proportion, you understand. Not quite hard enough to shake that cigar from his mouth.

"Read the *Star* tomorrow," I said; "you'll feel much better, I hope."

I made the doorknob with seconds to spare. In fact, I didn't have time to get really mad, until I was going down in the elevator. Of course, I'd cooled off beautifully before I could find an empty phone booth in the lobby; and when Mac had turned my call over to the rewrite desk, I had to stop several times in my dictation to have a good laugh, all to myself.

It was all of two-fifteen when I hung up on that final chore. Not that the hour was cause for alarm, with an open westbound street just outside the hotel door, and the Hudson about twelve minutes away by taxi. Then I remembered I had to telephone Dr. Joe. My spirits really nosedived when I dropped that nickel.

They buzzed his number a long time before anyone answered. It was a woman's voice, and it certainly did not belong to that receptionist I'd met this morning.

"Mr. Jordan for Dr. Piccari," I said, "in a rush, please."

"Can Dr. Donovan handle the case, sir? Dr. Piccari is out of town."

"But that's impossible—Dr. Piccari said he'd wait for my—"

"This is the doctor's exchange secretary speaking, Mr. Jordan. You are automatically connected with us when one of our phones does not answer." She had a voice exactly like a girl who tells you the time. "Dr. Donovan has arranged to look after Dr. Piccari's practice when he is in Florida. But if yours is a special case—"

"What time did Dr. Piccari leave?"

"I really couldn't say, sir."

Well, my watch said two twenty-five, which was enough for me. "Never mind, miss. I don't think Dr. Donovan could help me."

The doormen on the Forty-ninth Street side of the Waldorf were busy when I dashed out, but a taxi whipped out of the line at the hack stand in answer to my signal.

"Furness Pier, and step on it," I said, settling back into an atmosphere of closed windows, faintly flavored with brandy. Then I realized that Nancy Janeway was sitting in the corner of that cab with me—drunk as seven billy-goats. Maybe that's no way to talk about a lady, but she certainly didn't seem like one at the moment.

CHAPTER XII

FRIDAY AFTERNOON: 2:30

"AREN'T you flattered, to have me following you?" she said, trying hard to turn on the Janeway glamor full force.

"Very much, Nancy. Just don't show your affection so publicly," I said, easing her arm down from my shoulder. "There are two cops in that black phaeton behind us. They might arrest you for mashing."

"I came to the office early, just to find you," she said. "Peeked at the assignment sheet, saw you were here—so here *I* am, too. What I want to know is—aren't you flattered?"

"You asked that once," I said. "My reply's on record. Just lean back, and let's enjoy this race with time together."

I threw a bill at the driver. "Here's your tip, Barney Oldfield. My wife's holding a stop-watch at that gangplank."

We snaked through the furniture vans

parked on San Juan Hill, giving Hurlbut's boys a chance to show off their driving, too. Janeway had taken my advice, and leaned back with her eyes closed.

"Why the sudden interest in my humble person, Nancy?"

"I've decided to tell you what I know."

"About Senator Parsons, for instance?" I said, for no good reason.

"D'you know I can bring him to heel—like *that?*"

"Who, darling, who?"

"You guessed it, Jordan," she shouted. "I could walk into his office now, or tomorrow, whenever I like. Make him listen. When he says 'remember my position,' I cay say 'to hell with *both* our positions, Tony Parsons.'" She gave one of those utterly feminine laughs that went down your spine like spring water. "Why should I care what becomes of people—anybody? Even me, if *he* won't—"

"Pull yourself together, Nancy. Are you still talking about Senator Parsons?"

"He'll not win another election. I'll stop it in tomorrow's first edition. But you must write the story, Jack. I wouldn't dare."

Let me tell you, I'd have blown up for fair if she'd been a little less sober. Our taxi had jammed into a long line of cars, waiting to swing in from the side street to the Furness Pier, still a good hundred yards away. If I wanted to make that boat, there was nothing to do but start running. My necktie was under one ear from Nancy's mauling when I jumped from the cab, but I managed to leave her behind, somehow. . . .

All right, if you must know: I did throw an extra bill at my driver, and told him to take her straight back to the shop. Mac could soothe that big story out of her with hot coffee, if she had a story. I was Bermuda-bound at last.

Taxis and towncars were whizzing past both my ears as I ran. Waiting for me was Trudy, with porters in tow, and all our bags. Good old Trudy, with shoes and pocketbook to match, looking patient as Job if not quite so resigned.

"Have you got the tickets?"

I was still fumbling for my wallet, when I felt a hand fasten on my right elbow. Then another, on my left. Hurlbut's boys were leading me back to the street, with scant ceremony. Trudy was screaming at them, but you couldn't hear a word above the full-throated blast of the *Queen's* sirens, as the gangplank and the ship divorced each other, slowly.

"What's the idea, boys?"

"We're not sure ourselves, Jordan. Just thought you might give us a hand with that girl who came over in your taxi."

"Do you realize we're missing our boat?"

"And do you know she was shot through the head, while you were running to make it?"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

José snatched off his gas mask and laughed at them. "Yes, my captain: gas. . . . The explosive kind . . ."

By ROBERT ARTHUR

Blaze of Glory

You'll wear no uniform, José, when you make your gift to Spain. But your way will be lighted by a blue flame, and a thousand guns will sound your requiem

THE boy José wriggled himself carefully down into the shallow muddy crater of a shell hole and there, pillowing his face on his arm and smothering the sound with his sleeve, gave way to the coughing fit he could no longer hold back.

It was over in a moment and he spat. The saliva was pinkish.

José did not think he had been heard by the accursed sharp-eared Moors. The coughing had been drowned by the distant, almost bored chatter of a machine gun, and by the deep grunt of a trench mortar hurling death across the shell-plowed wasteland into the ruined hospital that sheltered the Moors.

José lifted himself on his elbows and peered above the rim of the depression. His sharp young face was alert and fox-like. His eyes were bright in the darkness—too bright. But that was the fever.

For a moment the boy paused, summoning the reserves of his energy. Then, drawing himself by the elbows, he slid his gaunt

body up across the slippery clay lip of the shell hole and onward toward the ruins of the hospital. Where the Moors waited with beady-eyed eagerness for the attack that was to come with the dawn, when Death would throw the shadow of his cloak all across this earth and gather to himself many brave Spaniards.

Onward, guarded by the night, José slid. Behind him the silent lines of his countrymen retreated. Ahead of him, bleak and black against the spangled robe of the heavens, the shell-pocked walls and gaunt window holes of the hospital came slowly closer.

For a year the Moors had held those ruins. It was the spearhead of their drive. So close had they come to the dark and silent city behind José, and no closer. Yet never had they been driven away. Always they remained, waiting for a relaxing of vigilance, a slackening of courage, an instant's giving way to weariness to sweep down and take the city.

On the morrow, once again the attempt to drive them back would be made. And as had happened a dozen times before, the bodies of brave Spaniards would pile high here, like stacks of wheat spewed out of a reaper. And the dark earth would drink deep of red blood, the bright sun would shine down into many an eye that did not blink before its glare.

And as had happened a dozen times before, the attack would probably fail. So that one day—a day which could not be far off—the devilish Moors would come sweeping across this bit of ground and into the city, to kill and burn and rape.

This José knew, and fierce hatred for the invaders, the savages from across the water, hammered in his breast like a hot flame consuming him. So that a dozen times he had taken his place in the enlistment lines, and begged for a rifle; had pleaded for a gun and bullets, that he might join the legions of grim men who had put down their tools — their hammers, their saws, their scythes, their shovels—to man the trenches and thrust back the enemy.

But that coughing he could not cease, the pink blood that came sometimes to his lips, the fever—those things had prevented. Always the doctors had shaken their heads and said no. Always they had told him to remain quiet, to avoid exertion, to leave the fighting to others, if he would get well of the cough.

But José knew, though they did not tell him so, he was not going to get well. Had Pedro, his uncle, gotten well when the fever took him? Had Jiminez, his cousin? Had his sacred mother? God had not willed that they should, and was not he, José, the weakest and least worthy of them all? No, it was quite clear that soon he too would be too weak to leave his bed, as they had been at the end. And after that—

Eh, well, priests had their place. But if he must die, he, José Respos, preferred to die fighting like a man. Like a soldier, taking the enemy with him in his death. And if he could not fight with a gun and bullets, if he could not have a uniform, there was another way that had come to him.

Madre de Dios! it was simple. All it required—aside from a few brains—was the ability to die. And that he, José the Cougher, could do as well as another. In a very blazing burst of glory, as a soldier dreamed of dying. Who would choose to live when he could die as José planned to, with the enemies slain by his prowess heaped about him like flies?

And so now José Respos crawled on his belly in the mud—skinny, coughing, unarmed save for an idea—across the torn clay toward the enemy. And presently he reached the guarding barbed wire, presently a voice spoke in the night, sharply, and José answered.

"I am a deserter," he whispered carefully into the blank shadows. "I wish to surrender. I bring news of value."

A grunt answered him, then a third voice spoke. José crawled slowly and carefully forward. . . .

IN the city, wrapped in the mantle of a lightless night against the possibility of bombers roaring over to drop destruction the general in charge of the coming morn

:g's attack and the major who had per-uaded him nothing could be lost by the experiment stood on a rise of ground and peered through night glasses toward the ruins of the hospital.

They could see nothing, but still they peered. Presently the major looked at his wrist watch, made out the time by the faint starlight.

"An hour, general," he said. "Shall I give the signal?"

The general nodded and lowered his glasses. He was a stout man, with a moustache that bristled fiercely, and a furrowed brow.

"I wonder," he muttered to himself, "how the scheme came to him?"

The major shrugged, and turning so that his body shielded the light, pressed the catch on a flashlight three times. A small white eye winked back; and below, behind the rise of ground, machinery of some kind whined with the even rhythm of a pressure pump.

"Perhaps," suggested the major, who was a man lean of frame and bright of eye, "it was the fever. Fever sharpens the mind. And I think he worked in the hospital for a time, as a messenger. He hoped to be a medical student. At all events, it is an ingenious scheme."

"If it works," the general grunted.

"Even if it does not work," the major murmured. "Of course, there are many things that may go wrong. The pipeline may be broken."

"Or the boy may not manage to get into the basements. He may be shot down first," the general suggested.

"True," the major agreed. Behind him the machinery in the hollow continued its pumping. "But if all goes well, in a few moments we will be forcing chlorine gas directly into the basements of the hospital. The thought is amusing, is it not?"

The general nodded.

"But if the ending of the affair is as the boy planned it," he said, "it will be even more amusing."

. . . José stood erect before the Spanish officer in command of the Moorish detachment that held the hospital. He strove hard to keep the coughing back, but could not. When it was over, he wiped his lips and once more met the man's eye.

"It is as I say, captain," he said stoutly. "I have news of value for you."

"You're a Red," the captain snarled. He was a tall man, big-boned, dark-featured, with a sabre slash across his cheekbone. He sat at his ease in a swivel chair in what had once been the office of the chief of staff of the hospital, a lighted candle on the desk beside him, and scowled at the boy. "All Reds are tricky. I think I'll have you shot."

"Captain," José insisted with dogged stubbornness, "I am not a Red. My father was a loyal subject of the king. And my uncle was a priest. They took him and—No matter. I hate the Reds. But I didn't crawl on my belly across that stretch where death takes his ease just because I hate the Reds."

The captain lit a cigarette and tossed the flaming match to the stone floor. In the doorway a dark-skinned Moorish sergeant awaited orders. But for the moment the officer reserved his decision.

"Very well." He shrugged. "Tell your story. No matter what lies you tell, you shall be shot. But there's no hurry."

José drew in a deep breath and tried to still the pounding of his heart.

"I am ill," he said boldly. "I die anyway. What loss is there in taking a chance? The doctors said that to live I must go far, to a place called Switzerland. To a hospital there. It will cost much money. *Madre de Dios!*" The boy made an eloquent gesture. "Where should I get much money?"

"Where indeed?" the officer grumbled. "What has that to do with your presence here? Bore me no more with your illness or I'll shoot you myself."

"As you say, captain," José agreed respectfully. "Nevertheless, I am here because I have learned of something worth much money that is here, it is my thought you will pay me for telling you of it, and perhaps finding it."

The officer sat up straighter and flicked the butt of his cigarette against the wall, from which it dropped with a shower of sparks.

"Son of a pig!" he snapped. "If there is anything of value in this worthless wreckage, you will tell me of it without pay."

He leaned forward, and his scowl deepened.

"Spit it up!" he commanded. "What of value would there be we have not found?"

"I will be paid?" José demanded. "So that I may go to Switzerland and be cured?"

"Your throat will be cut if you don't speak!" the captain roared. José sighed.

"But I die anyway," he murmured. "If I am not to be paid, as well by a cut throat as another way. As well tonight as tomorrow."

The lean officer swore, then shrugged.

"You will be paid," he said, "if you speak the truth—which I doubt. Now out with it! What of value have we overlooked?"

José's voice dropped to a whisper.

"The radium, captain. I think you have not found that, have you?"

THE captain found himself on his feet, swearing fluently. "Whelp of a mountain goat!" "What kind of lie are you trying to put over on me? I'll slice your ears off personally and string them around your neck before I shoot you! I'll—What radium?"

"Ah!" José said wisely, cocking his head to one side and looking down his nose at the officer. "Then you haven't found it."

"Radium!" the captain bellowed. "What would radium be doing in a ramshackle stable like this ruin? And what do you know of radium anyway, gutter-sweepings?"

"Nothing," the boy said hastily. "Nothing, my captain, except that it is something doctors use, and is of much value. How much I do not know. But—" his voice sank into a whisper and his eyes were round—"I have heard it said that the radium hidden here in this building, before your brave soldiers captured it, cost one million pesos."

The Spanish officer stared at him, hard-eyed. In truth, it was always possible there *might* have been radium here. This had been a hospital—the finest in Spain. Radium would be used in a hospital. It might easily be overlooked in the abandonment of a place during an attack. And its value—well, even if it were far less than a million pesos, it would be rich prize indeed.

Being a fighting man, the captain was not well informed about radium. But that much he knew.

He sat down and lit another cigarette.

"Sparrow," he said, his voice silken, "you are a fool. You have heard somewhere, no doubt, a rumor concerning this radium and you have taken it for the truth. It is a lie, but I am curious to know just what it was you heard."

José spat into a corner, and the officer promptly cursed him.

"My captain," the boy replied, "that is the truth. I did hear such mention, among the doctors to whom I went to have my cough cured. They grieved much that the radium had been lost. They are anxious for it back. Their leaders wish to sell it. Money is needed. It would buy much flour, and many guns."

"Of course," the captain muttered. "Get on, get on."

"So," José announced with a flourish, "it is simple. You know that they, the accursed Reds, attack at daybreak?"

"That is known," the officer told him. "We are well prepared. As always. Our friends have signaled from the roofs. The dirty Reds will lie in their own blood as thick as acorns underneath an oak tree."

"Eh, well," the boy said, "why is the attack? For no other reason than the Reds are desperate, and will do anything to get money. They wish to capture the building to regain the radium from its hiding place to sell it. Lives are cheap. Money is scarce. Does not my tale now make sense?"

The rebel captain gnawed his long, horsy lower lip thoughtfully.

"Then, supposing what you say is true, how is one to find this radium?" he asked scoffingly. "I suppose you, spindle-shanks, know the secret of its hiding place?"

José shook his head sadly.

"No, my officer. But this I do know. It is hidden someplace in the basements. Down in the bowels of the building. There were—so the talk I heard said—laboratories down there where one worked with the radium. And its hiding place was described. I think I would recognize it when I saw it."

"Then repeat the description to me," the captain commanded.

José coughed, and when the spell was over, shook his head.

"I shall recognize it," he insisted. "I can find it. Besides, there is little time. I have other news for you. News you will not like."

The heavy eyebrows of the man drew together.

"What is this news?"

"Just this," José replied, watching him a little fearfully. "The fiendish Reds have hit upon a scheme—how they will do it I do not know, except that it has to do with the sewer-mains in some manner—to drive you from the building before they attack. They plan to fill the cellars with a very poisonous gas, my captain, and kill all your men like rats!"

A second time the officer came to his feet with a rush.

"Thunders of hell!" he bellowed down at the cringing form of the boy. "If this is true, how do you know of it, stable sweepings? Speak!"

José hunched his shoulders but stood his ground.

"I heard it whispered among the officers, captain," he said meekly. "I am only a boy, a sick, coughing one, to whom no one pays attention. Would I tell you if it were not so, and I was not of your side?"

The rebel captain muttered a string of unsavory oaths to himself and then clamped a heavy hand on José's shoulder.

"The sewers," he grumbled aloud. "Poison gas sent through the sewers. It is a mad idea. And yet—yet—No doubt the sewers are broken and there are many openings into the basements. If it were true and I took no action—"

He made up his mind and spoke decisively to the Moorish sergeant, still standing at attention in the doorway.

"Clean the cellars!" he rasped. "Get the men up to the ground-floor level until further notice. All equipment and munitions with them."

The sergeant saluted and vanished. The officer propelled José toward the door.

"As for you, fleabite," he said, "you and I are going to visit the underground levels now. Be sure you are telling the truth. There are worse things for liars than death."

MEEKLY the boy preceded him down a hallway littered with plaster from ceilings and walls. The upper floors of the building had been reduced to wreckage by gunfire, and the roof had fallen in.

But the ground and first floors still stood, as well as the walls of the floors above, and were tenable. The openings in the bricks made fine machine gun ports; and the cellars, all concrete, were practically bombproof.

It was a strong point that had stood against every attack for months, and would have taken the heaviest of modern artillery to reduce. Until the building had been razed literally brick from brick it was almost uncapturable. And with the dawn, the boy José knew, its walls would stand off still one more attack while the Moorish marksmen within pleasantly killed the advancing Spaniards. Unless—

The heavy hand on his shoulder guided the tatter-clothed lad past scores of Moorish soldiers, sprawled asleep in the corridor. It turned him down a stairway guarded by a sentry, down a flight of dark steps which the captain illuminated with a pocket flashlight, and deep into the bowls of the building.

Below, many scores more of the Moorish legionnaires were bivouacked in the hallways and rooms, old laboratories, store

rooms, and other space in the hospital basement. Awakened, they were grumpily getting to their feet, collecting equipment and filing upwards as the sergeant carried out his orders.

In fifteen minutes the last of them had quitted the cellar, leaving dust thick in the air and the stone walls reverberating to the tramp of feet and the harsh, strange words of their cursing. There was left only the captain, a lieutenant who joined him—a short, dour-seeming man—and the sergeant. And José.

The captain sniffed the air.

"No gas," he said. "Quickly now, rascal. The radium!"

"If I may have the light—" José suggested humbly; and with an impatient curse the Rebel officer gave it to him. José moved forward confidently down the long narrow corridors, where the shadows leaped and danced like spirits of evil cutting capers on a sinner's grave.

The three followed on his heels, suspiciously. José turned into the first room he came to, flashed the light briefly, and backed out. It was but a storeroom, smelling of Moors, and of no interest.

But the next was a room he sought. It had been a laboratory. Or a research room. The wreckage of shelves that had held equipment was still there. So were broken sinks. And gas jets, where burners had been attached.

José moved toward them, and as he came close, flashed the light into other corners of the room. Swiftly, under cover of darkness, his fingers found the gas jets and turned the cocks to open. There was no gas to flow, of course. The pressure had long since been cut off—if indeed the buried mains had not been blown up by shellfire—a contingency which José addressed a silent prayer to the Holy Virgin to make not so.

When, shrugging, José led them onward, four open gas cocks stood in the room behind them.

He led them through more rooms, and another laboratory where he successfully repeated the opening of the gas connections. But now the captain was swearing audibly, and the time was short. In a small room that had many shelves and many broken bottles, José paused.

The torch made a circle of light about a steel door three feet square set in the wall. The door had once been locked. Now the lock was broken and it sagged on its hinges.

José allowed a little sound of disappointment to escape his lips.

"It is as described!" he cried. "But—it has been opened."

"Of course it's been opened!" the Rebel captain sneered. "If your radium was hidden there—"

"But it is small!" the boy cried eagerly. "So tiny! Perhaps—"

He ran toward the door, and as he did, tripped over an obstruction on the floor. The light flew from his hand. José grunted, and as he painfully rose to his feet, his fingers took something small and heavy from its hiding place, tucked inside his sock at the ankle. He had been searched of course; but who would examine a waif's muddy socks and shoes?

Then he gathered up the light, flung open the steel door, and revealed inside a second door that had also been forced. The second door, opened, showed steel shelves on which broken glass lay, little heaps of old chemicals, a broken microscope, and some rusty instruments.

José reached up and fumbled along the empty shelves within his reach. When he withdrew his hand it was empty.

"I—I can not find it," he stammered. "It should be a small thing—a box or bottle. I don't know which. But very heavy. This radium, so I heard, is kept within walls of lead. It might have been overlooked—"

"If it was ever here," the captain said unpleasantly, and took the light from him. "I will look for myself!"

He thrust José aside and played the light within the little safety closet. Then he swore, incredulously, reached in and drew forth a small object the size of a man's thumb.

"Lead!" he exclaimed.

"Lead!" José echoed him. "A lead bottle! It is the radium! It burns! It must be kept within lead for safety!"

The three rebels stared at it, brows creased. The lieutenant took it and hefted the small lead vial in his hand.

"It is heavy," he said knowingly. "And this radium is kept in lead tubes. I have read it. Otherwise it is dangerous."

"We shall see," the captain replied curtly, and thrust the thing into his pocket. "I am still suspicious of this scrubby, coughing monkey. I shall—"

And then the Moorish sergeant threw back his head and sniffed. The lieutenant did likewise. And it was he who cried out—

"Gas! *Chlorine!*"

ACROSS the lines the general and the major still stood on their rise of ground. It lacked less than an hour of daybreak, and the general was fretful.

"You have made the change?" he demanded.

The major nodded. "Everything's going smoothly," he reported. "Twenty minutes of the chlorine, to give 'em a good sniff and keep 'em out, and then we shifted over. We've sealed up the break we made and turned on the pressure again, normal. Of course it was cut off months ago.

"There will be a lot of waste of course: bound to be cracked joints in the pipes, if nothing worse. But so far as we know the main is intact as far as the hospital. If God wills it, we will succeed."

"I suppose there's no use hoping too much," the general conceded gloomily. "Still, it would be fun to see those accursed Moors—Well, we can only wait. And see."

. . . José sat huddled on a broken box in the captain's room. Almost an hour had gone by since they had hustled him up out of the basements, where the sharp, pungent chlorine smell had begun to waft down dark passages as if feeling its way with invisible fingers toward its prey.

After that the annoyed officer had ordered all doors leading into the underground sections closed off and made gasproof. The troops, who were awaiting the dawn attack, squatted in the halls or manned machine guns at gaps in the wall, and felt uneasy.

"I do not like it," the captain swore heavily to his lieutenant, his aide. "Chlorine through the sewer mains—it's a fishy idea. Yet how else *could* the stuff be gotten here?"

"Those Reds!" the lieutenant spat. "They're a tricky bunch. God knows what else they're up to. Good thing we had the lad's warning."

"Is it?" the captain snarled. "I wonder. I don't trust him. Radium! Chlorine in the cellars! Pfui! I wish I knew the truth. I've sent for a chemical man who used to be attached to this place. Major Armandos. He'll be able to tell us if its possible the sewer mains—What is it, gutter-snipe? You seemed startled. Do you know Major Armandos?"

"I? *Madre de Dios,* no!" José exclaimed piously. "I merely jumped because a flea bit me."

"Radium!" the captain snorted. "Come to think of it, if there was radium in this place, why didn't Armandos ever mention it? He must have known. He was assistant to the chief of staff. He could hardly have forgotten the existence—"

"Major Armandos!" the guard at the door said, bringing his rifle to attention; and the captain and the lieutenant wheeled toward the plump, red-faced man who came in, stamping the mud from his feet.

"Well?" he exclaimed testily, as the two saluted. "You sent for me, Captain Barios. What in the name of a thousand Basque devils do you want?"

The captain explained in terse, clipped words, while the major's face grew redder.

"Radium!" he cried. "Chlorine through the sewers! What lunacy is this? There was no radium among the supplies; and as for gas being forced into the basements through the sewers, the idea is fantastic!"

The burly captain grew purple. He seized José by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet.

"Then this walking scarecrow has been spouting lies to me!" he roared. "He has been a part of some trickery! He—"

"José!" the major exclaimed. "José Respos! He was a messenger here, until he was found tubercular. What does this mean, whelp?"

Captain Barios swung an open palm against José's cheek with such force that the boy went spinning into a corner and fell. Then the man jerked him upright again.

"Speak!" he roared, bringing his contorted face within inches of the boy's. "Speak, you red weasel! What trick have you been playing?"

José cringed.

"Don't—don't hit me again," he gasped. "I'll tell. I'll turn it off."

"Turn what off?" the captain bellowed, and the boy trembled.

"The chlorine," he whimpered. "It's being pumped through a special pipe—they told me how to turn it on. You didn't notice when I turned the valve—"

"Stop gibbering!" the captain shouted. "And speak sense. Major Armandos, have you any idea what pipe he could be referring to?"

The squat major's face was taking on purplish tinges.

"Captain Barios!" he said with ominous precision, "I don't know and I don't care. It's obvious you've let this young liar lead you by the nose like a pig going to the sticking. For the sake of your own skin I hope—"

THE captain slapped José's cheek again with a rough hand, made harder by the officer's own fear. "What pipe? What valve?" he almost screamed, and José cowered lower.

"Please, captain," he gasped, "let me go down there with a gas mask on. I will turn it off. All will be well. I swear it. Someone remembered this pipe and offered me money to trick you. I will show you—"

"By the thunder of the devil's wings, you will indeed!" the captain said grimly. "Lieutenant! A gas mask for this whelp. You and the sergeant will accompany us. Major Armandos, do you care to descend into the basements with us?"

"I do!" the major spat. "This José Respos was a clever urchin, as I remember him. A full report will have to be made."

He glanced at the window and saw the faint lightening of sky that hinted of the dawn's grayness.

"And the time is short!" he reminded the captain with heavy sarcasm. "The attack we are awaiting will begin at any minute."

He glared angrily at Barios and started for the door.

"Come!" the Captain snarled, and jerked at José's arm. The boy stumbled down the corridor after the rebel officer, fumbling with the gas mask that the lieutenant had flung at him. At the first door leading to the gas-filled basements they paused while the three officers and the Moorish sergeant adjusted masks.

Then, snouted like monsters from the earth's entrails, they descended into the darkness, the captain leading the way with his electric torch throwing a path of light ahead.

There was a wispy fogginess in the air as they advanced — the chlorine. And the damp silence was disturbed by a sound: a faint hissing whisper like the noise of snakes beneath a rock.

The clutch on José's shoulder was peremptory. Obediently he turned into a doorway. And in the room they entered that soft and ominous hiss was louder.

It was one of the old laboratories. The officers heard the soft sibilant sound, and through the round goggles of their masks they stared at each other. Then with an abrupt movement the major sprang across to one of the open gas cocks and held his hand before it. The cool stream of invisible death pouring from it told its own story.

The stout officer made a movement with his fist that was in itself a curse, and the captain who held José, unable to swear because of the mask, raised his fist and dealt the boy a blow on the ear that spun him

against the wall, from which he slid to the damp stone floor.

José sat there, staring at four masked men dimly visible by the light of the electric torch, and his eyes were mocking. He snatched off his own gas mask and laughed aloud at them.

"Yes, my captain!" he cried, and they heard him though they could not speak. "Gas from the gas mains. I turned on the gas cocks, and in the city they restored the pressure that has so long been turned off. First they pumped some chlorine through to scare you.

"But that was only the beginning. Then they forced through the valves I opened, into the basement here which you so obligingly made gastight for me, the natural gas. The explosive kind. It was my idea, my officers. All mine. So that the attack might succeed. Now—watch!"

His hand, in his pocket, came forth. It held a large match. He reached to strike it, but the captain saved him the trouble. His pistol leaped into his fingers, and even as the aghast major tried to wrest it from him, the gun spoke. And death leaped from the muzzle.

José saw the pale blue balloon of flame spurt into life at the pistol's muzzle, and in a time too short for the human mind to reckon it, flare through all the rooms and corridors of the basements of the hospital in which so many hundreds of the enemy waited now for the attack from the city. And then nothing . . .

IN THE city, the watching general and major saw the rest, as uneasily they stared at the distant brick shell of the hospital, taking form against the graying eastern sky.

"The attack begins in one minute," the general said fretfully. "The boy has failed."

The major was about to speak, but was interrupted. The brick ruins across the lines were rising bodily in the air. They rose, the walls opened outwards, the floors soared skyward in a confusion of stones and dirt and men; and then all collapsed together into a soft gray pall of dust, soundlessly, for the terrific slap of the explosion did not come for a pair of seconds afterwards.

A single great blue flare for an instant had outlined the collapsing building. Then it and the building both were gone forever.

As if the explosion had been a signal, machine guns burst into hysterical chattering and rifles began to talk in rumbling chorus. Light artillery punctuated the symphony with a *slap-bang! slap-bang!* and moving lines of running men came dimly into view. But the general appeared not to notice the attack had begun. For a moment longer he kept his glasses fixed on the dust-veil that hid the building from which so long the enemy had menaced the city.

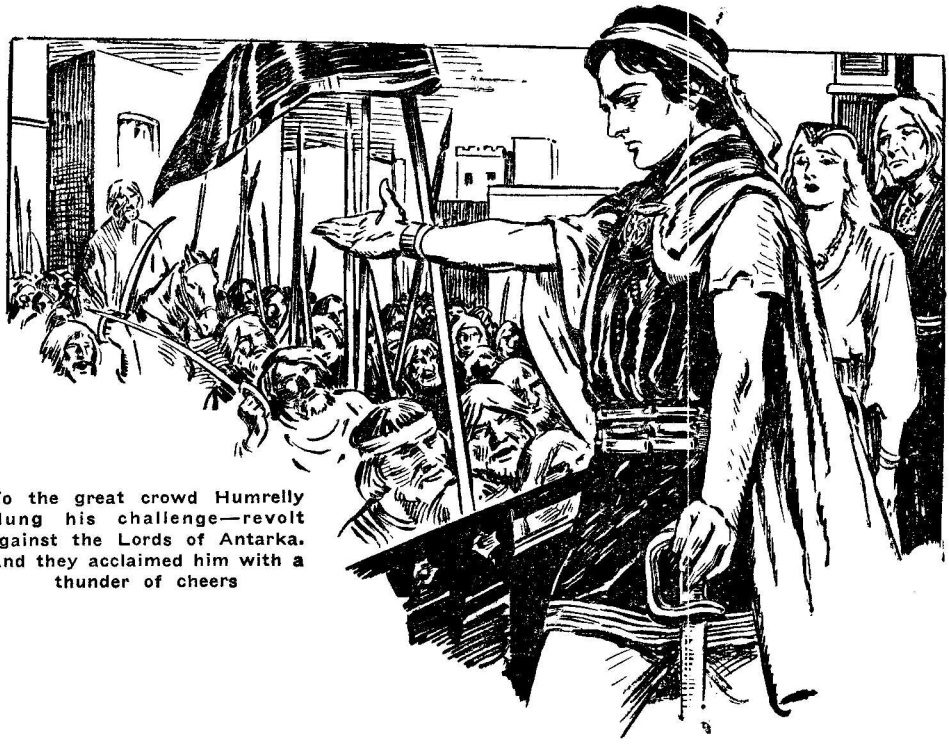
Then he drew a deep breath.

"A good soldier," he muttered gruffly, "has died."

It was the requiem Jose would have wished.

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

Coming Soon: Augustus Post—Pioneer Birdman



To the great crowd Humrelly flung his challenge—revolt against the Lords of Antarka. And they acclaimed him with a thunder of cheers

Lords of Creation

By EANDO BINDER

HOMER ELLORY, brilliant young Twentieth Century scientist, slept for three thousand years in a carefully contrived time-chamber, and awoke in the year 5000. Having pictured Tomorrow as a fabulous world of super-scientific inventions, miraculously contrived ultrametropoli, and of men and women demigodlike in their intelligence and skill, he is distressed to discover that he has emerged from his man-made cocoon into a second Stone Age. A world without metal. For all the world's precious ores have been exhausted by a period of bitter, all-destructive warfare in the preceding centuries.

Overcoming his first disappointment, he reconciles himself to living out his life in a gentle and primitive sort of existence among the tribe of Norak, who live on the west bank of the Hussn (Hudson) River. Sharina, daughter of Jon Darm, the chief, patiently teaches him the language, and the two become fast friends. Ellory even fancies himself a little in love with her, in spite of her engagement to the young chieftain, Mal Radnor. Wise old Sem Onger, most learned of the tribe, is his counselor and constant companion.

ONE DAY a rocket ship appears out of the blue; and Ellory learns of the Land of Antarka (Antarctica), where civilization still flourishes. Ellory witnesses the payment of the tribute exacted by the Lords of Antarka—ten young men, three maidens, and food supplies—once every nine months. He is shocked and disgusted both by this practice and by the calm submission of the tribes to this barbarous custom.

With Sem Onger, he visits the ruins of New York and discovers, in an almost completely wrecked laboratory, a bit of intensely radioactive metal. With this, Ellory believes he can bring about a restoration of civilization as he knew it.

But before he can begin on this project, Mal

This story began in the Argosy for September 23

Radnor brings word that the tribe of the Quoise has attacked the Noraks. Ellory decides to end the conflict quickly by making iron weapons, extracting the metal from the ferrous oxide found in the city ruins.

The process goes painfully and slowly, but at last Ellory has his first iron sword completed. Sem Onger protests when Ellory announces his determination to try the weapon on the field of battle himself—but Ellory refuses to listen. . . .

CHAPTER X

THE SHINING STICK

WITH Sem Onger's detailed directions ringing in his ears, Ellory rode west to the broad Hudson. A sleepy boatman paddled him across without question in a flat-bottomed scow, the horse swimming behind. On the other shore, Ellory followed the trail that led into cool woods.

Though a fair horseman, he soon found his bones aching. This was not like leisurely cantering along prepared bridle-paths of 20th-century parks. The trail was rough, dipping up and down. The horse, more suited to plow than open running, lumbered along heavily, shaking its rider.

Ellory began to repent his impulsive, almost rash resolve to join the war. Primitive as this battling might be, he had not the slightest war experience. What good would he be, even with a sword? Why had he done this? But he could not rationalize that. It was all a mixture of reasons again, involving himself and these people.

He slept that night under the stars, wolfing down a strip of dried beef from the saddle-bag in the morning. By nightfall the following day, he knew he must be near the battle zone, unless he had lost the way. Flickering campfires appeared abruptly, around a turn, halfway up the slope of a broad hill—the Norak forces.

Ellory announced himself at the sentry line, dismounted, and strode among tired, muttering soldiers, eating before their campfires. Many uniforms were blood-splotched. Here and there a crudely-bandaged man lay stolidly with his wounds. The day hours had seen a skirmish.

Mal Radnor rose startled from among his officers gathered around a fire.

"Humrelly!" he grunted. "Why are you here?"

"To offer my good right arm, as you once put it, in the service of Norak!" returned Ellory, drawing himself up, though he creaked in every joint. "And this—a metal weapon!"

He raised the sword, glinting in the firelight.

Mal Radnor stared at it with a half sneer. A slow smile came to his lips.

"We will see," he said pointedly, "if the man from the miraculous past can battle as well as make trinkets."

At dawn, still stiff and sore from his hard ride, Ellory stood beside Mal Radnor, at the crest of the hill, looking out over the territory where they would battle soon. In a long line to right and left stretched the thousands of men, tensely awaiting the enemy.

"We have been driven back steadily," muttered Mal Radnor. "In a month, if this continues, we'll have our backs against the Hussn River. We must stop them!"

He glanced at Ellory, mockingly.

"You will perhaps swing the tide of battle today, with your metal stick?"

Ellory said nothing. The sword did look small and ineffective, beside their huge clubs, maces and spears. Understanding nothing of metal or its properties, they failed to be impressed in any way.

Mal Radnor chafed impatiently, taunting the enemy under his breath. He was a tall, splendidly-muscled specimen of young manhood, legs and arms bare for free action. Ellory did not compare unfavorably. He was slightly taller, broader. His muscles had been kept in trim, in the twentieth century, with tennis, rowing and handball. And he had been toughened by the past week's labors with the bellows.

Stone-age warrior and twentieth-century scientist, they stood together, a pair of stalwarts.

And when, suddenly, the enemy appeared and Mal Radnor gave the command to attack, they mounted and galloped

shoulder to shoulder down the slope. The war chief, Mal Radnor always led his legions to battle, as military leaders had before the advent of large-scale scientific wars.

Ellory, as in a dream, found himself on a powerful black charger, flying like the wind down the valley slope. A warrior, armed only with an untested sword, charging to battle in a stone-age war!

THERE was little thought of strategy, in this primitive struggle. Over their heads, as they thundered along, sang darting arrows, plunging into the ranks of the enemy. Arrow fire returned. The two lines of cavalry met with a shock. Horses wheeling and snorting, hand-weapons came into play. Then the infantry swarmed up from both sides, with spears, clubs and stone-headed maces.

The melee settled down to hours of slow, grim butchery.

Riding down the slope, Ellory had felt cold.

Arrows had slithered past his ears, singing of death. Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen a horse stumble here and there, throwing its rider. Or, more often, a feather-tufted arrow-end appeared miraculously sticking from a man's chest and his riderless horse plunged on.

As his spirited charger reared and wheeled, meeting the Quoise cavalry line, Ellory had begun swinging his sword automatically with his right hand, holding the reins tightly with his left.

Still stiff and cold, he felt detached from the actual battle. His swinging sword met nothing.

Then, suddenly, a huge blood-stained mace loomed in his face. Blindly, he cut with his sword. He felt the crunch of steel through wood and the stone-headed weapon was deflected past his ear.

A startled face peered at him for a moment, and then the Quoise had jerked a great club from his pommel and lifted it high. Ellory and fate were face to face.

Instinctively, knowing he could not shear through the thick club so easily, Ellory thrust forward with his sword. The hard, edged metal stabbed through leather and shoulder and the club dropped from nerveless fingers. The Quoise fell back, *hors de combat.*

Ellory looked at the blood on his sword, stunned.

For the first time in his life, twentieth century or fiftieth, he had drawn blood, wounded a fellow human being. For an instant he was weak with nausea. Then, abruptly, fire burned through his veins. This was battle, combat, and the devil take the hindmost!

Gripping his sword-handle firmly, yelling amid the terrific clash and din, Ellory drove his horse into the thickest of the melee.

Time stood still.

Ellory's bright sword flashed in the sunlight, weaving a pattern of light. Many more times he drew blood. But he avoided taking life. He took a savage delight in merely nicking each opponent, or chopping his wooden weapon in two with a tremendous sweep of his blade.

Thrust, cut, jab, in lightning strokes—it was sheer artistry. The artistry of a metal weapon against clumsy heavy stone and wood. All their weapons carried weight at the killing end, and were thus top-heavy for fast action. Ellory's sword, with its heavy handle and light, but deadly blade, outclassed them easily.

All day the battle raged on.

Ellory remembered only hazily that he dropped back now and then for a breathing spell. Then up into the "front line" again, confounding the enemy wherever he met them.

But he was also aware that the Norak forces in general were steadily pressed back by the Quoise, he with them. The long battle line crawled up the slope, over the hill, and down the other side where the Norak army had camped the night before. By nightfall, when darkness brought temporary armistice, the Quoise were in possession of the new territory.

Ellory's mind cleared from battle weariness, as he rested on his elbow before a

campfire. The singing energy that had driven him all day drained out. He suddenly recalled the moans, the hoarse shouts, wounds gushing, the reek of sweat, horses and freshly spilt blood.

He conquered a sick feeling, as he saw Mal Radnor's face over him.

The young war chieftain had a bandage over one arm. "I see you did not win the day for us, Humrelly, with your 20th-century magic!" he said tauntingly.

"I have one less wound than you!" Ellory snapped back. "In fact, none at all."

He stood, faced the stalwart chieftain. "I'll go into battle with you, day after day, and prove it was no accident!"

That, Ellory saw, was the only course that could impress their Stone-age psychology. So he thought.

Mal Radnor pondered a moment.

"I watched you all day long, as often as I could," he said slowly, reluctantly. Then, surprisingly, he reached out to grip Ellory's shoulder.

"You are a man, Humrelly. I misjudged you. More—"

He stooped to pick up Ellory's sword. His eyes glittered as he hefted it. Then he swung it down on a log, biting deep into the wood. Other men were watching.

"Humrelly!" Mal Radnor's voice was almost childishly eager. "Can you make more of these metal sticks? With these, we can win, instead of being driven back by the more numerous Quoise!"

A hoarse shout of approval came from the surrounding warriors. Ellory suddenly realized he had gained a small fame, in one day, with the sword. It was likely, too, that in the enemy's camp they were talking over the strange man who could not be killed or harmed because of his magic wand that shone so queerly in the sun.

"In a month," promised Ellory, "I can supply your whole army with metal weapons."

"Then go!" exclaimed Mal Radnor. "I will send a personal message back to Jon Darm, giving you all the supplies you need!"

And Ellory basked in the thought that he had won a place in the fiftieth century that was already unique.

CHAPTER XI

EDICT FROM THE SKY

THE ruins of New York, undisturbed for an age, frowned down upon the activity of the next month. Ellory was superintendent of an embryo steel mill. With a staff of older men who had not gone to the wars as helpers, he set up a dozen large clay smelting pans. Wagon loads of charcoal fed roaring fires. Tons of red oxide yielded tons of pouring metal. The clang of steel on steel resounded as swords were shaped.

Ellory also devised a pike-head, to be attached to a short wooden handle. With these, the heaviest of wooden clubs could be splintered in two with one blow. Also skulls. A few days within the monthly time limit he had set for himself, the first wagon-load of the new weapons was being readied.

And barely in time, for that night a messenger came clattering up from Mal Radnor. Bitterly contesting every inch of the way, the Norak forces now had their backs to the Hudson River. Another day's fighting would find them retreating to the nearer shore, the war over and lost.

Ellory took the wagon-load across himself, that same night. The weighty metal very nearly sank the raft ferry. At dawn, he drove his oxen up the New Jersey shore, toward the battlefield.

Struggle had already begun, when he arrived at the crest of a knoll. Ellory clanged two metal swords together and the sharp sound penetrated the dull roar of battle.

It was, Ellory thought dramatically, like the proverbial shot that was heard around the world, in a past age.

Mal Radnor, quick-thinking, withdrew part of his forces and led them to the wagon. Ellory passed out swords and pikes without explanation. Men of action, they would quickly find the way to use them most effectively.

"Hold them off today, at all odds, Mal Radnor!" Ellory shouted. "Tomorrow, I'll have enough weapons for half your forces."

Mal Radnor wheeled his mount. A thousand strong, the newly armed battalion swept back into battle. Ellory watched for a time. Metal flashed in the sunlight. The war-cry of the Noraks became stronger. The resistless advance of the enemy slowed down.

Already the magic of metal was asserting itself.

At dawn the next day, having run his steel mill full blast all night, Ellory delivered five more wagon loads, and for the first time since the border war had begun, the enemy was fought to a standstill.

At dawn of the third day, twenty thousand Norak troops, swinging their sabers and pikes, charged down on twice their number of panic-stricken Quoise and utterly routed them.

In the following two weeks, the Quoise retreated. Periodically they turned at bay, only to quail before the crushing threat of metal.

And the war was over, with the new Norak border fifty miles within former enemy land!

ELLORY and Mal Radnor, side by side, led the returning army in their victory march through the capital city, decorated with gold and green bunting, its streets filled with dancing, singing people. From a balcony of the Royal House, Chief Jon Darm delivered a speech of eulogy.

Colorful though it all was, Ellory's thoughts wandered. The war was such a small, unimportant phase of what he hoped to do. He had yet to solve the secret of the glowing wax, institute science of some sort, find out more about the strange civilization of Antarctica. One of their rocket craft had circled over the final battle, like an aerial question mark, apparently in observation. What did that mean?

Though he tried to avoid it, Ellory's eyes and thoughts fastened on Sharina. She stood on the balcony beside her father, cool, lovely, white-robed, angelic. Was she staring down at him, or at Mal Radnor? Mal Radnor, of course. Now that he had his nuptial war-victory, they would be married. Ellory had forged the wedding ring himself, out of steel. One of fate's little tricks.

Ellory started out of a trance. Mal Radnor had stepped back, facing him, raising his sword as a signal. Thousands of other swords flashed up in the sunlight, in salute to Ellory.

Then Jon Darm's deep voice:

"For your great part in this victory, Humrelly, I appoint you Warlord of Norak, second in command to none!"

That evening, while he danced the stately, easily-learned steps of their dance with Sharina at a festive ball, the girl looked at him strangely.

"You have only been with us four months, Humrelly," she said softly, "and now you are Warlord!"

"To tell the truth, angel," he said, grinning. "I haven't the least idea what to do about it."

"There won't be much to do about it until the next war." The girl smiled.

"In the meantime," Ellory said, "I'll work on the glowing wax."

"It was brave of you to fight in that battle, with the first sword," Sharina pursued. "Mal Radnor told me about it. He said you fought magnificently!"

Ellory glowed a little. Somehow, mutual esteem had grown between the two young men through the campaign.

"He didn't do so badly himself," Ellory murmured. He went on earnestly, looking into her eyes. He had made up his mind about something, and now was the time to say it. "Mal Radnor will make you a good husband, Sharina." He hoped his voice was casual. "The marriage will be held soon?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes.

"In a month."

She was as suddenly looking at him then.

"Humrelly—"

Ellory prepared to interrupt, to avoid

another situation, but interruption came from a different source. Suddenly a drone beat down from the skies.

Sharina's eyes widened.

"An Antarkan ship landing!" she exclaimed wonderingly.

They went out to look.

IT was not yet dark. The great ship circled once, as warning to clear the square, then came down like a striking eagle. Ellory was with Jon Darm and the others when they advanced to the landed craft.

The hatch opened and Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra, stepped out.

Ellory caught his breath. In the twilight glow, her white beauty gleamed softly, like that of a moon goddess. How incredible to think of her as the one who had so recently taken slaves into her ship!

Jon Darm bowed and murmured the usual greeting, surprise in his voice at this unheralded visit between the appointed times.

The eyes of the Lady Ermaine flicked about, at the decorated buildings, and within the open doors of the Royal House, at the signs of festivity.

"You are celebrating what, Jon Darm?" she asked.

"We have won a border war against the Quoise."

"Your petty little border wars!" said the Lady of Lillamra, in an amused tone. "They burn like little flames all over this Outland. I suppose you wouldn't be happy without them. But, Jon Darm—"

Her voice hardened a little. "You had metal weapons! We saw one of the battles, accidentally, while cruising. Where did you make them—at the ruins? I thought so. You are not to use them again, Jon Darm, do you understand? We do not permit it."

A Medieval ruler forbidding his subjects to better themselves in any small way. Telling them they must not take one least little step forward. Ellory saw in that how vicious was the attitude Antarka held toward what they called the "Outland."

The Antarkan girl—she seemed in her early twenties—changed from arrogance to curiosity.

"What genius among you found the way to produce them?"

Behind its mild guise, the question bristled with threat. Ellory sensed that, in the stony silence that followed. But the Antarkan girl quickly read unwitting glances at Ellory. She faced him, her eyebrows lifting slightly.

"You?"

Ellory made no sign.

"I remember you!" she said suddenly. "You are the one, last time, who was insolent. You are—what is the name?—Humrelly, the herdsman! And now you have produced metal weapons?"

Ellory thought of denying it, but felt his face flushing under her searching, canny eyes. Yet he kept silent.

"Answer me!" she demanded coolly. "If not—"

She slipped a tubular weapon from her jacket, aimed it at him.

A gasp of horror came from the others and they shrank back. Ellory stood his ground unflinchingly, pulses beating with rage. Gun or no gun, he wouldn't let a snip of a girl make him cringe. Though he knew it was a fool thing to do, he dared her with his eyes.

Dared her to fire.

She didn't. She slipped the gun back into her jacket. Her eyes had just the briefest admiration in them—and wonder.

"It would be senseless to kill you," she said imperturbably. "One last chance. Speak now or go to Antarka as prisoner."

SEM ONGER'S fingers squeezed Ellory's arm, in warning against that fate. Whatever it would mean, Ellory himself decided he didn't want it. Swiftly, he reviewed how much he could say, and how little.

"Yes, I found the way to make the weapons, Lady Ermaine," he said.

"How?"

"By burning the red dust around the ruin towers with green wood and charcoal. It happened accidentally once, when I

built a fire at the foot of the tower. I saw molten matter run out and cool to a hard mass." He shrugged. "I thought it would make good weapons, and so it proved."

The Antarkan girl was still staring at him fixedly.

"For a herdsman, you are amazingly clever," she said, with a half mocking note. "Tell me, why do you use green wood in the process?"

"Because it—"

Ellory caught himself just in time, before he said "reduces the oxide faster". He knew nothing of oxidation, reduction, chemistry. He was a Stone-age man, ignorant of even the simplest reactions. He saw the girl's close attention. Did she suspect? Was she trying to trap him?

"—seemed to burn out the metal better," he finished, with barely a halt. "That is all I know about it."

He shrugged again, hoping he was not as bad an actor as he felt himself to be.

"Queer!" the girl murmured, half to herself. "Queer that you should suddenly excel in an art that might ordinarily take generations to develop. Are you a true genius, or are you—"

She hesitated.

Her eyes bent on him with such a piercing speculation that Ellory prepared for exposure of his identity. But again, as the other time, the Lady of Lillamra laughed at herself.

"But that would be still more unbelievable! An Ancient—alive today! The spell of night has put fancies in my head. I will go before I think of more absurd things."

She shook her head, as if to clear it, and the silvery tide of her hair struck shafts of moonlight through the darkening air.

She spoke again, to the chief.

"Jon Darm, this man deserves better than a herdsman's life. Invite him to your council table. He can do much for you, with his mind. But"—warning flashed from her voice—"remember that I have forbidden the use of metal weapons hereafter."

Her ship, a few moments later, drummed into the air and was lost in the gloom of near night.

CHAPTER XII

WARLORD OF NORAK

"SHE came near to suspecting you were an Ancient!" said Jon Darm worriedly, when the last throb of the rocket ship had dissolved into the hush that was normal. "If she once knew, she would take you from us. It would be best to hide you, next time."

"Hide?"

Ellory, fuming now in reaction to the recent humiliation, swore under his breath, savagely. "Life isn't worth living, under that kind of treatment. Is it, Jon Darm? Is it, Mal Radnor—Sem Onger—Sharina—"

He challenged them all. All, in turn, looked at him resignedly, sadly. Sem Onger patted his shoulder, in a soothing gesture. Ellory shoved his hand away. His anger rose in him, shaking him from head to foot. He had the urge to slap their faces, to sting them out of their apathy.

Then he saw the faint glow in Sharina's eyes.

"It isn't, Humrelly!" she murmured. "But what can be done about it?"

Ellory gripped himself. His thoughts surged.

There was a spark here, the spark that had always burned in revolt against tyranny, and that would never die. He could fan that spark, kindle a fire, with the right fuel. He sensed that covertly they waited, with an instinctive hope, for their guest from a great past to go on.

Ellory straightened up.

"I'll tell you what can be done! Revolt! Fight!"

He snapped the words, watching their reaction. He saw them start and exchange glances. It was a thing they understood, they who had so recently fought for land. But would they understand fighting for a principle?

"A fight for freedom from Antarka!" Ellory added tensely.

Jon Darm cleared his throat nervously.

"That is impossible, Humrelly! The Lords of Antarka are powerful. You have

heard the fate of those tribes which resisted them—cities burned, people hunted."

"Yes, individual tribes," Ellory said steadily. "But what if many tribes resisted them? You and the Quoise and the Jendra and all the others—"

"The Quoise!" burst in Mal Radnor. "But they are our enemies!"

Stone-age psychology again—a thousand years of it. Ellory went on patiently.

"Your enemies? Which is the greater enemy, they or the Antarkans? For a thousand years your little states have been bickering with one another, wearing each other down. The Antarkans have reaped in the meantime. Wherever a little spark of revolt flamed, they quenched it. But could they quench a big flame? One that involved dozens of united tribes, numbering millions of fighting men? Could they?"

Ellory was applying debating technique, learned three thousand years ago. Present a question whose answer undermined the foundation of your opponent, like a planted bomb. Demand an answer.

"Could they?" he insisted. "Mal Radnor, you're a military man. If you had a million fighting men at your back, could the Antarkans vanquish you?"

Mal Radnor gasped at the sheer thought.

"With such an army," he said excitedly, "I could do much! I could—" He stopped, as though the prospect dizzied him.

"BUT where to gather such an army?" Sem Onger shook his old head sagely. "You are new among us, Humrelly. You do not know of our age-long enmities between tribes. Your eloquence would mean nothing among other tribes. The Quoise, if you spoke alliance to them, would slay you at the first word, not knowing you as we do. And so with all the other peoples. Even if you bore a charmed life, you would speak years before achieving your aim."

Jon Darm nodded. "Alliance! Unity! The very thoughts dizzy us. It is like a queer dream, Humrelly."

As queer a dream, Humrelly reflected, as the thought of a world state had been to the fighting nations of his twentieth century.

Mal Radnor sighed as if seeing an enchanting vista fade into nothingness.

"A million men at my back! Ah, Humrelly, that is magic even you cannot perform!"

Ellory realized he had struck a real snag this time.

Preach a gospel of unity among warring, Stone-age tribes? Launch the new-born thought of empire in one sweep? In the 20th century, it would have been as easy as making the rounds in London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, Washington, and airily suggesting that they all form a nice, sweet little brotherhood, under one government. It might come about of itself, in this Stone age, in time. But time is slow.

Ellory knew he was perhaps a thousand years ahead of history.

If he had radio, he might do it. His voice, cast over a spidery network, creating mass spirit—if only that one thing had remained from the dead past! Here, he would have to plod from tribe to tribe, like a mad preacher.

Ellory's shoulders sagged. The Lords of Antarka would rule long after his natural death, most likely.

He started. Sharina had touched his arm.

"Humrelly, you won't give up?" Her eyes were pleading. "There must be a way. I believe in you! In such a short time, you have done so much already—won a war for us. You can do greater things. Even, perhaps, defeat the Lords of Antarka—some day!"

Ellory looked at her lovely face. She had inspired him once before, there at the ruins, with a subtle power. She inspired him once again.

Something leaped into his mind. So stupendous was the thought that he consigned it to the privacy of his mind for the time being.

He asked only one question, facing Mal Radnor. "Is the army disbanded?"

"We will begin tomorrow, sending the men back to their homes and farms throughout the land—"

"You will not begin tomorrow," said Ellory tersely. "Tomorrow, in the square, I'll address them, and all the people!"

Jon Darm looked up, half angered.

"What is the meaning of this, Humrelly? I am chief!"

"But I'm the Warlord of Norak, by your own hand and decree this day!" reminded Ellory evenly. "Trust me, Jon Darm. I will explain tomorrow."

THAT night found Ellory in the deserted, empty crypt in the Kaatskills, watching the shadows of flickering candlelight on the stone walls. He had come here to think, alone.

Thoughts more grave and serious than any since his awakening burned through his mind. Fate had thrown him at the crossroads of history. Each little decision of his from now on would echo down through ages. He knew that as certainly as he knew his name.

One breathless thought loomed gigantically—the thought that had been born just a few hours before. Empire! Military empire—forged by blood and sword!

Sweeping out with a metal-armed horde, conquering, welding all the little tribal states into a mighty nation! That was the one way to do it. Perhaps all the land once known as America could be brought under his banner. But not for self-glorification. Only to defy the Lords of Antarka.

Ellory paced up and down, and ghosts from the past paced with him—Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon. But none had had so lofty a *casus belli*. The cost: lives and temporary suffering among the Stone-age people. The reward: their eventual release from the yoke of Antarka.

Did he dare start it?

He felt suddenly young, inexperienced, crushed by responsibility. Who was he, a common enough mortal from the twentieth century, to lead the fiftieth century to better things? If only he could invoke statesmen from the past for guidance!

What about the glowing wax? And his dream of launching science? Might that not be the wiser, safer course, instead of loosing the dogs of war?

But that, again, might take years and years, or might never materialize. If it had been so hard to make even a few blunt iron things, how much longer would it take to produce all the finer implements of a mechanical civilization? And that was on the assumption, first, that he somehow solved the metal-and-power question. And perhaps, before he gained a good start, the Antarkans would step in and destroy his work, jealous of this threat of budding science.

Back and forth his thoughts swung, as the long night hours passed.

His the decision to make—his alone! Not a whisper from the past to help him. The crypt was silent, desolate, symbol of how remotely lost were the world and environment of his birth.

A new world—a new problem!

And then, like a sound through the halls of time, he seemed to hear a faint cry—the cry, perhaps, of billions of buried dead who had been oppressed. The cry of those who had died martyrs against tyranny. And who would fight again, if alive now.

There was only one course, that cry told him, regardless of consequences. Empire among the people with whom his life was entwined! Empire to throw against the might of Antarka! At whatever cost!

Ellory made this decision as the first crimson tints of dawn stole into the eastern sky. As he rode his horse through the chill morning air, quick plans ran through his mind.

First and foremost—lighting the spark in Jon Darm and his people.

AT noon, Homer Ellory stood on the front balcony of the Royal House, overlooking a sea of faces. Directly before him, in the square, stood the twenty thousand fighting men whom he had armed with steel, and whom he had fought with. Beyond, filling all the streets, were the populace, for the word had gone around

like wildfire that the man from the past would speak publicly for the first time.

Back of Ellory, Sem Onger leaned against the balustrade, mumbling to himself skeptically about "voices cast for a thousand miles, by radio", which he had just read about in one of the crypt's books. Mal Radnor and Sharina stood together silently.

Jon Darm raised a hand and utter quiet came over the assemblage.

"Our guest from the past needs no introduction," he said simply. "He wishes to address us all." The chief stepped back with a wondering look at Ellery.

"People of the fiftieth century," said Ellory, his voice carrying clearly over the still air. "I came from a time that knew evils as well as good things. Humankind has always been faced with problems. And you have a problem today as great or greater than any in history. The tyranny of Antarka!"

He said it boldly, bluntly. Oratory would confuse their Stone-age minds. The plain truth would impress them most, light that spark he knew lay ready for fanning.

A murmur arose in the crowd and died as it waited his next words.

"For a thousand years the Antarkans have robbed you of young men and girls, and food supplies. You and the other tribes. By what right? By no right that any of you believes, deep in your hearts. Many of you have seen your sons and daughters taken away, to serve these self-appointed masters. And much of your toil in the fields is to feed them. You carry an invisible burden with you all your lives!"

His voice rose a note. "Why? Why? Have you ever asked yourselves that?"

The answering murmur from the crowd, louder now, proved that they had.

"Must it go on for another thousand years?" Ellory pursued. "Your sons to slavery, your daughters to worse, your food tribute to mouths that speak of you as worms? It should be stopped—and can be. But only by united effort, along with the Quoise, the Jendra and all the other tribes."

Quickly he added: "Who are your greater enemies—the Quoise or the Lords of Antarka?"

Crowds, as had been the way of crowds through history, are won easily. Ellory was a little amazed at the chorused bellow that came back:

"The Lords of Antarka!"

"There is only one way to achieve unity with the Quoise and other tribes, against the common enemy."

Ellory's knuckles whitened as he gripped the railing over which he leaned tensely.

"By conquering them! The army of Norak, invincible with metal weapons, must sweep out and defeat all opposition, and later unite them under one commander. Before this great army of millions, the Lords of Antarka must yield!"

Blank silence greeted Ellory.

Back of him, he heard the gasps of his companions. It was a fateful moment, and Ellory shivered. He tried to say more, but his tongue stuck.

Jon Darm's voice hissed angrily at his side. "Humrelly! What have you said? You—"

"Father, he's right!" It was Sharina's voice.

"You are not so startled, Jon Darm," cackled old Sem Onger. "You were thinking the same all night yourself! I know, I know, for in your youth you had ideas, as I had, and others of us. But we were afraid. Humrelly is not afraid!"

Mal Radnor sprang forward suddenly.

"Freedom from the Lords of Antarka!" he yelled, his young face alight. "Who will follow our Warlord, Humrelly, in this great cause?"

The hushed silence of the audience was broken. Twenty thousand metal weapons flashed in the sun as the army acclaimed its new leader with a thunderous cheer. Back of them, the crowd joined in the din.

Ellory was amazed with the suddenness of it all. He dimly realized that a thousand years of oppression had come to a head. He had lit the spark that, fate willing, would blow distant Antarka off the

face of Earth, as a ruling power. About him had settled the cloak of conquest, and already, faintly, he could hear the tramp, tramp, tramp of marching feet. . . .

TWO weeks later, Ellory and Mal Radnor had their last dinner, on the eve of their venture, with Jon Darm and his daughter, and Sem Onger. The latter, old and philosophical, ate the heartiest.

"Come, come," he chided them all. "Eat and be less solemn. Our cause is just, our plans careful. I will continue making metal weapons, in the ruins. Humrelly and Mal Radnor will lead our legions to victory. The Antarkans, if by chance they observe a battle, will think it another border war. You, Jon Darm, will soon be governing chief of a great land. You, Sharina—"

He paused, then: "You have yet to take in marriage the future chief of this land, freed from Antarka!"

Ellory glared at Sem Onger, for a meddling old fool, but Mal Radnor spoke up.

"After this great campaign," he said slowly, "time enough to think of such matters."

In a gesture little short of magnificent, the young chieftan had left the matter open. Ellory did not know what to think. He was at the point of jumping up, forcing the issue, one way or another, but hesitated. Would it be wise, at this time, with so much ahead? Perhaps the less said the better.

He rose, gripping a wine glass.

"A toast to success!" he proposed. "And to the downfall of Antarka!"

The five drank silently, caught by the spirit of the moment.

CHAPTER XIII

CONQUEST

EVENTS began to move swiftly. To Homer Ellory, it was like the sweep of history in some intangible book he was reading. He felt himself curiously apart from it, a pawn in a game played by the gods who molded destiny from the clay of human affairs.

Followed by its wagon trains of supplies and camp attendants, the army of Norak crossed the Hudson River and marched south. The Quoise state was Ellory's first objective, in his empire building. As he had surmised the Quoise border patrol, dismayed, fell back sullenly before the invaders, without presenting opposition. They wished no second taste of metal-armed might.

Under Mal Radnor's guidance, Ellory led his legion to the capital city of the Quoise. The night before they entered, Ellory went over their campaign plans with the young chieftan.

"We'll strike down the Atlantic seaboard, defeating whatever armies oppose us," he summed it up.

He opened the Atlas taken from the crypt's library, to a map of the eastern states. Previously, with Sem Onger's knowledge, he had blocked in the main tribal states, as they now existed. A thick black charcoal line snaked southward, passing through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina and Georgia. It was to be their conquering line of march.

Mal Radnor stared with never-failing wonder.

"I can hardly believe, Humrelly, that it shows every river, mountain and plain in our path! How could the men of your time perceive all that, and record it on such a small space?"

"I'll explain some other time," smiled Ellory. "But the map, I think, still holds, even if made three thousand years ago. Topography changes little during such a short tick of the geological clock."

He placed his finger at the end of the black line, where it broke off abruptly at the Georgia-Florida state boundary. "From here, we'll strike northwest—"

He began again. "I'm ahead of myself. One step at a time. First, we must conquer these eastern states, and absorb part of their fighting strength."

His eyes narrowed.

"There is only one policy to use—the threat of force!"

He applied his Martian policy the following day, in the capital city of the Quoise. As previously planned, Mal Radnor paraded his entire army, regiment by regiment, through the city square. Metal swords and pikes were upraised in the sunlight—those same weapons that had played such havoc with the Quoise forces.

Standing beside the Quoise chief, Ellory watched the reaction in his face, and saw healthy respect there. Now was the time to declare himself.

"Your land is now a subject state to Norak," he delivered his ultimatum. "You will send envoys to Jon Darm, promising fealty. Either that"—he forced a savage tone—"or we will burn this city to the ground and enslave your people!"

The Quoise chief grunted, stoically hiding his fear.

"I will send the envoys," he acceded with little delay.

"Secondly," Ellory demanded, "five thousand of your picked troops are to join our forces."

The man looked at him curiously. "Who are you? It is rumored that you are a Lord from the Past! And that you have magic powers almost equal to those of—" He paused.

"Of the Lords of Antarka?" Ellory finished for him. "I am from the past, and have those powers. And I am an enemy of Antarka!"

He left, with this seed planted in the chief's mind, to sow the seed further.

NOW at the head of twenty-five thousand men, Ellory and Mal Radnor swung west, to the land of the Jendra, formerly eastern Pennsylvania. In three pitched battles, the Jendra army was routed, leaving their capital city vulnerable.

Ellory again delivered his ultimatum, and again left with his army swelled by five thousand.

The new men, outnumbered by the original Noraks, could neither revolt nor refuse to battle. A strict sentry system, with orders to kill on sight, discouraged desertions. Two other factors Ellory foresaw would weld the new army more firmly as time went on. One, that as they always attacked new states— as much hereditary "enemies" as the Noraks—the new recruits would fight wholeheartedly. Second, in the heat of battle, men were apt to forget why or for whom they were fighting, and know only that there was an enemy to destroy.

Ellory turned south now, through conquered Jendra, skirting the ruins of Philadelphia.

"I went to school there for a while," he mused, with a pang of memory. "Nineteenth Street, Rittenhouse Square, the Taproom at Nineteenth and Locust—"

He sighed. "Three thousand and sixty years ago!"

"What are you saying, Humrelly?" Mal Radnor peered at him.

"Nothing, nothing." Ellory pointed. "But look, Mal Radnor. More half-rusted remains of what were called skyscrapers in my time. More oxide heaps. More iron, when needed, for our growing army!"

Every now and then a wagon came, from Sem Onger, loaded with new metal weapons. These Ellory distributed among the new units, trusting them to be loyal since they had little choice.

March, march, march!

The pound of hooves and feet, the clang of metal, the hoarse shouts of conquering men were in Ellory's ears constantly. The birth-cries of an empire! Armies and states fell like leaves before their invincible march to the south. A certain jubilance raced through Ellory's veins, like a strong intoxicant.

Napoleon! Caesar! Genghis Khan!

He knew now how they had felt, conquering the worlds of their time. He was the Alexander of the fiftieth-century! He was writing "empire" across the page of history, closing an age, opening another. Millions upon millions of people soon would acknowledge him warlord.

Ellory walked on air, drinking the potent liquors of power. That was at times.

At other times the flow of blood, the

brute orgy of fighting, the ugly passions let loose, would overwhelm him. He would be almost sick. Behind its mask of glory, war was a sordid, stupid thing. It was horrible to see men killing one another. And he, Homer Ellory, had started this. On his soul it would rest, if he failed.

His moods swung between these extremes, like a pendulum. But the balancing thought burned clear in his mind—the eventual rebellion against Antarka. That alone upheld him, subdued the feeling of power and the ache of his conscience.

March, march, march!

Armies were routed at the first encounter now, and the ever-growing juggernaut rolled south. The burdensome details of increased organization fell on Ellory's shoulders — conscripting supplies and wagons, forming new battalions, picking officers. Ellory had led the way, with Mal Radnor, into every battle so far, but he realized it had become a mere formality. Mal Radnor had secretly organized a picked cavalry troop which flanked Ellory through every encounter.

"A bodyguard!" Ellory accused a little hotly, finally. "Since when do I need protection? I showed you how to use the first sword. I want elbow room after this, do you hear?"

"You are too important to lose, Humrelly," returned Mal Radnor gravely. "You are none the less a man. The bodyguard will continue."

Ellory gave in, and went a step further.

"Sensible thing to do, of course. But I won't ride to battle at all, any more. I'm forming a general staff behind the lines. And you, Mal Radnor"—he grinned in revenge——"I pick first of all!"

It was Mal Radnor's turn to be stung, as though his manhood had been challenged. "No, Humrelly! I must lead—"

"Lead, nothing!" snorted Ellory. "The army can win now, blindfolded. You know that. We have work to do, plenty of it. We have to begin thinking of how to handle the biggest army that you or I have ever seen before!" . . .

Somewhere in North Carolina, a month later, a rider from the north slipped off his horse to deliver a message from Sem Onger. Ellory read, in charcoal lettering on bark:

Greetings, Humrelly.

I have used the last of the oxide heaps in these ruins. Thus I will not be able to deliver more weapons. Do you need more? Jon Darm has received already twelve envoys from conquered states. He is organizing, as you outlined, a system of communications with their capitals and ours.

Sharina joins me in wishing you continued success.

Sharina! Ellory conjured up a vision of her lovely features. Cool and restful, it seemed to be a symbol of better things to come, after this fever of conquest was over. Dimly, too, the exotic patrician face of Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra, danced in his mind. When would he meet her again, and under what circumstances?

Sooner, it chanced, than he expected.

He wrote an answer to Sem Onger, telling him to exploit the ruins of Philadelphia for iron. Pitiful gleanings, from the mighty steel industry of the twentieth century, but enough to tie the chain of empire in this second Stone Age.

CHAPTER XIV

"FREEDOM FROM ANTARKA!"

A MESSENGER came from the south one day. The message from his chief, to Ellory's astonishment, yielded his state —in advance. Whenever the "Warlord of Norak" wished, he would send a peace envoy.

"Mal Radnor, how do you explain this?"

"News travels fast, in this world, by word of mouth. Wanderers, nomads, beggars, of no particular tribe, shuttle through the lands, carrying tales. Your fame has spread before you, Humrelly!"

Like the days of King Arthur, Ellory mused, when bards and troubadours recited the deeds of knights and wizards.

"Undoubtedly this chief realizes his

army will fall, as all the others have," continued Mal Radnor. "Thus, he wisely surrenders his state, without shedding needless blood."

Ellory straightened up. Florida was the surrendered area.

"Then, Mal Radnor, our first step is done. We are now ready to turn west and north, for a longer campaign! A territory fifteen hundred miles long is already under our wing!"

Mal Radnor was slowly shaking his head, in sudden awe. "Little did I realize when I grasped the handle that would awake you, a few months ago, that I was bringing this about! You are a great man, Humrelly, as Sharina said—"

He stopped, and they were both embarrassed before one another. Mal Radnor scuffed at the ground with his toe. Ellory knew what he was thinking. That the same twist of the handle had also, for the young chieftain, affected a personal phase of his life. Ellory could think of nothing to say.

Mal Radnor straightened his shoulders.

"Where you lead, Humrelly," he said quietly, "I follow."

In his atlas that evening, by campfire glow, Ellory traced a thick black line that shouldered through former Alabama, Tennessee, skirted the Alleghenies north into Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois. He ran his charcoal stub to the southern tip of Lake Michigan, where great Chicago had once stood—his second objective.

And what could stop him now? He had an army of sixty thousand seasoned fighters, small in twentieth-century terms but enormous in the unfederated Stone Age. Two months to take the Eastern seaboard. Perhaps another three months, at the most, to smash through to Chicago. One third of America would then be his. And the other two thirds ripe for taking!

In nine months, before the Lords of Antarka again swarmed out of their isolated shell, a united America at his back. An eager, reminiscent smile rested on his lips. There could be only one name for it—The United States of America!

"Humrelly!" Serious lines were etched into Mal Radnor's face in the fire's light.

"The army worries me. I have heard mutterings. The foreign units now outnumber the Norak nucleus two to one. So far, mutual enemies, they have not banded for revolt. But at any moment it may happen!"

Ellory pondered for a moment. This problem had become acute.

"It's time," he said slowly, "to reveal our cause—their cause, too. A war-cry will do it. 'Freedom from Antarka!' Have our Norak forces sing this, on the march and in battle."

THE next day, strategically placed columns of Norak troops roared that chorus to the skies—"Freedom from Antarka!" Jendra, Quoise, and the soldiers of other conquered tribes listened in amazed, sullen silence. Ellory hoped he had done the right thing. Or had he broken the last possible shred of loyalty, with this chant against a thousand-year institution? Would they accept him as a leader against tyranny—or as a madman?

"Freedom from Antarka!"

The war-cry, still confined to the Noraks, rang out when the next tribe opposed their advance. Ellory saw that the foreign units fought only half-heartedly. In places they hung back.

Ellory groaned to himself. He had created confusion, hesitation, rather than unity. The opposing army, thirty thousand fierce, half-mulatto tribesman of the south, drove Ellory's disorganized army back.

For the first time, defeat faced him. And one defeat might destroy all he had won.

Mal Radnor, watching from their vantage behind the lines, turned a grave face. "Unless a miracle happens, Humrelly—"

He drew out his sword. "I go to battle!"

His black charger leaped away, thundering down the slope. But Ellory's horse reached the battle zone neck and neck with Mal Radnor's.

"Freedom from Antarka!"

Yelling their own war-cry, the two commanders plunged into the thickest melee.

Toughened by his outdoor life, Ellory threw every ounce of his brawn into slashing, stabbing, cutting down the enemy. For a moment a cluster of newly inspired fighters formed around them, halting the opposing army's advance.

For a moment. Then they were forced back. The foreign units, turning tail, left the full brunt of attack on the outnumbered Noraks. Only a miracle . . .

Suddenly, as though their war-cry had invoked it, an Antarkan airship dropped from the sky, circling widely over the battlefield. Its orange-red rocket spurts vied with the flash of metal in the sun.

Ellory sensed the electrifying effect among the battlers. He felt the dull fear that arose in all the hearts of these Stone Age men—on both sides. And dull, futile hatred. Though the Antarkans were never known to interfere in their wars, it took the whole meaning of battle away. Up above were the real masters, whichever side won. The fighting became mechanical, dispirited.

Ellory's mind quickened. There was a chance now, at this crucial moment—

"Freedom from Antarka!"

His bellow rang out clearly in the battle lull. The Norak forces took up the cry thunderously. And, the miracle happened—fire struck in the minds of the foreign units. They turned, swords upraised once more, battling now against what the ship in the sky symbolized.

"Freedom from Antarka!" roared from sixty thousand throats. Ellory's army smashed full force against the opposing tribesmen. They broke and fled, within minutes. Overhead, the Antarkan ship circled like an all-seeing eye.

"Thanks!" Ellory waved up to it. "You don't know it, but you won the day for us—to your own loss!"

Mal Radnor, at his side, frowned.

"I hope they leave—"

Ellory frowned too. Why didn't they? It must be just a trifling border war, to them, viewed in a moment of idle curiosity. They couldn't have heard the war-cry against them, above their rocket blasts. Had they noticed how large an army lay below? Their metal weapons—that was it! They disliked their Stone Age subjects taking this step into the dawn of a metal age. Sharp worry seized Ellory. If they landed and investigated . . .

And they did. The ship arced into a landing glide and came to a stop a hundred yards in advance of the previous battle-line. The under jets incinerated a few corpses, and a landing wheel heartlessly rolled over one figure that hadn't been a corpse. Wounded, the man had tried to crawl out of its path.

Ellory cursed and urged his horse on.

Mal Radnor, following, spoke warningly.

"Careful what you say, Humrelly. This is not the time to be exposed."

CHAPTER XV

ERMAINE WARNS

THE hatch of the ship opened and Ellory caught his breath. Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra, stepped into the sun, a vision of loveliness against the grim background of the battlefield. Her face drew up in a distasteful grimace, at the odors and sights.

"How ugly this is! Sometimes I think"—she half-turned addressing her male companions—"we should stop these butcherings. But that would be a long, arduous, thankless mission." She shrugged.

"And you care neither one way nor another!" thought Ellory.

"Which of you is commander?" she asked, facing them.

"I am," said Ellory stiffly.

She glanced at him. "It is customary to bow the head," she reminded him coldly, "when greeting the Lords of Antarka."

Ellory complied, flushing.

"A most stiff-necked one. And get off your horses. I do not like to look up at you." She watched them dismount. "Now a question or two. Why are you using so many men in this war?"

"To win the quicker, Lady Ermaine," spoke up Mal Radnor quickly.

"And those metal weapons. I suppose"—again an aside—"the secret has gone around. Or—"

She transferred her gaze to Ellory suddenly, peering closely. Her blue eyes widened.

"Humrelly! You again?"

Ellory had hoped she wouldn't recognize him, through the grime and dried sweat of the battle. Now he cursed himself for taking a chance.

"Yes, Lady Ermaine," he mumbled, wondering how this would end.

Quick anger leaped into her face.

"I forbade the further use of metal weapons once," she said icily. "You have disobeyed me!"

"But Lady Ermaine," parried Mal Radnor, "it is one of your promised rules that you do not interfere in our wars—"

"In this instance we must," she retorted imperiously. Suspicion crept into her voice, to Ellory's dread. "You have the air of concealing something. And what are your Norak forces doing down here? You have no border dispute in this region!"

"A sea-commerce war," murmured Mal Radnor vaguely. "The Thakal people seized one of our vessels at their port. We came here by sea, for revenge."

How thin the story was Ellory realized by the trembling of Mal Radnor's body. But strangely, instead of pursuing the subject, the Lady of Lillamra abruptly faced Ellory.

She was at once imperious and beautiful; a challenge and a deadly menace. The battles he had waged with these outland tribes became as nothing to the perplexed warfare of mind and heart and senses that Ellory now faced within himself. Tensely he heard her speak.

"You were a common herdsman before. So you said. Now you are commander of an army! Did you lie to me?"

"He—" began Mal Radnor, but the girl of Antarka silenced him with a gesture.

"Let him speak for himself!"

Fidgeting under the cross-examination, Ellory thought rapidly. The ice was thin.

"I lied to you," he said bluntly.

"Why?" Her blue eyes were on him unblinkingly.

He did not hesitate.

"Because your beauty, first seen, strikes men dumb and confuses their tongues!" he returned in a low voice.

ELLORY, watching, saw the momentary flash of pleasure over her face.

"What a pretty little speech!" she said, mockingly. "It is not usual to hear it from one of you Outlanders. And I suspect it!"

Flattery had failed. Or had it? She was staring at him now with a veiled interest.

"There is something strange about you," she murmured. "Your manner, the look in your eyes, your accent—"

"I have a defect of speech," Ellory said weakly, remembering he had once used that excuse.

"Also occasioned by my blinding beauty?" Her laugh came again. "No, you are a more subtle character than that, Humrelly. You stand so straight and stiff. A humble posture does not come easily to you, does it? In ways, you are more like one of us, or like one of the Ancients might have been."

She was peering at him, and Ellory thought she had finally penetrated his secret. But staring back into those soft blue eyes, he held his tongue. She expected no answer. She seemed to be searching for something in his eyes, and a slow smile dimpled her cheeks.

"You did not lie this time!" she said cryptically.

Abruptly, then, she turned to the ship. "We will go."

She turned back.

"It will be wise for you," she said, as though it were an afterthought, "to discontinue the use of metal weapons. It will be reported to the Outland Council. They will take stern measures if they find disobedience."

She leaped lightly into the cabin, and from a safe distance, a moment later, Ellory watched the craft lift into the sky and vanish to the south.

"Well done, Humrelly," said Mal Radnor. "Your lies, sweetened with the honey of flattery, tasted as truth to our Lady Ermaine of Lillamra!"

But Ellory knew what she had meant, in that pharse. She had a beauty that confused the tongue! Ellory hadn't lied. A man's senses would reel, if too long in her presence. He realized with a start, hours later, that the entrancing vision of her had lodged unshakably in his mind. Sharina's face, from long absence, faded beside it.

Ellory shook his head annoyedly and turned back to the map, memorizing the route to be followed next day by his great army. A crucial day had passed. Demoralization in the army had changed to a unified *esprit de corps*. The way lay clear.

The way to conquest, empire—freedom for his people. . . . There was a slight stirring at his elbow.

"Are we going to give up our metal weapons, as our Lady Ermaine commanded?" asked Mal Radnor with a knowing smirk.

"What do you think?" Ellory's smile became grim. "But we'll have to watch our step. Hereafter, if an Antarkan ship happens to appear, we'll have the men hide their weapons."

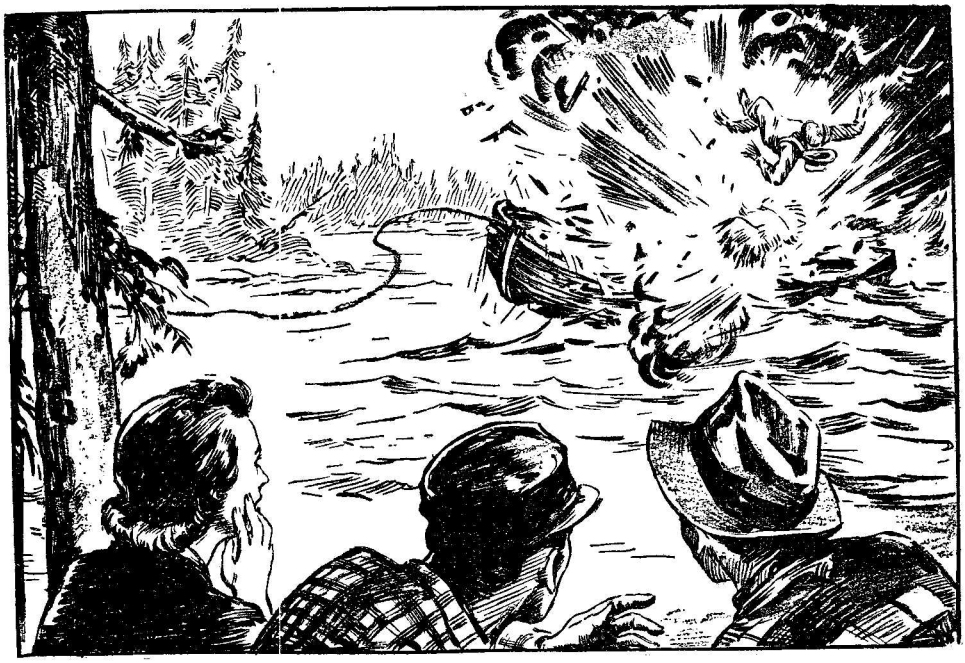
•

"Freedom from Antarka!"

Hurling this defiance to the skies ruled by Antarka, Ellory's empire-building legion marched northwest, no longer an army but a crusade. No longer were they Noraks, Quoise, Jendra and Thakals. Shoulder to shoulder they tramped, united in cause and aim.

Their line of march went forward now with scarcely a break in uniform speed, like a steamroller. Opposing armies broke at the first skirmish. States flanking the line of conquest hastened to sue for peace, fearing the conquerer would turn. Ahead of Ellory, on wings of speech, flew the story of his prowess.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Out on the water the bateau seemed to melt away. A man gasped . . . a woman screamed

Dynamite Boss

By F. M. TIBBOTT

Come log-jam or high water, you can tell pretty exactly what high explosives will do: that is, the regulation kind. But high explosives in skirts are quite another matter

YOU can hear about Joe Obit and Christine Moore in any of the Pine Tree Paper and Lumber Company camps. Anybody will tell you about it, and then very likely ask your opinion; because something is lacking.

To complete the story you'd have to hear about the flier in psychology that York Marlin and Doc Sumner cooked up: an experiment which they and Cap Welch, who was in on the action, kept under their hats.

And their reason for that was sound.

For Marlin and Sumner and Welch all understood that the yard crew ought never to know what they had done. The yard crew in general—and Joe Obit in particular. Joe was the dynamite boss and he had an uncanny aptitude for locating the key log in a jam. Men with that ability are rare. They have to be born with it. And that spring, when delay in getting the drive downriver meant bankruptcy for the company, Joe Obit took on a value that was close to priceless.

But this was an angle that York Marlin didn't foresee. As the company's woods manager he'd had too many immediate troubles to have time for more than a general survey of possible contingencies.

The first catastrophe had happened in March when floods cut heavily into the Pine Tree Paper and Lumber Company's

reserve supply of pulpwood, sweeping away thousands of cords piled on the bank by the company's mills. There were contracts to fill; contracts with penalty clauses.

And to top it off there was the Ajax Paper Company, hovering like a hawk, indulging in sabotage, trying to force a bankruptcy and thereby pick up the Pine Tree Company's timber holdings at their own price.

York Marlin couldn't prove it, but he knew well enough that Ajax was behind the trouble at River's Head. Somebody had taken hammers and chisels and wedges to the machinery on the alligators, those huge flat-bottomed tow boats that were fitted with engines and winches and mile-long cables to haul the booms of pulpwood and timber down the lakes to Number One Dam at River's Head where the stuff was sluiced into the river.

If he hadn't sent his bosses and a skeleton crew in there two weeks ahead of the usual time there wouldn't have been any drive that season. But the engineers and their assistants got there before irreparable damage had been done and they got the alligators in commission by the time the first booms were ready for towing.

And then everybody from York Marlin down prayed that what wind they had would come from the north. The alligators hadn't the power to drag the two-acre booms of logs against the wind; and their first break of good luck was a northwest blow that took the ice out of the lakes and then settled down to a gentle breeze.

In the first three days of open water on the lakes the alligators jerked six thousand cords to the headworks at Number One Dam: just double what they usually figured on, and half as much again as York Marlin had to average this spring. So he was feeling pretty good that morning in early May as he stood on the walk-way at the dam and watched the steady sluicing.

From out on the lake the dam's superstructure, consisting of gatehouse and storage space, looked like a long Noah's Ark. It vibrated from the rush of a twenty-foot head of water through the open gates. And down through the central gates went the logs, long stuff and short stuff all mixed in together. They came down between the sluicing booms, pushed by the crew with long slender pickpoles till the suck of the current caught them.

The sluicing booms made a great V, running out from the dam to the headworks; and out there men tramped around capstans pulling into the V each boom of logs brought down by the alligators. In the V and beyond it were acres of logs, brown-backed and yellow-white at the ends; and on beyond them the water rippled, sparkling, blue and green, two miles of it, to the farther shore where the black growth lifted tier on tier to the mountains.

IT WAS a clear morning and York Marlin stood on the walk-way with his nose to the breeze, his hands jammed in the pockets of his open mackinaw, his old felt hat tilted over one eye, a pipe in his mouth only a shade or two darker than the brown of his face.

His eyes roved here and there, twinkling, blue. They fixed on a fisherman coming along the embankment road from Oram Caldwell's River's Head Camp a few minutes walk up the shore. The man's faded canvas hunting coat and riding breeches had a comfortable look, and his slough hat and easy gait and the fly-rod and net that he carried completed a picture of utter contentment.

York smiled as he watched him and then went to the end of the gatehouse to meet him. Since the first day of the drive, Doctor Sumner was the only fisherman at the camp who bothered to carry a rod; the river was so full of water and logs there simply was no chance to fish.

York raised his voice above the roar of the river, "You aren't wishing me bad luck, are you?"

Doctor Sumner's eyebrows lifted a little. Then he glanced at his rod and net and his smile matched his weathered coat and breeches; it wrinkled the corners of his eyes and gave his wide mouth a whimsical cant.

"You know I'm not," he said. "I just like the feel of 'em." He laid the rod and net on a pile of boards and looked down at the white-crested river and the dark logs leaping in the spray.

"You're certainly pushing 'em," he said. "How many booms so far?"

"Finishing the thirteenth." York grinned and held out crossed fingers. "And if we could keep this pace we'd be through by the end of the month. But we can't. Sixty thousand cords in thirty days—" he shook his head. "But we've got to begin feeding it to the mill by the tenth of June, which is plenty soon."

"I thought there were only forty thousand cords," Sumner said.

"That's four-foot stuff," York told him. "And there's ten million feet of saw logs." He squinted at the boiling current where twenty-odd feet of a log came whirling up like a broom handle and slammed back into the water. "That's what I'm afraid of now," he said. "When those long sticks get to jumping like that they can make a jam in a couple of minutes that'll take us hours, or even days, to break. I wish it was all short stuff."

Sumner smiled. "Keep your fingers crossed and knock on—" He stopped as the gong that was hooked to the gatehouse telephone started clanging.

The sluicing boss ran up the ladder from the booms and into the gatehouse. Presently he came out on the walk-way, and yelled, "Hold it! Drop the gate boom!" Then he came around, and said to York, "They're hung up at the head of Misery, and they want Joe. You know where he is?"

"He's down at the chutes. Call him up and tell him to come out to the road and I'll pick him up in five minutes." York turned to Sumner. "Talk of the devil," he said. Then he grinned. "Well, you can get in some fishing while we're shut down, anyhow."

"No, I think I'll ride down with you," Sumner told him. "I like to see Joe operate on a jam. He'd have made a swell surgeon."

They went down the embankment and got in an old touring car that was parked in front of the wangan. The car had thirty-six-inch wheels to give it clearance over rocks, and its heavy-duty springs made it ride like a truck. They bounced over rocks and churned through mud. The frost wasn't out of the ground yet and every day it heaved rocks higher and made soft spots softer in the Carry Road.

The car ground along in second gear and its noise drowned out the roar of the river. The Carry Road ran through a tunnel of black growth and white birch, paralleling the river after a fashion but seldom in sight; and overhead, angling back and forth across the road, ran the river telephone line with branches here and there to lookout points on the river.

Joe Obit and a rodless fisherman from the camp were standing beside the road when the car came in sight of the path to the Chutes.

"There's that guy, Bagley, again," York said from the side of his mouth. "The way he gets around on the river you'd think he was an old-timer up here."

Sumner smiled. "He's having the time of his life. He told me he'd never been in the big woods before and he had to see it all."

"He's seeing it, all right," York muttered. "He's under foot everywhere."

THE car slowed and stopped beside the men; Joe, all woodsman and river-man, from his corked boots to his dinky round hat; and Bagley, rigged up in the latest plaids and canvas-topped rubbers, the city sport. Joe opened the rear door of the car, kicked the mud from his corks and swung himself in without touching the floor.

"Do you mind if I go with you?" Bagley asked. "Obit tells me there's a log jam down the river, and I've never seen one."

"Hop in," York told him. "But look out you don't go through the top—this road isn't any boulevard."

The car churned on; down past the branch road that led to the outlet where the river bulged out to form Craw Pond; down past Number Two Dam where Craw

Pond narrowed back to the river again; down to the path that went in to the foot of the Corkscrew and to Misery Pool just below it. They left the car there and took the path to the river. Coming out on the bank, York stopped and said softly:

"*Oh,* oh!"

Almost as far up the river as the last bend in the Corkscrew there was no water in sight. Logs choked the river, long stuff and short stuff, piled up in a tangled mass that hung out over the deep water in Misery Pool in a ten-foot face. Spread out above the face a dozen men were picking futilely with cant dogs. And under their feet the roar of the river was hushed to a chuckling gurgle.

The crew boss hurried ashore.

"I never see the beat of it," he said to York, and shook his head. "It started up in the Corkscrew and we picked it loose. But them long sticks kep' hangin' up. We worked it down to here but the' was too much stuff comin' down, and before we could stop 'em sluicing at Number Two she was hung for fair."

The crew boss' anxious look cleared at York's half smile and nod, and he turned to Joe Obit. "She must be hung on them deep boulders, Joe," he said.

But Joe didn't appear to hear him. He was looking at the tangle from half-closed eyes, his jaws working slowly on a wad of tobacco that swelled a copper-brown cheek. In repose his face was as smooth as a boy's; a homely face, broad yet lean, and a nose that was too small and pudgy for his wide-spaced eyes. The intentness of his expression, now, gave him a look of forty; but the company books showed his age as twenty-six.

His eyes shifted from point to point, along the face of the jam and upriver. Then he went down the bank and out on the logs, the crew boss at his heels. They moved slowly along the face of the jam, stopping and then going on.

They reached the far side and worked back; and near the center, some ten feet from the face, Joe indicated a spot and set the crew to work. He watched them a few minutes then came ashore and went over to a clump of alders and cut a twelve-foot pole with the knife he wore at his belt. He trimmed the pole and carried it up to the shack. York and Sumner and Bagley went to the shack and watched him tie several sticks of dynamite to the large end of the pole. He crimped a length of fuse in a dynamite cap and set the cap in one of the sticks.

"Matches?" York asked.

Joe fished a tin box from his pocket and shook it.

"All set, I guess." He grinned, hitched up his suspenders, and dropped down the bank. The extra hitch he had given them made his wide white suspenders bite into his shoulders and gave him the appearance of being suspended in a breeches buoy.

He swung out to where the crew was working. When they had completed the hole down between the logs to his liking he waved them ashore, lighted a match and cupped his hands. Bluish gray smoke spun from the end of the fuse as he lowered the charge, working it deeper and deeper with the pole.

He stood there a moment, gave the pole a final shove and then came leisurely ashore.

A muffled *whur-room* came from the river; water spouted and chunks of wood flew; a cord or two of four-foot stuff spewed from the face; the jam creaked and moved, and settled again, quivering uneasily.

The crew dropped down the bank with their cant dogs but Joe held up a hand and stopped them. He cut another alder pole and rigged a heavier charge and went out on the jam alone. Logs groaned and shifted here and there as if the jam were going out. Joe stood poised, waiting. The movement stopped and he went on.

There was still a hole where he had placed the first charge. He peered into it, stepped carefully to the farther side, streaked a match across his pants, lighted the fuse and lowered the pole.

An instant later the log he was standing on snapped sideways. It moved so quickly

it left him hanging in the air. He jabbed down with the pole, but there seemed to be no bottom; and he dropped into the hole, out of sight, on top of the charge of dynamite.

IT HAPPENED so quickly, so unexpectedly, that every man there was shocked into immobility. York's eyes strained at the hole. He couldn't believe that Joe wouldn't come out of it in an agile scramble. But the moments passed and then the logs slowly closed over the hole. One of the crew cried out, and the horror of it beaded York with a cold sweat.

The charge exploded with a dull concussion. The logs around it shifted, creaking, and a tremor ran through the jam. It began to move. Then a man cried:

"There he is!"

And out in the pool, yards from the face of the jam, York saw Joe Obit's threshing arms and white-suspendered shoulders. The crew fell down the bank and into the water, directly in the path of those mangling tons of logs. They made a living chain and snatched Joe ashore and boosted him up the bank; and the last man was hit on the foot by a whirling stick of pulp-wood.

Joe's face was a brownish gray. His mouth hung slack and his eyes rolled. York was kneeling, holding up his head and shoulders; Doc Sumner's stubby fingers were going over him, back and neck and ribs and legs. Joe shook his head, groaned:

"I'm all—huh—all right. I—" he sat forward and retched. He brought up shreds of brown stuff, and York asked, "You hurt inside?"

Joe shook his head. "No-o. I—huh—" he retched again. "I just—uh-h-h," he shuddered. "I just swallered my chew."

One of the crew broke out in a hysterical laugh and stopped suddenly. Sumner was pushing back Joe's lids and looking at his eyes. He smiled a little and peered at Joe. "Can you really hear all right?" he asked in a low voice.

Joe nodded, and Sumner shook his head again. "I don't understand it," he said. "The concussion when that dynamite went off should have ruined your ears."

"Oh-h," Joe grinned faintly. "I beat it out. That first shot made a hole out t' the pool and I got my head out just before she went off."

The crew boss let out a gusty breath. "Boy!" he said. "What a squeak! They'll be tellin' about this when I'm gray-headed."

A startled look came over Joe's face. He half rose and then glanced at the river. The logs were making *tunking* sounds as they bucked and shouldered each other; and Joe said to the crew, "You guys better keep 'em moving."

He waited for the men to get back on the job, and then he said to York, "Look, you gotta keep 'em quiet about this. If Christine hears about it, she'll kick-up a row. She—uh-h—" Joe reddened and looked sheepish. "She's scared something'll happen to me on the river."

York looked at him, barely able to hide his amazement. What he'd heard about Joe and Christine this spring had only amused him. He couldn't believe it had gone this far.

"Oh," he said softly, "I didn't know it was like that between you. She—you sure she isn't kidding?"

Joe's eyes narrowed a little. Then he said, "Godfrey, I wish she was—I mean about the river. She—" Joe got redder. "Well, she don't like me to be on the river."

York glanced at Sumner and then at Bagley. Sumner looked thoughtful. Bagley had moved quietly to the bank where he was watching the river. The logs were running free again, and the men were rolling and shoving in those that were hung up on the banks.

"We'll keep 'em quiet," York said.

He called the crew together. "We won't say anything about what happened this morning," he told them. "Not a word about it till the drive gets down. And tell the boys on the other side. I want you to understand that I'm not asking this just for fun. I've got a good reason."

He looked the men over, one by one, and each nodded solemnly and returned to the river. York turned to Joe. "You'd better get out of those clothes. Build a fire in the shack and dry 'em out."

He watched the logs a few minutes and then drove back with Sumner and Bagley to Number One. Bagley went up on the dam, and York took Sumner to the office.

"There's something goin on, Doc," York said. "Can you imagine Christine falling for a guy with a mug like Joe's?"

Sumner smiled. "I've heard of stranger things. But it's had me wondering some, myself."

"THERE'S something going on," York repeated. "This is Christine's third season up here and if there'd been anything between her and Joe before this spring I'd have heard about it. They didn't see each other last winter because Joe's been right here in the woods, and he's too shy with women to make anything like this headway with a gal in the ten days that Christine's been here. There's just one answer to that, Doc; she's gone after him."

Sumner nodded. "It does look something like that," he admitted.

"And I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that I know why."

"Well—I've got an idea, but I hope it isn't the same as yours."

York closed the door, and said in a lowered voice, "You got what he said about Christine not wanting him to work on the river?"

Sumner nodded again. "She's a good head waitress, but it's struck me more than once that she's more interested in tips than she is in the service. She has what I'd call the 'money eye,' and if somebody could use her for a certain piece of work, and offered her enough, I think she'd take it."

"Even to working on Joe to quit this job?" York asked.

"Even that—if the price was right."

"That," York said, "is exactly what I've been thinking." He shook his head. "And if she pulls it off, I'm sunk. And the company's sunk. But I can't go to Joe about it; he'd never believe it. And if I went to Christine—"

"I wouldn't," Sumner said. "There's always the chance that she's really fallen for Joe; it's pretty slim but it's still a chance, and there might be another way of getting around her."

"As how?"

"Well, there's Jaimeson—if Joe isn't too expensive a risk."

York didn't get the connection at first. Then he recalled that Jaimeson, who came up to River's Head Camp every spring, was an insurance broker.

"Oh," he smiled. "Now there's an idea!" He turned it over in his mind and his smile widened. "Accident insurance; and for enough to make Christine's eyes stick out. I'll get it if it costs me a hundred a month! And I'll see Jaimeson about it right now. Coming?"

"No. I'm going to get my rod and sit on a rock and watch the water."

They went out and Sumner took the short cut up over the rocks and York continued on to the embankment road. As he reached it he saw Bagley hurrying from the dam. He didn't want to talk to Bagley and increased his own pace.

He was gratified to see Jaimeson sitting on the main camp porch talking with several other fishermen and guides. He took Jaimeson aside and told him what he wanted and they went to Jaimeson's cabin and filled out an application blank. Then York went around to the help's quarters and looked up Christine.

She seemed nervous and a little pale. Her face seemed sharper and she wasn't, York thought, nearly so pretty when she looked like that. He guessed it was due to a combination of guilty conscience and his sudden coming upon her, and tried to put her at her ease. He smiled, and said:

"Joe told me this morning that you were afraid something might happen to him on the river. Of course there's some danger; but there's just about as much when you cross the street in the city. That's why I carry an accident policy on top of the

company insurance. When Joe told me about you this morning I thought it might ease your mind if I took out the same kind of a policy for him."

Christine shook her head and pressed her lips together. "No," she said.

"But it's a pretty good policy, Christine. It pays ten thousand dollars for accidental death or the loss of both hands or feet, and from that down to a few hundred dollars for things like a cracked rib or a sprained wrist."

YORK watched her as he spoke and thought he caught a glitter in her eyes, but he wasn't sure. He said, "I've just been talking to Mr. Jaimeson who handles insurance; and he's telephoning one of his companies now to put Joe's policy in effect immediately. By noon today Joe will be covered, and if anything happens to him after that, he or somebody will collect anywhere up to ten thousand dollars."

Christine wet her lips and then shook her head again. "No," she said. "It's Joe I want, and I want him just like he is."

"Of course you do; we all do; I don't know what we'd do on the drive without him. But I just wanted you to know that if anything did happen to him—"

"If anything does happen to him," she broke in, "it'll hafta happen t'day. Because he won't be on the river after t'day—not if he listens t' me; and I think he will after what happened this morning!"

York looked at her, startled. "This morning?"

"Yeah," she said tartly. "You know mighty well what happened!"

"Who told you, Christine?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. "That's my business."

York finally came away without any further satisfatcion. He walked thoughtfully back to the dam and found Doctor Sumner on his rock.

"She's deeper than I thought, Doc," he said. "When I told her I was insuring Joe she said she wasn't interested in anything but Joe—just as he was. But when I told her it was for ten thousand I'd almost swear it hit her right where she lives. And Doc, she knows about what happened this morning."

"She what?" Sumner sat up straight.

"That's isn't the worst of it," York said grimly. "She said—she put it something like this: that Joe wouldn't be working on the river after today; that if he listened to her he'd be through, and she thought he would listen to her after what happened this morning."

"What else did she say?"

"Nothing. When I asked her who told her she shut right up. I think she realized that she'd said too much. She was nervous and acted as if somebody'd been talking to her. If I could only be sure of that, I could get somewhere. But the way she spoke of Joe almost made me think she liked him pretty well."

Sumner's brief grin was sympathetic. "Well," he said, "if she does want Joe, you'd better send for another dynamite man."

"If I know where to get one I'd have sent for him already." York shook his head. "No, if I lose Joe, I'll put Cap Welch on the job."

"Cap?"

York nodded. "At least he knows enough about the stuff not to blow anybody up. But I'm not through with Joe yet. If I could just keep him away from Christine, and find out what was behind her interest—"

York paused. "You know, Doc, I'm going to be surprised if Bagley isn't behind this business. I think he was lying when he said this was his first trip in the woods. He's got too good a nose for the trouble spots on the river, and that's where he's been spending his time.

"And there just isn't anybody else who could have told Christine. He followed me when I went up to the camp just now and saw me talk to Jaimeson; and while I was making out Joe's application he could have seen Christine and warned her—maybe even threatened her, or offered to pay her more than anything I offered."

Sumner said: "I'm beginning to think

you're right, York. It certainly fits the pattern. But it does seem to leave us about where we were."

"You're telling me?" York exclaimed.

They were silent awhile. Then York said, "Well, there's one thing I can do. I'll send Joe over to Track's End with Cap this afternoon, and late enough so they'll have to spend the night. That'll give us till tomorrow to think up a way out."

HE WENT up on the dam and sent word to the alligator captains to haul no more long stuff till tomorrow noon. Running only short stuff, there wouldn't be any danger of a jam while Joe was away. Then he went out on the float and talked to Cap Welch, who ran the company's heavy-duty power boat between River's Head and the railroad town of Track's End some twenty miles up the lakes.

"We'll be needing some hay for the tote team pretty soon anyhow," he concluded. "And you can bring over those last half dozen cases of dynamite."

"Okay," Cap said. "I'll be ready to start at three."

York walked slowly off the float and over the embankment to Sumner.

Sumner looked at him questioningly. "More trouble?"

"No-o. . . . I had a flash back there, just before I left Cap. Something about Christine and the insurance, and something else that I can't pin down."

"Well!" Sumner said, and became professional. "Sit right here and we'll try to dig it up. Just go over everything you said to Cap, as nearly word for word as possible."

York went over it. And when he came to the hay and dynamite he jumped to his feet. "Got it!" he said. "At least it's an idea. Come over to the office."

"You know," he went on when he had closed the door, "when we bring in hay or dynamite we always load it on a bateau and tow it behind the power boat; and Joe always goes along when we're hauling dynamite and rides back on it.

"Well, we'll blow up the bateau this trip, right out there in front of the camp, with a dummy on it that looks like Joe, and when Christine thinks he's dead and then finds out that he isn't—well, I think watching her will tell us what we want to know."

Sumner chuckled. "I believe you've got something, York."

They talked it over, working it out till they were satisfied with every detail. It was a simple plan. On the way up the lakes Cap Welch was to make the power boat develop engine trouble, and he would tell Joe it would take him at least five or six hours the next day to get it fixed. With this assurance, Joe would spend the morning around town and leave Cap free to load the bateau in a certain way, the dynamite in the stern, with one case capped and fused, and the baled hay piled mostly in the bow and leveled out over the cases. The fuse would be cut to a thirty-minute length and looped under the hay from stern to bow.

Cap's next job was to buy a pair of wide white suspenders, a shirt, a pair of overalls and a hat. Then he was to tinker on his engine till Oram Caldwell arrived in his speedboat with Doctor Sumner—Sumner having cooked up an urgent errand as an excuse for a quick trip to town. And Cap was to tell them of his engine trouble and to bring Joe home, so he could start right along to be sure he'd make River's Head before dark.

That was to be about ten o'clock and Cap would start down the lakes immediately. At the narrows, three miles from River's Head, he would stop, fill the shirt and pants with hay annd complete a dummy which, at half a mile, nobody could tell from Joe. Then he would wait till three o'clock, when he would place the dummy in a sitting position against a bale of hay, light the fuse and start for River's Head. The dynamite should let go about half a mile off the camp.

In the meantime, Doctor Sumner was to see that the speedboat left town at exactly two-thirty. That would bring them

clear of the narrows in time to see the bateau blow up; and it was up to Sumner then to keep the speedboat out on the water until after the power boat had landed. This last, to give Christine several minutes in which to think of Joe as dead.

IT WAS nearly noon before York and Sumner decided they'd covered everything. Sumner left the office then and returned to camp, ostensibly for dinner, but really to fasten himself to Bagley until Joe and Cap had left for town.

York ate with the last shift of the sluicing crew and then sent for Cap. He went over the details with him, step by step, until Cap had them letter-perfect. Then York drove down the Carry Road after Joe. He found him at the wangan at Number Two, eating dinner.

"Oh, Joe," he said. "Cap's going to town this afternoon after hay and the last of the dynamite. He'll stay over till tomorrow morning and give you a chance to see a movie and do any errands you have."

"Boy," Joe grinned. "How soon's he leavin'?"

"Be a couple of hours or so. Time enough for us to go down to the forks and see how they're getting along."

On their way downriver York told Joe about the special insurance policy. "I thought it might ease your mind to have it," he said. "But don't tell anybody, not even Christine."

"Godfrey, no!" Joe said. "She's been tryin' hard enough already t' get me t' quit my job. And if she thought it was dangerous enough for all that insurance . . ." Joe shook his head. "But I'm sure obliged to you for it, York. If anything should happen, it'll come in mighty handy."

They came back to Number One a little before three. Jaimeson was waiting for them, and York asked:

"Anything wrong?"

"Not a thing," Jaimeson said. "I just need Joe's signature on this application. Right here where the cross is, Joe. And it might be just as well to put down your beneficiary—just in case."

"Beny-fish—" Joe looked puzzled.

Jaimeson smiled. "That's the—the scientific name for whoever you want the money to go to in case you get bumped off."

"Oh," Joe said. "Where do I write it?"

Jaimeson showed him, and Joe went in the office. York was amused. He watched through the door and saw Joe write painstakingly in the two indicated places, blot each carefully and fold the paper. Then Joe came out and handed it to Jaimeson.

"Much obliged," he said.

"Same to you," Jaimeson smiled, and Joe went over to the wangan for his toothbrush and more chewing tobacco.

A few minutes later York watched him start up the lakes with Cap, the power boat towing a long wide-beamed bateau. It was a perfectly good bateau and he made a little gesture toward it, telling it goodbye.

That evening he walked up to the camp for his mail, watched Sumner and Bagley and four other fishermen playing poker and then started back for the river.

The stars were bright and seemed to hang low as he walked down the embankment road. Beyond, at the dam, he could see the lights where the crew was still sluicing the short stuff. And against the lights he caught the shadow of someone coming along the embankment. Presently he saw it was a woman; and then, even in the darkness, he recognized Christine.

She stopped in front of him, and said, "They tell me down to the wangan that you sent Joe t' town and he won't be back till t'morra."

"That's right," he told her.

He caught the angry twitch of her head, and then her voice rose sharply, "You did it just so I couldn't see him! But you wait till t'morra, and when I see him—you just wait!"

She stepped around him and hurried toward the camp.

York had a restless evening and an uneasy morning. He saw the speedboat start

for town a little after nine, and then settled down to wait.

A few minutes after three he picked up the power boat, just a spot against the black growth on Beaver Island. The spot grew larger and then there were two spots, with several boat-lengths between them. Cap, he thought, wasn't taking any chances, with nearly a hundred feet of tow-line on the bateau.

York wondered how much of the hay they'd lose; probably just the bales immediately around the dynamite.

YORK swore suddenly under his breath. The dummy! Dynamite always spent its force downward. Over deep water like that, with the baled hay on top, the dummy wouldn't be much more than jarred and would float like a cork! Why hadn't he thought of that? York sweated a little. He could only hope that Cap would have the sense to turn back and jerk it to pieces and hide the clothes.

He glanced at his watch and then back at the lake. The dummy's white suspenders flashed in the sun, and a waitress in the yard called out:

"Oh, Christine! There's Joe."

York smiled to himself. Cap had done a good job so far, anyhow. In another ten minutes he'd be directly opposite the camp and scarcely half a mile away; and the thirty-minute fuse had just ten minutes more to burn!

From the corner of his eye York saw Christine and two other girls come out in the yard at the end of the porch. But he didn't have a chance to watch her. A shifting air current brought a sound to him that made him stand up and stare at the narrows. He couldn't see it, but he knew the speedboat was coming. Strange that he could hear it back in the narrows.

The speedboat wasn't in the narrows; it was well this side—minutes ahead of time!

It came rushing on. A nervous shiver ran through York. If it kept that pace and direction it would be close to the bateau when the dynamite exploded. It kept its pace and direction, getting closer and closer till it seemed to York that it would strike the bateau. It was on the far side, partly hidden by the bateau; and in that moment York saw two men rise in the stern as if they were struggling.

One of them went overboard.

The speedboat shot ahead of the bateau, the roar of its engine dropped to a hum and it swung in a wide circle. York's eyes came back to the bateau, and in the water just ahead of it he barely made out a spot that he knew was a man, swimming. He saw the man reach for the tow rope, swing along it and slowly pull himself up and onto the hay in the bow. He was conscious of laughter, on the porch and from the yard. Somebody said, "Well, he made it. But what the—" The voice stopped.

And out on the water the bateau seemed to melt away. A ring of smoke that was neither white nor blue nor gray sprang out where the bateau had been and drifted slowly upward. A dull, heavy sound came to York, and in the silence a man gasped.

The few men on the porch and the girls in the yard suddenly started running, with one accord, for the pier. York was the first to reach the float at the end. And all the time he was watching the water.

The smoke ring spread and lifted and thinned. Now he could see the speedboat nosing slowly among bobbing bales of hay and a litter of splintered wood. The boat headed for the pier and its engine roared. It shot out of the smoke haze, but Oram Caldwell at the wheel and Doc Sumner's back hid what might be on the stern seat. Presently Sumner straightened up and turned and raised an arm.

York didn't know what he meant till the boat came closer and he saw that Sumner was smiling. All at once his legs felt weak and his stomach seemed very empty. The float was still rocking from the explosion; and he swayed over to an upturned rowboat and sat down. The speedboat eased in and he saw Joe's chalky face at the gunwale. Then Caldwell cut the engine, and Sumner called out:

"He's all right! Just shaken up."

Hands reached out to lift Joe from the

boat; but he stood up and stepped out by himself. He was pretty wabbly. Christine got an arm about him. She looked sharply at York; and rather than have her burst out at him, York moved back and nodded to Sumner to take Joe's other side. They tried to lead Joe from the pier. But Joe shook his head.

"No," he mumbled. "I gotta find out—" He belched suddenly. It seemed to relieve him and his voice was stronger, as he went on, "I gotta ask Cap about that damn' dummy."

YORK glanced at the lake. The power boat was nosing in and he waited in hollow suspense, wondering what Cap would say. The power boat swung broadside and stopped just off the float. Cap peered at Joe, and called incredulously:

"You—you ain't hurt?"

Joe shook his head. Then he asked, "How come that dummy on the bateau?"

York held his breath. Then Cap grinned. "Why," he said, "you always ride on the dynamite. And when I come off without you it didn't seem right not t' see you back there; so I rigged up the dummy just t'—" he stopped and shrugged.

Joe muttered something but, in the sudden laughter and confusion of voices, York didn't hear what he said. Joe started ashore with Christine and Sumner, the others trailing after them. York waved to Cap Welch. "Get a couple of the boys and pick up what hay you can," he said, and went ashore himself.

Sumner had gone to the guides' camp with Joe and Christine; and he looked worried when he came around to the porch. York said, "How is he? You didn't find something—?"

"No," Sumner told him. "All he needs is a few hours rest. But it was pretty close. I almost had heart failure when he jumped overboard. He spotted smoke coming out of the bateau, and when he saw the dummy he thought it was a man lying there asleep. I tried to hold him, but he thought the bateau was on fire and might set off the dynamite. And when it did go off—"

Sumner's face screwed up and he shook his head. "I thought we've never see him again."

York said, "If he hadn't been on top of the hay, we wouldn't. Not alive, anyhow. How did you happen to be ahead of time?"

"Oh-h—" Sumner grimaced. "The engine wouldn't start. We were ten minutes late and I guess I got under Oram's hide. When we did get going he opened her wide and I couldn't make him slow down." After a moment, he asked, "Did you get a chance to watch Christine?"

"I never even thought of it."

Sumner grunted. "Well, I don't suppose it makes much difference. I've got bad news, York. Joe told me just now that he was through. He says that two such close calls must have used up his luck for years."

York just sat there. Finally he said, "That's another thing I didn't think of. I guess it's time I was getting through, too."

"Yeah, I'm afraid you're getting too old for this business," Sumner told him ironically. Then he dropped a hand on York's shoulder. "Come out of it, feller, you'll lick this trouble yet."

It was after dark and York was sitting in his office with Sumner when somebody rapped on the door.

"Come in," York said. The door opened and a man stood there in the shadow.

"Oh, hello, Joe," York greeted him. "Well, I'm sorry you're through, but I'm mighty glad you're okay. I haven't told Jerry to make out your time yet; but if you'd like to have it now I'll call him. Come in and sit down."

"Why—uh-h, I didn't come for my time. I—" Joe hesitated, still standing outside the door. Then York noticed something queer about his face and went over to him.

"What in the world!" he exclaimed. There was a bluish swelling around one eye, running from his cheekbone up under his hat. "You didn't do that in the water?"

Joe shook his head and grinned faintly. "I got it up to the camp."

"What happened?"

JOE shifted his feet uneasily. "Why—uh, it was in the kitchen. We was talkin' while the girls was puttin' away the dishes and Will Samson asked me how it felt t' get blowed up. I told him I didn't know, I was too busy wondering if somebody was goin t' collect that ten thousand dollars on my insurance. I guess I wasn't thinkin' good, or I sure wouldn't of said that."

Joe wagged his head. "It sure got me into trouble. Ed Rowe said if I had that much insurance he bet Christine had put me up to it so she could collect it. Ed's always kidding, and Christine just laughed. But I didn't like it and I told him she didn't know a thing about it, and if I had got blowed up, the money would all of gone to my ma."

York said queerly, "Your mother?"

"Yeah." Joe looked puzzled. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing! Not a thing!" York told him. He looked at Joe, hoping yet scarcely daring to hope. "Go on," he said, wetting his lips. "What happened?"

"Why, Christine—Say," he interrupted himself, "it's kind of hard t' tell whether a woman's goin' or comin, ain't it? Why, ever since she come in this spring she's been after me t' quit my job; and this afternoon, when I told her an' Doc Sumner, here, that I was through on the river, she turned right the other way round. Wanted me t' go back t' my job, an' kep' after me till supper time."

Joe stopped and shook his head again, utterly perplexed. York could hardly contain himself. "But what happened?" he asked. "I mean tonight when she found your insurance would go to your mother?"

"Why—she was standin' across the table from me with a plate in her hand, and she called me a dirty double-crosser and slammed me with the plate."

Sumner made a choking sound, and York didn't dare try to speak. Joe moved his feet and went on, hesitatingly. "So I—I thought I'd come down an' see if I could have my job back."

"You—you sure can!" York managed to say. He hated to ask the question, but he had to know; he crossed his fingers, and asked, "But what about your luck?"

Joe grinned. "Why, accidents always run in threes," he said, and put his hand gently to his face. "Anyhow, I figure it ain't so dangerous on the river."

It was still coiled there; the cold, lidless eyes stared at him unblinkingly

Journey to Judgment

By RICHARD SALE
Author of "No Patriot There", "Mosquito", etc.

Strong the man who has the courage of his derelictions. But not strong enough. For there is a conspiracy against transgressors: a conspiracy sometimes worked out in fire . . .

BY THE thin reluctant light of the dark dawn, Rensfell saw his haven; and although it appalled him, still, he was grateful. He was grateful for any small solidity of land beneath his tired feet after the terrible night he had managed to live through.

The slate brightening of the dirty east brought the spit out of the sea around him, and he could discern, presently, that it was rock. Black, rough bare rock, without a tree, without earth or sand, without even the remnants of driftwood and jetsam.

Just a long parabolic rock, about fifteen feet wide and sixty feet long, all wetted from the breaking surf upon it. Rensfell could not conceal his momentary horror. It was enough to keep him alive, for it would not go beneath the surface of the sea. The tide was at flood then and the rock had an altitude of at least four feet at its highest point.

But there was nothing to be had in the way of food. He could not eat from rock. Even the rainwater which collected in the pockets of the spit would probably be contaminated with salt sea water.

Day broke fully, as much as it could. For although the wind was dropping, and the ponderous seas were falling off, the petit-point drizzle hung in the sodden air like mist, and gusts of it bent into Rensfell's face at times when the antic wind bunched it in a ball and blew it off the pimple of land.

Then, when the rain stopped and the sky grew glaring bright behind the blanket of dirty, olive-edged clouds overhead,

Rensfell, erect, could spot the Brazilian coast. No more than five miles due west, he thought. It was there—real, full green and lush.

Soon Rensfell stopped feeling numb. He had reached a point in the preceding night in which everything that happened seemed impersonal. He was not a brave man, he knew; yet when havoc piled upon havoc, he found that he had used up all his fear, and he had watched his disaster in a strange sterile way. Now he could feel emotion returning, along with nerves and fear.

"I'm alive," he thought. "At least I am alive."

Quite true, but he had little else to hope for. He was alive; he had won that much. To retain his prize was something else again, and quite a little trick to do. Being in sight of land had lent him, for a brief bit, a fine elation, until he realized that he was in the same position as a becalmed sailing ship. The only difference being that doldrums do not always exist, day after day, and a ship is not always becalmed. But a rock spit, without helm, sails or hull, is very permanent.

The hard thing to take was that he couldn't signal. If there had been wood, any old shattered wood upon that rock, he could have lighted a fire with the matches in his waterproof case. He had matches and cigarettes, safe from the sea. Nothing else.

Still, there was a chance. This close to the shore, he would be within sight of small boats, fishing boats, trawlers, crawfish boats. Some would come by here. This shipping hazard was not unknown to charts. He frowned, remembering the charts which now floated somewhere in the south Atlantic Ocean.

This spit—he remembered it now. St. Gabriel's Head was its name upon the chart. Ten fathoms at all approaches dwindling to eighteen feet close to the rock itself. He recalled it distinctly upon the chart because he and Gwalter had worried about their distance from it and the lee shore behind it when the blow began.

The sun came out after awhile and burned the mists off the water as the seas dropped. By noon there was little ground swell and the troughs were shallow. The water was clear and green and warm. It was fine shark water and Rensfell imagined the barracuda were pretty thick.

He would have chanced a five-mile swim to the mainland except for those cursed fish.

He felt very lonely suddenly, because he was thinking in terms of the long view: himself upon St. Gabriel's Head for days, not just these few hours. Two men might have been able to swap opinions, to bolster each other's failing courage, even to formulate a decent plan of action. But one man was a lonesome symbol in a world of realities. He wished quietly that he had not killed Gwalter.

IT WAS strange to think that he had worried about Gwalter killing him seven months back when they first ate their way into the interior. For that was the way it should have gone then. Not the way it finally happened. Back in Cayenne, broke and desperate, Rensfell knew that he was the tenderfoot and Abe Gwalter the seasoned explorer of the jungle.

Rensfell with his pinched pallid face and sparse length, looking neurotic and anemic, and Gwalter, hard and short and strong, everything about him firm, moving abruptly and assuredly.

Rensfell had never beaten his way into the bush, hacking at octopi-like tentacles of fetid vines, feeling the moist thick breath of jungle in his lungs. Rensfell had never shot a fer-de-lance before it struck his ankle, had never seen a boa drop upon one of his bearers, had never mined gold deep in the dark damp reaches where the stench of the swampy black earth hung in the air like steam above the sun-baked waters.

No, he had done none of it. Gwalter was the man who had. And Gwalter was the man who should have done the killing.

Alone in Cayenne with a priceless map —that had been Rensfell's plight. And they had told him about Gwalter, told him that Gwalter was the man to see.

On the terrace of the Hotel du Roi, he sat with Abe Gwalter and drank a highball and talked. "I knew a Rensfell once," Gwalter said in his short terse way. "Guy named Bill. Went inside. He had a gold vein in there and he kept it there too. The jumpers couldn't track that lad, and they couldn't find his claim. Died of fever finally. Any relation?"

"He was my brother," said Rensfell. "My younger brother. My name is John. I was two years older."

"Well, Rensfell, you're fresh out here and green and you got something on your mind and it's gold."

"How could you know that?" Rensfell said, startled.

"They don't come to me for much else," replied Abe Gwalter shrewdly. "Except maybe to make a touch. But you—" he shrugged. "Your brother left you a map, eh?"

"Yes."

"And you want some one to go in with you. Some one who knows the jungle, knows the Indians, eh? Maybe some one who has the money to finance it?"

"Yes, exactly. They told me—"

"If it's Bill Rensfell's map, I'll do it. Sixty-forty split. All my expense, all my equipment, all my labor. Just your map. No better terms, no worse. Take it or leave it."

"Sixty per cent—for me?"

Gwalter stared at him coldly. "Forty per cent for you," he said. "All you're doing is putting up a map you were lucky enough to fall into. Out here we pay off for sweat. It'll be my sweat. Forty will still make you a rich man."

"But without the map," Rensfell said desperately, "you wouldn't make anything!"

"Nor you, without help," said Gwalter. "And *I'm* not broke." He lighted a pipe. "I'm being damned fair with you. Anyone else would make it seventy-five, twenty-five and murder you in the bargain. I keep my word and I bring you back alive. If you don't think so, ask your consul. That's my first and last offer, and you've got a minute to say yes or no before we just forget the whole thing."

"I'll—do it," Rensfell said.

Even in the jungle, Rensfell never knew quite how to take Abe Gwalter. The man was rough and ready, hard and sometimes cruel the way he worked the bearers; and yet there was something human and soft about him.

Like the night he stopped by Rensfell's bunk and squatted on his heels and said, "You sleep with that .45 revolver, Rensfell, and it's not smart. Keep it under your pillow if you want, but not in your hand. You're liable to kill yourself in your sleep."

Rensfell had stammered some lame explanation.

"Oh, stow that," said Gwalter quietly. "You sleep with your gun because you're afraid I'm going to kill you for your map and take your gold myself. Well, that's all right. Only keep it under your pillow. . . . And incidentally, I've had plenty of opportunity to murder you, Rensfell. But it just isn't in the cards. I'm satisfied with my sixty per cent. I don't want any more and I don't want your body. I don't believe that way."

Rensfell hid his shame and confusion by asking, "What do you mean, you don't believe that way?"

"Well, son, I'm not a good book quoter, but there's one in the good book I do believe. They that live by the sword die by the sword. That one. It's real in the jungle, and I've seen it happen. It's not a case of conscience; it just happens that way.

"Bad gold has killed the men who killed to get it. The jungle, the country, the waters, they all conspire to get a man who transgresses. I'm not sentimental about killing, mind you, but I'm thinking of my own skin. It's just that I believe if I bumped you, some one or something would get me in return. That's the law of this hot, mad country."

AFTER that Rensfell did not sleep with his gun in his hand, and they got along fine. Indeed, a mutual trust gradually built itself up between them, and the day they found the vein, as the map directed, they hugged each other; and Rensfell was surprised to find that Gwalter, the cool, calculating, firm Gwalter could get so enthusiastically excited.

"Can't help acting like a fool when you actually hit gold," Gwalter said that night. He was stating fact, not apologizing. "Always does something to you. And I'll tell you this, Rensfell, I'm glad to be out here with you. There are other men I know I couldn't turn my back on."

"Why not?"

"Oh, well, a chap will come to me and know where there's a vein and he'll promise me eighty per cent, even ninety, to get me to take him inside and work the vein. When they haven't touched the gold, they give anything away. But after they see the gold, when they see it come out of the rock and feel it and touch it, they get stingy about it; and as soon as the vein is clean, they aim for the back and go home with the whole pot."

"You've actually been out with men like that?"

"Actually," said Gwalter drily. "And I always managed to aim for their front just a notch ahead of their aiming for my back. . . ."

They didn't exhaust this vein. When they had taken out all that they could possibly portage, Gwalter called it quits. "I know, I know," he said, "it's a hard thing to do, to walk out of here leaving all that behind. But there's another time and another day, and we can go back. And if you come back with me next time, we'll make it fifty-fifty, because you'll be earning that much then. But right now, we've got all we can possibly handle and if we try for more, we're liable to lose it all going home."

"How much do you think we really have?"

"In guilders, francs or dollars?"

Rensfell said, "Dollars."

"About a hundred thousand dollars," Gwalter said. "Nice lot of pokes. Last a long time. Six months work, Rensfell; hard work for you too. But there's forty thousand dollars to last you until the next time we go in. That's not bad, is it?"

"Not at all," Rensfell said quietly.

They went back by the rivers, not the jungle. They floated down the rivers to the sea in the huge raft which they cut from trees, guarding the gold and their lives constantly. And when they reached the mouth of the Zamba river where it emptied into the Atlantic Ocean, Gwalter had still another surprise.

"You see, Rensfell," he said, "if we had gone back by land, there would have been jumpers along the way to get us. You can't stay inside seven months or so and not have word leak out. It gets out. So we took the rivers and now we take a boat.

"I sent a runner on ahead to this town with gold to buy a boat. We load this stuff on the boat and then sail south for Rio to cash in. Not Cayenne. Too many cutthroats. Rio is the place, and then it's goodbye until we meet again. When your money runs out."

Gwalter was a shrewd fellow. Rensfell had to admit that.

But not shrewd enough. He trusted Rensfell, and it was fatal. For by the time they hoisted sail on the small sloop which Gwalter had bought at the dirty little fishing town, Rensfell had decided many things.

For once, he felt strong, brave, and full of decision. He had spent six months in the jungle, and hard work had made a man of him. He felt it. Even Gwalter had had great respect for him when he caught the fifteen-foot bushmaster alive and brought it into camp, carrying it with his fingers gripped behind its ghastly head.

"Wonderful specimen," Gwalter had said. "We'll take it along with us. One of the biggest. I know a man in Sao Paulo who'll pay us very decent money for that snake."

And, surprisingly enough, the bush-

master, the great dreaded serpent of the New World, the most awesome serpent of any world, with the largest and most frightful fangs within the whole herpetological realm, had survived the rigors of the return trip even to its passage with them aboard the sloop, secure in its fashioned box with the wire top.

Certainly, Rensfell reasoned, a man with guts enough to catch a thing like that has guts enough to murder.

HE WISHED, in a way, that hate could have been involved. That would have made it easier. But there was no hate. He liked Gwalter as much as Gwalter would let him. But Rensfell was damned if he would ever go back into that jungle nightmare again. And he thought that forty thousand dollars was damned little for the hardships he had gone through.

One hundred thousand dollars in gold. One man could live forever with that much money. And a chap would never have to go back again.

That's all there was to it. Too bad for Gwalter, but that was the way it had to be. Rensfell would have bequeathed the vein thereafter to Gwalter in entirety if Gwalter would have given him all the stake; but there wasn't a chance of that, and Rensfell never even broached the idea. Gwalter was much too practical a man for any such scheme.

For three days, Rensfell tried to find a chance to take his man. He was wary and afraid, for Abe Gwalter had killed other men who tried for him. He was lightning with the belly-gun he wore in his holster on the left side, and he slept almost as if he were awake.

Rensfell didn't dare take a chance, and tried not even to think about it. He felt that Gwalter would sense the treachery of it, even from a thought.

The barometer dropped then on the fourth day, and the wind went counterclockwise from west to south to northeast and they knew they were in for something. By nightfall, the norther had started to howl and the seas built up; but still they kept sail on her and tried to beat south along the coast, looking for a place to go in. None showed.

Gwalter was disturbed, but Rensfell was not bothered much. He had sailed before; it was the only thing he knew, and he felt that the ship was stout and trustworthy and he knew that they could heave-to in the gale and ride it out safely enough.

When the foresail blew out, in the ugly dusk, Rensfell got his chance. Gwalter went forward to make the halyards fast, and, with the terrific motion of the boat, he had to keep both his hands on the stays to steady himself. Rensfell instantly ran below and got his revolver and went forward to the bow hatch. He opened the hatch, and shot into Gwalter's back from there, no more than four feet away. Six shots; no sense taking chances.

Gwalter pitched overboard without any help, and Rensfell never did see his face again, nor the body which instantly sank from sight in a growling trough.

After that, Rensfell rigged a storm trysail, after taking everything else off her, and then he lashed the helm and hove to. He went below, to spend the tumultuous night in his bunk where the motion would not be so bad, but he was not afraid. He liked the boat, and she held into it nicely —though he did put out oil bags and a sea drag near midnight.

After that, he took it easy. Not a thing to worry about. Only a lee shore, and since the drift was south, there was damned little chance of that. He had confidence in that sloop, and it was well-placed.

If she had not struck on St. Gabriel's Head and pounded her bottom to splintered bits and sunk in seven minutes, there is little doubt that she would have outlasted the storm easily.

AFTER the weather cleared, Rensfell had luck. He found a rain-pocket which had not been sprayed with sea and his tongue buds told him it was good. He

drank it down to where he could drink no more, only lap with his tongue, like a thirsty dog.

More luck. After the sun had passed its zenith, he caught a sealed tin of biscuit which floated in and noisily clanked against the rock. He broke it open on a jagged point and ate several, remembering that he might have to conserve them only after he had already made a pig of himself.

Rensfell got a grip on himself. He knew that he was acting like a starved castaway before he even was one. He had been on the rock only six hours or so, and the day was young. Plenty of chance for a fisherman to come out from that soft green land and pick him up.

The day had turned pinpoint clear, and the rock was surely visible from the shore. The shirt he wore was khaki—not a startling color—but the sun was so bright that he was easy to see.

Later in the afternoon, tired of sweeping the horizon against the glare of the sun, he began to hazard guesses on the position of the sloop. From what reckoning he recalled, he picked the spot where he had washed up on the surface of the Head, cutting himself on one arm, and bruising his ribs. Those seas had been nasty.

He remembered that he had gone off the starboard quarter aft; and figuring from that, he placed the dead sloop in a certain section of now-flat water on the northeastern point of the spit. He moved to the spot, shielding his face from the sun with his arm. That sun was bad. He was grateful he still had clothes which protected him. Half-naked, he would have broiled alive.

He stood on the end of the spit and looked down into the water. Eighteen feet here—three fathoms, the charts had said. The mast wasn't showing, so she would be on her side. The water was green and lucid and inviting, but such water held the sinister sickly-white flicker of a shark's turning belly when you least expected it.

He did not go in. Instead, he thrust his head into the water off the spit, opening his eyes and trying to see the sunken ship. For a moment, he saw nothing, and then he fancied he could make out her black bulk, the bow pointing at him.

Well, that wasn't so bad. Even if it was pure fancy, it wasn't bad. The ship was down there in shallow water, and the gold pokes were inside her. The primary thing now was to be saved. He could always come back, himself or with help. Helmets and grappling irons. That gold wasn't lost.

Things hadn't turned out badly after all. With one dive, he could put his hand upon the gold.

As the sun began to wane, he saw a fishing boat come up from the south and put in toward the green land across the harsh water. He yelled and waved frantically, but he was not seen. But he was elated. There were boats here then. Sooner or later he would be spied.

Rensfell was terribly thirsty that evening, but he found that the sun had dried the pockets of rain-water. He ate a biscuit and it was hard going. The biscuit seemed mealy. There was nothing to wash the taste of it away. He wished vaguely that it might rain again during the night.

Luck. It did. Not long after dark, a sudden furious shower drenched him and the rock, and he drank his fill, marveling at the good fortune.

"I can't lose," he thought fervently, fully sated. "Things break too well. Everything is with me. Tomorrow a boat will pick me up sure."

He stretched himself out in the flattest part of the spit he could find and stared up at the bright stars which spilled across the sky as the squall clouds flew on and were gone.

He remembered the night that Gwalter had squatted on his heels, warning him about sleeping with a cocked gun. Funny how plain and clear the words came back: *The jungle, the country, the waters, they all conspire to get a man who transgresses.*"

Gwalter had said that. The memory of

it panicked Rensfell for a moment. And then he smiled faintly. It was not true of course. The very elements had given him his chance to put Gwalter away. And while it was true that the ship had been wrecked (his own carelessness for not having his chart), the gold was still safe indeed, guarded by the sea but not destined to be held by the sea; and now the wind and the rain gave him water and life.

He watched the stars at their stations until suddenly his fatigue struck him down and he was asleep, deeply.

SOME one had placed a heavy foot upon his stomach. He was not even awake when he sensed it. But his mind warned him to be still, to play possum and he did this. The brightness of his closed eyelids told him that it was long past daybreak. Eyelids are not opaque to sunlight.

There was the humid heat of the new day upon his face. He was spread-eagled, on his back, his arms outstretched, his legs apart, and twisted comfortably. And there was a weight, directly upon his midriff.

But not a foot. Definitely, now, not a foot. Too much bulk.

All this Rensfell considered with his eyes shut, as he breathed normally. It was going to take courage to open his eyes, for whatever sat upon him was alive. He swallowed and fought to control himself. He thought it would be a rat perhaps. A rat that swam ashore like himself from the sinking sloop.

He made his muscles taut so as not to jerk if startled; and he actually did a handsome job of it, considering what he saw when he slowly inched his eyes open. But he did not control the glaze of cold horror which darkened those eyes, even through the slits which showed them. They popped wide open, then shut abruptly.

And although Rensfell did not move a muscle consciously, a tremor of terror rippled through his frame; and the bushmaster upon his stomach, thick and terrible, hastily coiled.

El mudo, the mute one, as the Indians had called it. The prize which he, Rensfell, had plucked from the jungle with a forked stick and a strong right hand. The most dangerous snake of the western world.

Rensfell could not think for many moments. He felt a bloodcurdling chill, literally, go through him raggedly and harshly and he fought to stop a shudder and succeeded. He knew what it meant for hair to stand on end, for on his neck he could feel the hackles distend themselves and go half erect. In an instant, cold sweat drenched him.

Nerve, nerve—that's what it took. Cold calculating nerve to remain still and not, in frantic panic, try to roll away from the snake. The instinct was to raise the arms and protect the face, or—going beyond that—to swing the arms and sweep the repulsive thing off his middle.

It would have been fatal. Those horrid hollowed fangs were three centimeters in length and backed by the largest venom sacs in the continent. It was death to lose your nerve; and somehow, Rensfell knew it.

He wondered, in a tight brittle bit of thinking, involuntary thinking fused with crazy racing sparks of emotion, how the devil he had missed seeing the thing. For certainly it had washed ashore when he did after the sinking of the sloop. That was it, that was how it happened. That meshed top box had floated up when the ship went down, and had driven into the rocky spit with the wind and waves, had splintered upon the rock when a breaking crest had hurled it off the sea, and the bushmaster was free.

No coincidence either that it should have sought his body during the coolness of the night. Serpents being very sensitive to change of temperature, the loathsome thing had found him out and coveted the fine warmth of his all too human body. It was a feat and failing of nearly all snakes and most hunters were well aware of it.

Rensfell's scalp was tingling as though

with electricity. After an almost interminable pause in which he waited for the snake to glide off him (certain it was aware that he was alive), he opened his eyes slightly to see it again.

It was still coiled upon him, its head drawn back tightly into a reversed S. The eyes stared at him, cold lidless eyes which did not blink; indeed, could not. The snout, flattish, faced him. He thought briefly that the colors of the snake looked bright and garish in the sun, now climbing the sky and swelling its heat.

Rensfell closed his eyes.

He knew what he had to do. A terrible thing, but it was the only thing to do. No case of a choice. A rash act, even the mere drawing of a deep inhalation, and he would be bequeathed a pair of punctures, fifteen minutes of agony, and a lonely death on a ragged rock.

The jungle, the country, the waters—they conspire to get a man who transgresses. . .

Was Abe Gwalter laughing now? Was there a faint and knowing smile upon his wet and waxy face where he lay in the abalone six fathoms deep?

Rensfell all but breathed. So shallow was his intake that his lungs did not inflate the cavity of his chest at all. He did not move, remaining in that position of sleep, arms outflung, legs twisted, the impersonal, omnipotent sun upon his face.

The warm sun which gives the earth its life, which holds the Arctic cold back in the ice pack of the poles.

Just wait and wait, and some time that snake would move. That snake would get off him and go crawling away. Then he could kill it. A heavy stone to crush its head and then a roaring laugh to the skies, and deep full breaths of oxygen, and the swinging of his arms and legs and gratitude for respite. The snake would go. Snakes did not stay in one spot forever.

Just patience and nerve, and a little waiting. The most important thing was at stake in this: his life. He could afford to wait.

By high noon, Rensfell knew the sun was slowly killing him. His face, though deeply tanned from its rigorous months in the jungle, felt the terrible weight of the sun's heatridden waves. And he was in a strange and terrible agony of his own. His position, unchanged for so long, was hurting him badly. He silently cursed; and that failing, he prayed; and that failing, he wished; but the snake remained.

The snake, as a matter of fact, would have remained there until they were both sun-dried dust.

PEDRO GASCONEZ, a poor fisherman from the town of Autora, passed close to the rock at four that afternoon, homeward bound from the bluer waters off-shore. Pedro was part Indian, part Negro, a small and fearless man of forty, whose catch for the day had been meagre.

His little boat, a jury-rigged catboat with an old and leaky hull, its sides gray from the sun and baked paint of another day, was beating on the port tack for Autora which sat in the green coast to the west. It had come as close to St. Gabriel's Head as Pedro dared to take it before he came about for the starboard tack. And just before he was about to put the helm over, he saw them both.

Rensfell and the bushmaster.

Pedro Gasconez instantly dropped his sail and brought the bow of the boat in between two rocks where he made the painter fast and leaped ashore, arming himself with a small net. A landing net.

But when he approached the prostrate man and saw the bushmaster upon Rensfell's stomach, he did not bother to use the net, for he was aware at once that the serpent was dead.

He reached down and grasped it carefully behind the head and lifted it off Rensfell's stomach. It fell out of its coil somewhat, but it had already stiffened some. Pedro threw the corpse into the sea where it floated, seeming alive with the motion of the placid water.

Pedro was surprised to find the man alive. He spouted questions in Portuguese

which Rensfell, only half-conscious, could not understand. Rensfell only knew the weight was gone from him and he groaned, "The snake, the damned snake!"

The little man raised him, and he screamed at the agony of movement. Rensfell tried to open his eyes and could not. He touched his face and screamed again. Everything was pain. He did not see how they went; but presently he knew he was in a boat and upon the water. Once he cried in Spanish, "The snake! I am blind!"

To which Pedro replied, a trifle haltingly, "The snake was dead, *señor*. He had been dead a very long time. Did you not know that such a snake cannot live in the sun? To kill them we pull them into the sun and let the sun bake them to death. It is said their blood is as hot as the day around them, so the sun boils them to death in their own blood. . . You could have moved long ago, long ago."

"My face," cried Rensfell with a sob. "My eyes, *los ojos*, they are burned blind."

To which Pedro Gasconez shrugged. The eyes, they were the least. But it was not his responsibility. He had brought this man off the rock; he would call up a medico, and then he would wash his hands. Himself, he could do nothing for a face that had been burned alive. He did not want to be mixed up in it.

Los ojos? They were a mere nothing. Pedro Gasconez only hoped that the doctor would reach his simple hut in Autora before this white man died. That would take the responsibility of the body off his hands.

Rensfell lay in the bow of the little boat shaking with terrible tremens, his teeth chattering like the clacking of bony heels upon a country tombstone. Once he managed to gasp, *"Es mordedura!* I am going to die!" and then he was quiet.

Pedro, who was a truthful man, agreed with him, but said nothing.

By THEODORE ROSCOE

With a crash of broken glass, Shepherd fell into the room

Remember Tomorrow

BILL SHEPHERD had been warned that he would not be able to sell the old French *château* that was the last tangible remnant of his dead father's estate. But Bill needed the money, and, scoffing at the rumors that clung around it, decided to drive from Paris to Picardy to have a look at the place.

The Château de Feu, they called it; and it stood in the Red Zone, that sector of the valley where had raged the fiercest and bloodiest action of the terrible Battle of the Somme. The soldiers buried there, so ran the old wives' tale, would not sleep at night, but rose from beneath their poppies to fight the battle that would not die. . . .

On the road near the *château,* Bill Shepherd finds the body of a strangled peasant, and is disturbed to notice that there are no footprints of any kind near the body.

He drives on, and meets a French girl, Gabrielle Gervais, who says she has run away from her own wedding. Bill offers her the hospitality of the *château,* which he is anxious to reach in order to summon the local police to investigate the murder.

THE CHATEAU is little more than a pile of stonework; only a small part of what had once been a magnificent structure is habitable. The wreckage is presided over by the caretakers, the Landrus.

At sight of Bill, Madame Landru screams: "They are here! The undead—the Forgotten of God! They have returned—!"

This story began in the Argosy for September 16

Bill explains his identity and the weird Madame Landru grudgingly admits that she may have mistaken him for his brother, whom he greatly resembles, and who died during the Battle of the Somme in this very *château*.

Sheltered at the Château de Feu, are an Englishman, Fielding, and a German, Herr Kull. As the storm rages on, an Italian doctor, a Russian professor, and the French driver of a wrecked bus also take refuge there. Eyeing the strange assemblage, Madame Landru mumbles: "Now they are all here—the French, the German, the Englishman, the Italian—even the Russian. Once more they invade the *château*—and once more death will come—!"

INVESTIGATING noises presumably caused by a prowler, the Landrus show Bill the tower, bricked up later by order of his father, where his brother had been the victim of a gas attack, while lying wounded during the battle. The Landrus also recount other deaths that have taken place in the *forêt* since 1918—none of them ever explained. Lending credence to Madame Landru's insistence that the dead were victims of the ghostly legion is the fact that two of them had been shot by weapons used in the War, a third destroyed as if by an explosion of a hand grenade.

Bill, impatient of this superstitious palaver, and yet uneasily fearful that there may be truth in it, goes with Fielding and the Italian doctor to summon the police. On the way, they stop for a second look at the murdered peasant's body.

The fingerprints on the neck that had led Bill to assume strangulation, are pronounced by Doctor Arnoldo to have been made by the man's own hands. In his pockets are coins of a type that have not been minted since 1916. And weirdest of all is Arnoldo's verdict as to the cause of death.

"The man was killed by poison gas. . . ."

CHAPTER XVIII

YELLOW CROSS

GAS! Bill Shepherd could feel the jolt travel down to his heels. He glared unbelievingly at the Italian doctor.

"You mean the kind of poison gas used in chemical warfare?"

Doctor Arnoldo looked about uneasily. His nose glasses were professional, but they could not diagnose the forest that stood round them like a pitchy wall, the dense clumps of sapling, charred timber and boscage brought into stark relief by the car-lights.

He said in a serious tone to Bill Shepherd, "Yes, *signor*. Although it may be phosgene or chloropicrin gas, it looks to me like mustard. I could not be certain without making an autopsy. But the cyanic discoloration of the corpse—the burning in nose and throat—I saw many similar cases on the Austrian Front." His bewildered glance fixed on the dead man. "Yes, I am sure that is mustard gas. The kind the Germans first used in the World War—the gas they called Yellow Cross."

But that had been back in the days of the Invasion, and this was 1939. There were no gas bombs spraying their lethal chemicals over these long-abandoned woods; no Prussians in the trappings of Mars beyond those shattered pines; no belching guns and tempests of steel and lines of charging men; no dugouts to be raided, sectors taken, fronts to be won.

Yet once more the night was uncanny with the hint of echoes from a struggle long gone by. The dead man's pocket money dated 1916! Suffocation from poison gas! Death had come back out of history in a shroud of yellow fumes. It was there in the dripping, black forest, invisible and malign.

The doctor looked ready to make a dash for cover. Fielding's face had gone bleak in anxiety—for once the calm Englishman was not ready with a logical answer—and Bill Shepherd, standing stunned, could feel his skin prickling. Thunder crackled in the sky as the breeze veered damply; there was a flutter of lightning behind jaggedly silhouetted treetops; one looked about instinctively for a bomb-proof shelter.

Bill Shepherd asked huskily, "How long would you say the man has been dead, Doctor Arnoldo?"

"I should say five or six hours, signor."

"That's right," Bill Shepherd agreed. He felt a little sick. "Fielding, here, glimpsed this peasant in the woods around five-thirty yesterday afternoon. The thunderstorm broke at sundown just as I drove into the forest. Mademoiselle Gervais was a half

hour ahead of me on the road; she saw the dead man then. He must have been—been gassed some time between half past five, when Fielding saw him alive, and—and nightfall."

Doctor Arnoldo murmured, "Yes, I should say he died some time in the evening. I am a little bewildered. Death by gas is not so immediate unless one is unaware of its presence and inhales a considerable quantity. Some of the German gases are almost odorless; others have a not unpleasant smell. If a man did not at first detect it, he might inhale the deadly fumes and be overcome before he realized it.

"It looks to me as if this man suddenly found himself strangling. He began to run. But the poison was working in his lungs. He had breathed deeply of the fumes. But *Madre Maria!*" the doctor appealed. "Mustard gas is thrown in shells. Is there a war going on? Who would start a gas attack in these woods here? Were there bombs exploding last evening?"

Fielding was staring at the dead man. He declared, "I didn't hear any bombs. Those Yellow Cross shells made a big bang, too. Look here, Doctor. How—how long does gas blanket the vicinity when a shell does explode?"

The Italian was sniffing nervously. "One shell would not cover a large area. If there was a breeze it would soon be dissipated. But gas shells are thrown in a barrage. There would be little danger from one shell exploded five hours ago when this man died."

"But there was no explosion," Fielding shook his head. "When I glimpsed this peasant in the bushes last evening the forest was as quiet as those cemeteries surrounding it. In the east there was some thunder, but a shell-burst would have gone off like the crack of doom. The storm came slam-bang just at sundown, but this man must've been dead on the roadside by then."

As he spoke, he was jingling the coins he had taken from the dead man's smock—the money dated 1916. Suddenly he stopped jingling the coins; frowned at the pieces spread in his palm. "By Jove! Shepherd, I've got an idea. It might explain this money—and how this duffer got killed by mustard gas."

Bill Shepherd wanted an explanation. "What do you make of it, Fielding?"

"Well, the beggar was up to something there in the woods. I told you it looked as if he was digging. But it might have been something worse. I couldn't say until I saw what he'd been up to. Look." He pointed at the path coming down through the trees to the road. "The place I spotted the fellow can't be far from here—quarter mile from the road, I'd say. What do you say we trace his footprints back to the place where I saw him; go there and have a look-see."

THE Englishman aimed his flashlight at the path going into the forest, and Bill Shepherd had no hearty inclination to follow that woodsy trail. He said, "As soon as possible we ought to get to the police!"

But he nodded toward the path—he would go. It wouldn't do to show the feather before strangers who wanted to help him. In a way, this forest was his own show; besides, he had little faith in the local *Gendarmerie* and the policework of Lieutenant Jaloux. That provincial constable had apparently bungled the Law in more cases than one, and there were things happening in the Forêt de Feu that Bill Shepherd wanted solved.

Reluctant as he was to leave the comforting lights of his car, he fell in step behind Fielding; the Italian doctor came at his heels; and the three started up the trail, Indian-file.

The path wound and climbed, tortuous in the underbrush. Lights of the parked car vanished as the path made a turn, and the night closed in behind them. Fielding's pocket-torch, guiding the way, was a small glimmer in that blackness. Bramble and laurel hedged the footpath; second-growth saplings and charred pines stood up on either side like a black wall; the dark

ness ahead of the flashlight was impenetrable, and the sky like a canopy of coal. Everything dripped and drained. Wet foliage glistened when touched by the ray of the flashlight as it poked and thrust in the undergrowth, hunting the path.

The path was overgrown with myrtle and woodbine, choked with weeds and thistles and forestcreeper. In places it was flooded and obscure. But the dead peasant's wooden shoes had left deep imprints in the mud and leaf-mould, the tracks had remained clear despite the rainstorm. They could see where he had come galloping along the twisty lane, imprints in the weeds where he had fallen down.

They followed the trail in silence, wary of roots and briar. Occasional flares of electricity would dribble across the sky; the woods would be unnaturally revealed in a pale green witchfire; thunder would rumble down an aerial staircase, then the forest, blacked-out, would be still.

They came to great, fire-eaten logs which lay like factory chimneys across the path and had to be climbed. Huge, uprooted stumps grabbed at them with gnarled tentacles. The path led into a thicket of blasted chestnuts, great trees bare of bark and foliage, their limbs amputated, their trunks stark as giant telephone poles and split to the heart as though by giant axes. Vines and toadstools could not hide the scars left by flying steel and flame. There was a tremendous oak lying dead, torn out of the ground as though it had been a turnip. A pine-trunk burned to a crisp. A shattered elm, broken at the middle, its top limbs bowed to earth in a mound of ashes.

Fielding made a sudden stop. "Take care, here. Mind the barbed wire."

Underbrush concealed the snarls of rusty cables strung with claws and fishhooks. It writhed in tangles alongside the path and netted through the bushes everywhere. Fiendish stuff to get caught in. Bill Shepherd hooked his coat sleeve; ripped it to the elbow.

"Look," the Italian doctor exclaimed. "A German helmet."

FIELDING'S flashlight had picked it out at the trailside. One of those coal-scuttle helmets, dented, brown with rust; someone had left it perched on a stray fencepost. Bill Shepherd looked at it sidewise. There were four round holes punched through the dome, like punctures in an old tin can.

Here, farther up the path, the forest floor was scattered with all manner of trash —wagon wheels, scraps of sheet-iron, gasoline tins, moss-covered mounds of junked machinery. The flashlight picked out a howitzer swamped under vines; nearby, in a nest of petrified cement bags, a rusted machine gun; and not far from that, half-buried in the ground, an airplane engine. The path took a bend, and a brilliant display of lightning overhead revealed a deep trench that zigzagged through the forest like an abandoned canal. The path crossed the trench by a bridge of shaky duckboards, and followed the parapet for a number of yards. Fielding directed the torch-ray into the trench. The trench walls were weed-grown, caved in places, breached where the parapet had crumbled; here and there the trench was filled with rubble or choked with underbrush. But twenty-three years had not obliterated the earthworks, and even the dugouts remained.

Most of the dugouts were caved or flooded—the trench-bottom was a channel of rainwater—but the flashlight discovered one dugout in a good state of preservation. The door was like the entrance to a coal mine, shored up with heavy timbering. One could see the steps going down, and the light-ray glimpsed the earth backwall of the room below. The firing step near the dugout remained intact—niches where observers stood watch with periscopes, ladders where the men had gone over the top.

The parapet was strewn with litter. A rotted, hobnailed boot. Bits of charred leather and harness. Meat tins. Mouldering cartridge belts. Canteens pierced like sprinkling cans. An empty knapsack. A dish-shaped steel helmet, its crown torn open. A pair of broken binoculars. The

charred butt—Bill Shepherd picked it up—of a rifle.

Fielding aimed the flashlight at a sign above the dugout door. The weather-beaten lettering was dimly legible.

CUTHBERT'S HOTEL. LADIES NOT ADMITTED.

Fielding said in a hushed tone, "British trench. Cuthbert was the nickname out here for Tommy Atkins."

Surely Cuthbert was not here now. Not in this long-abandoned trench strewn with rusted equipment and debris. The dugout door was like the entry to a tomb. There was a smell of earth and rotting lumber and wet plant life at night. Cuthbert was gone. He had packed up his troubles in his old kit bag and gone back to England, or back to those cemeteries behind the line. Unless . . .

Bill Shepherd found himself staring at a wraith in the dugout door. It writhed up out of the aperture and floated out into the trench—a spook of white mist that nodded its head as it evaporated. Bill Shepherd started violently.

Doctor Arnoldo said in a strained voice, "It is not gas. It is only fog from the rain. Were it gas, you would not see those rats down there."

There were three of them at the top of the dugout steps. At the aim of the flashlight they raced out into the trench in a figure-eight maneuver, and vanished back into the black dugout mouth like evil thoughts.

Bill Shepherd had not been thinking of gas. The door of that underground retreat gave him a creep. He turned on Fielding, "Come on. Let's get a move on."

"This way," Fielding said.

CHAPTER XIX

TRENCHES OF THE GHOSTS

THE path bent sharply to the left and the trench wandered off in the night, and Bill Shepherd was glad to see it go. If you had an imagination you could visualize dead soldiers crouching under those crumbled parapets, awaiting a ghostly zero hour. Those disabled howitzers and scrapped machine guns in weedy nests might well be waiting phantom gun-crews, legless Germans, crippled French and British, infantrymen without arms and aviators without faces.

He dispelled the visions of Madam Landru with an oath, but the face of that peasant back there on the road, dead of mustard gas, was not so easily dispelled. How could the man have met death by poison gas on a night twenty years after the Armistice? How came his pocket money to be dated 1916? Fielding seemed to have an idea; perhaps in painting pictures of these war-ruined woods, the English artist had seen something the imagination of a mystery-story writer couldn't see.

The path was meandering through a burned-over glen. This trail in the forest, Bill Shepherd thought, was like the path through the desolation and wreckage of the upper floors of the château. These woods too, undermined with shell-holes and bomb-craters, blocked with burnt timber, strewn with trash and the rusted spare parts of war machines, had known the wanton fury of human vandalism. Here, too, the raging hordes had chopped and smashed and overturned; they had wielded the torch. Bill Shepherd looked at the felled trees in dread; couldn't conceive the violence that had leveled a stand of pine, shattered a pair of twin oaks to hills of matchwood.

They skirted a crater as deep as an excavation at Pompeii. Fielding aimed his flashlight into the yawning pit, murmuring, "Must've been a mine." Tons of explosive must have been used to blast out that cavity. It was wide as the mouth of a dead volcano, and the pond at the bottom resembled a quarry lake. A play of lightning overhead flooded the crater with a pale green light, and the men saw, half way down the crater-side, a demolished armor-plated engine that looked like a prehistoric animal that had crawled down there to die. That wreck had been an armored car.

Some distance farther on the path they passed something that, horizontal in the weeds, resembled a giant, fifty-foot sewer pipe. Fielding said laconically, "Big Bertha." How that monster gun-barrel had come to be mislaid there, Bill Shepherd couldn't imagine. The pride of the Krupp Works with ivy wreaths on the breech and a swallow's nest in the muzzle! Big Bertha was dead—all these engines in the weeds were dead—the Forêt de Feu was like a cemetery of war material.

But a peasant had been killed here tonight by mustard gas—a French peasant with coins dated 1916 in his pocket. Bill Shepherd gripped the Mauser pistol in his own pocket, and kept his eye on the beam of Fielding's flashlight, anxious to see.

"We can't be far from the place." Fielding paused. "There's the side path where I came up on my bicycle. Look for the hull of a burned Zeppelin in a thicket near the path. I remember halting to look at it, and thinking it must've been a pretty big crash. It isn't far from here, and a little way beyond that there's the clump of bushes where I saw the peasant digging."

They proceeded slowly; then the flashlight discovered the fire-blackened mass of crumpled aluminum at the pathside.

"This is the place, all right," Fielding said a moment later. "See where the man came charging out of the bushes? Look. There's a rag of his smock where he tore it on the thorns. He must've come out of the brush running hell for leather."

INADVERTENTLY the three halted, eyeing the screen of brush for some malignant sign. The flashlight ray went probing. Elderberries, scrub oak, golden rod. Wet foliage gleaming out of darkness. Of the death that had ambushed the peasant there, the undergrowth betrayed no evidence.

Doctor Arnoldo said dubiously, "We had better hurry up, my friends, the rain is going to return any minute."

"I saw him right back in there." Fielding jabbed at the scrub with the flashlight ray. "He scuttled off behind those elderberries. He must've returned to whatever he was doing. He was lively enough then."

Bill Shepherd said doggedly, "Come on."

As he stepped from the footpath into knee-high weeds, he kicked something. He said, "Hold the flashlight!" to Fielding, and stooping, fished from the weeds an old trench gun. He eyed the weapon curiously. It had the barrel of a large pistol and the shoulder butt of a sub machine-gun. The butt was wormy, the barrel clogged with earth, the trigger rusty.

"Parabellum," Fielding said. "Belgian make. Good pistol in its day."

Shepherd dropped the rusted weapon, and pushed on into the brush. The ground was swampy; the bush foliage showered drops of rainwater. Clawing their way through the shrubs, they came to an open space where the undergrowth had been cleared. They halted apprehensively while the white beam of Fielding's pocket-torch explored the clearing.

"He was working in here," Fielding said. "There, by Jove!"

The white circle of light came to a stop. Centered in the flashlight's focus was a spade—a rusted intrenching tool such as soldiers carried in their marching equipment. The grip had rotted from the hickory handle, but the shaft looked stout and there was fresh earth on the scoop. Someone—evidently the peasant—had been digging with the cast-off spade.

The light circle focused on a mound of fresh sods, then swerved to the left and dipped into an excavation. Not a large excavation, but a rectangular trench, some six feet long and three feet wide, dug hip-deep in the center of the clearing.

Fielding stepped to the edge of the digging and looked down. His mouth twisted in disappointment.

"Damn! It's partly filled with rainwater."

"Porca!" Doctor Arnold was peering at the rectangular hole. "It looks as if the fellow had been digging a grave."

Bill Shepherd's neck-nape prickled. A grave. That was what it had looked like at first glance. As if that peasant had had a premonition, and come out here to dig his own. Then, with that thought, there came a disturbing memory. Herr Kull, the German, who had come to the *château* in the van of the storm-victims; he had been out here in the forest looking for a grave. Could there be some connection between this brush-screened pit and the German's quest?

"Too much water in the bottom," Fielding was shaking his head. "I'd like to know how deep that grave is. It can't be much more than four feet down."

"He was digging a grave, then," Bill Shepherd muttered.

Fielding nodded cryptically. "If you asked me, I'd say his own. Wasn't for that rainwater at the bottom, I think we'd know what—"

There was a startled exclamation from Doctor Arnoldo, who had suddenly wheeled and pointed into the brush. "Attend! I hear something moving in those bushes over there."

They listened, nerves tense, eyes vigilant.

Thunder rumbled in the night.

Damp breeze rustled the foliage.

Then, in the underbrush across the clearing, Bill Shepherd heard a stealthy movement as of someone pushing through the tangled shrub. A dead stick snapped. Fielding shot his light at the bushes. "Who's there?" The challenge was answered by a scurry, a crackling of twigs and branches, a rushing through the undergrowth as the prowler bolted off.

BILL SHEPHERD cried, "He's getting away!" and charged across the clearing like an explosion. His nerves had wanted action. Something he could do. Something he could grab on to. Ever since entering this forest he had waited, repressed, tight-nerved, anticipating some move from some human part of the night's fantasy. Ghosts there had been in plenty—Madam Landru's eyes—murder mysteries—a man killed by poison gas. Fielding had speculated logically, but his logic had only been conjecture, and Bill Shepherd had been waiting for a gesture from whatever corporeal hand might be behind this malevolence.

He dashed for the bushes where the prowler had rushed away, shouting, "Head him off! Don't let him escape!"

Fielding and the Italian cut into the brush behind him, running elbow to elbow. Bill Shepherd plowed blindly through the tangle, following a sound of crashing in the twigs as though someone were running zigzag. The fugitive was not a dozen yards ahead, tangenting off through a thicket of saplings which were brought for a split second into view by a blaze of lightning.

Bill Shepherd yelled at the Englishman and the doctor to take the other side of the thicket, and had a flicker-glimpse of them skirting the copse of young trees. Thunder boomed over the forest tops, and the foliage flattened to a gust of wind. Fielding's flashlight twinkled off and disappeared, and Bill Shepherd tore at invisible briars, fighting to follow the sounds of the escaping trespasser. Pausing to listen, he could hear the Englishman and the Italian floundering in the brush some disdance away, but the noises in the thicket ahead had stopped.

There was a sudden, dazzling illumination of lightning, and a deafening volley of thunder. A squall of water swept down over the trees. Sapling thicket and forest were engulfed. For another dozen yards, Bill Shepherd fought his way through the blotted-out undergrowth and swirling rain, then came to a panting stop. The cloudburst was over. Lightning blazed five or six times in rapid aerial displays; there were three tremendous bursts of thunder; then a silence of draining water and leaves dripping.

A shaft of pale moonlight came filtering down through the sapling tops. Bill Shepherd looked up; saw the moon riding over a tumbling sea of black clouds. The forest came to view in this lunar exposure, wan and unreal, like a woodland viewed through smoky green glass. Bill Shepherd

listened to the water-soaked stillness, vigilant for action. No sound at hand save the guttering of twigs and vines. The prowler must have escaped.

He bent his glance to the undergrowth on the other side of the thicket.

"Fielding!" he called finally. "Are you there?"

No answer.

He stiffened, tensely alert. "Fielding! Doctor Arnoldo! Are you all right?"

No sound save the drip and leak of wet leaves.

"Hey, there! Fielding! Arnoldo! What's the matter? Where've you gone?"

The drip and leak of wet leaves, and a mutter of thunder retreating down the sky.

Bill Shepherd exclaimed aloud, "My God, they can't be far—I saw them not three minutes ago in that brush patch over there!"

But they weren't in that brush patch now, for it wasn't sixty feet away; he could see it clearly through the moon-washed saplings, and the bushes were not quite shoulder-high, and if those men were there he would see their heads. They weren't in the brush patch and they weren't in the sapling copse and they weren't in that clearing back there by the path. They couldn't have gone beyond the reach of his shout, and if they hadn't why didn't they answer?

"Fielding! Doctor Arnoldo! Haaay, Arnoldo! Fielding!"

Not even an echo.

He stood quite still listening to a new sound in the forest nocturne—the ticking of his own heart. He realized his hand was aching in his pocket, but that was from its clench on the Mauser pistol. He drew the weapon from his pocket; shouted again; waited.

THEN, moving cautiously, his eyes going from side to side, he skirted the sapling grove and breasted into the brush where the two men had been last seen. There was about half an acre of this scrub and elderberry, fenced by a stand of charred pines that stood like black masts in the moonlight. They couldn't have thrashed across half an acre of briar and gone into those pines, for their charge had kept pace with Bill Shepherd's and they had been on his flank when he entered the sapling thicket. But he started for the timber, because there was the only cover within possible running distance of the briar patch where the two men could have disappeared. He didn't reach the pines.

Barbed wire. It blocked entrance to the pines like a wall. Snarled and tangled, concealed in the undergrowth, it made an unclimbable hedge of steel thorns—a rusty snare of savage hooks—a man-trap capable of enmeshing a regiment, had one tried to get through.

Bill Shepherd followed the wire for quite a distance before he realized the implication. Fielding and the Italian doctor could not have charged on into the pines. Neither could the prowler he had chased into the sapling thicket. Somewhere in that half acre of low underbrush and that little covey of saplings—in a moment as brief as a squall of rain and six thunderclaps—the Englishman, the Italian, and the prowler, too, had disappeared.

He charged in criss-cross attacks through the brush patch, beating at the foliage with his pistol barrel. He rushed about in the copse of saplings. He knew, then, that they must have retreated to the footpath beyond the clearing; but the cloudburst had muddied the path, and in the mud there should have been tracks. When he crossed the clearing where the peasant had been digging a grave, and reached the footpath and saw no fresh footprints in the mud, Bill Shepherd yelled and ran.

He reached the car just as the moon was foundering once more and the thunder was coming back across the sky. He didn't stop to look at the dead man stiff in the poppy bed. Leaping into the Hispano-Suiza, he snapped on the switch and brought his foot down on the starter.

The engine went *grrrrrr* and the headlamps dimmed.

He worked the spark-lever and the gas-pump, frantically priming.

The engine coughed, growled, and the headlamps almost went out.

He rammed the starter to the floor. The engine turned over once, slowly, then went dead. Bill Shepherd groaned. That damned cloudburst! Water in the battery; magneto and ignition probably flooded. He knew nothing about automobile engines—second-hand Hispano-Suizas in particular—and he would not have been in the fettle to tinker with this one had he been a garage mechanic.

He splashed around in the mud and cranked wildly, his arm empowered by the knowledge that a glassy-eyed dead man at the roadside was looking on. But the engine, too, had been choked; the headlights dimmed like dying eyes, then petered out.

The moon was going. Bill Shepherd released the crank and stood back panting, shooting scared glances into the blackening roadside thickets. Swearing helped, but it wouldn't start the car. He fought once more to revive the engine. No go. Stooped over, cranking, he couldn't watch the forest, and this forest where peasants could die from poison gas and men disappeared at a flash of lightning had to be watched.

CHAPTER XX

COMPANY OF GRAVES

HE WATCHED it, crouching against the car, pistol gripped in hand, eyes darting this way and that. Mustn't give way to panic. Mustn't lose his head. Either something had happened to Fielding and that Italian — they'd been overpowered, held silent at gun-point, at bay in some bush clump where he hadn't seen them—or he'd missed a calculation, and they'd made off into the timber. Or for reasons of their own they'd ducked out of sight, played squat-tag in the underbrush, remained hidden. But he'd thrashed every quarter of that field. They couldn't have gone through the barbed wire. Couldn't have reached the footpath without leaving tracks.

No time for the droning voice of Madam Landru to speak out of memory in his ear. "There are those in the Forêt de Feu who do not leave visible tracks."

No time to recall the unsolved deaths of a little girl found in a shell-hole, and a blacksmith's daughter murdered by an unseen killer, and a poacher sniped by a marksman in the black of night. Those assassins had been as trackless as the cannon which blocked the road to Thiepval, as the mustard gas which had strangled that peasant in the poppies.

"I can't crouch here doing nothing like a fool!"

His snarl was brave enough in his hearing, but he couldn't stiffen his hand. It was shaking of its own accord—he could feel it at his side—fluttering like something that had become detached from his person and didn't belong to him. His knees, too, seemed infected with these tremors. He had to get going before his legs contracted this cowardly vertigo.

The Contalmaison *Gendarmerie?* Eight miles at least. Down this wretched wagon road and round-about in that landscape of cemeteries. He considered the dash, craftily. Craftily, because he wanted to avoid the voice of conscience that told him he wasn't going to do it. Don't be a fool, Shepherd. Get the police. Only sensible thing to do. Race to that town and rouse the countryside. Make the dash for Contalmaison—the quickest way to get out of this Forêt de Feu.

His feet were ready and urgent. He wanted to go. Why the devil did his mind go back to that *château*—that sepulchral ruin in the midst of desolation—that shadow-haunted room presided over by Madame Landru and Archambaud — that fireside peopled by alien visitors; the Russian savant, the German tourist, the roosterish little bus-driver, the dark-eyed French girl. Damn it, he couldn't leave the girl in that nightmare! He had to go back and get her out of there. Gabrielle Gervais . . .

Already he was running. It was, he told himself, his damned American weakness for heroics. Typical Yankee stuff—pulling someone else's chestnuts out of the fire. Hadn't his brother come over here doing

the same thing? The whole A. E. F. a year later, for that matter. But you couldn't do anything about it if you were born that way. Plunge in after somebody you didn't even know—no matter if they'd stuck you up five hours before with a pistol. Rush in where angels would fear to tread; but get the girl out of possible jeopardy, whether you trusted her or not. Women and children first—whether it was La Belle France or one Gabrielle Gervais.

He ran in spurts. Dashing for fifty yards. Pausing to look around. Dashing another fifty yards. He kept his finger alive on the trigger, and he held to the middle road ruts. The *château* was not four miles, and if he plugged along without mishap he could make it in about thirty minutes. The mud was gluey, and the road seemed to make a lot of bends and windings—longer than when he had traversed it in a car. The forest came closer, and the underbrush was darker, the shadows more black and fantastic for the pale revelations of the moon.

The physical effort of running relaxed his nerves a little; the fear which enveloped his skin was countered by his single purpose to outstrip any baneful evil which might be closing in around the girl. He had not forgotten that he had deprived her of her gun, and that she had later declined its return, anticipating his need for a weapon. Nice guy he'd have been to bolt off and leave her unarmed. The sooner he saw her out of these woods, the better. Funny—her bearing a resemblance to Edith Cavell.

His thoughts centered on the girl as he ran, but the nerve-ends under his skin were centered on the forest. A bush rustled by the breeze, and he skittered sideways. A looming tree shadow startled him. A white wraith creeping through a thicket made him whip about with leveled gun. Only mist raised by the warm rain.

THE moonlight waned so subtly, the forest was blacked out before he realized it. The storm was coming back. Flares in the sky; loudening thunder rolls; quickening wind. He lengthened his stride, running doggedly, following the faint-glistening streaks of water in the road ruts. Lightning ran across the night, and the forest jumped in and out of view; and then, after one brilliant electrical flare, he could no longer make out the roadway. Thunder clapped violently overhead, releasing an inky downpour. Bill Shepherd waited for another sky flare; marked the road in that instant's illumination; put his head between his shoulders and plunged on.

He came to the girl's ditched automobile, and judged the château at another mile. He ran on blindly, hoping this cloudburst would pass as the previous rain squalls had. But the rain settled into a steady downpour, as if the capricious weather had at last made up its mind. The lightning was only occasional. In this black, sheeting bath, he missed the road.

He had made a side turning somewhere in the darkness; misjudged the corridor of a bylane for the roadway. He rounded and ran back, hunting the wagon ruts. No, he hadn't come that far in this direction; the wagon road lay just over there.

It wasn't over there. Blue light flared through the rain, and he was on some footpath deep in the forest. He might have been on it for five minutes—maybe fifteen. He wheeled and ran in the direction he had followed first; some cross-path must have led into this from the road. He couldn't find it. Darting and turning in the streaming black, he addled his sense of direction. He swerved and ran headlong, one elbow in front of him to fend off the underbrush, following the hedge along the path. He was lost.

Then he did not know how long he ran.

He was blinded, drenched, dazed, hounded by fear. Roots tripped him, and he charged into clumps of thorn. Brush switched at his knees, and invisible branches clawed at his face. Dense walls of undergrowth kept him on the path. At one brilliant glare of lightning he found himself in a narrow gully; some moments later he was running through a fire-scorched elm grove.

He stumbled on, reeling and floundering in the blackness; the path had to go somewhere, and his legs had to run. He couldn't think of that girl in the *château,* now—couldn't think of the disappearance of the Italian doctor and Fielding — couldn't think, in this forest of death, about anything.

He ran like a drunken man, not knowing where he was going, his mind bleared, vision gone, all his will power consumed in the effort to energize his legs.

Then he saw a light. A fixed beam, faint yellow in the pouring night far ahead. The invisible path seemed to be going in that direction; Bill Shepherd wrenched himself out of panic, wiped rain from his eyes, stiffened himself with an oath, and had a goal to make for.

IT was nearer than he had expected. Not five hundred yards ahead. The yellow gleams widened to a shine; the shine was a lighted window. The Château de Feu! A blaze of blue lightning over the tree tops silhouetted the Norman tower, the mansard roofs. Hardly a pistol shot away, and for all he had known, he might have been lost in the other end of the forest.

He swore; waited for another lightning flare to show the path; then charged forward, his eye on the yellow window. The path bent suddenly, without warning in the dark, and he plunged through the hedge of underbrush, tripped on some unseen obstacle and sprawled violently in a bed of moss. He sat up cursing, clutching a twisted ankle. His next thought was for the window, and he looked for it frantically; caught sight of it—a reassuring beacon—off to the right. Not two hundred yards away, and he couldn't miss the château, now, even if he blundered from the path which was taking him there.

He paused a moment, considering the lighted window. He hadn't had time to think out a course of action. Wouldn't do to barge in like a panicky fool and scare the wits out of the girl. He'd scout that window first and see if everything was all right.

If it was—and somehow the window light was reassuring—he'd take the girl aside and tell her his car had stalled, the others had set out for town on foot, something like that. Then he'd take Herr Kull, Professor Putinov and the bus driver aside and tell them what had happened. They'd better know all the details, be advised about that menace of poison gas.

Maybe they could form a mutual guard over the *château* for the rest of the night; maybe they could go down the road together and extricate the girl's car from the ditch. Yes, he'd have to tell the Russian, the little Frenchman and the German.

Sprawling headlong, he had lost the girl's gun, and he fumbled in the wet moss, groping for it. He couldn't find it at hand; the window light did not reach the brush where he had fallen. He swerved about on his hands and knees, pawing the moss. Then his blind fingers grasped something—the thing he had tripped over. It was wet and smooth and jutted up out of the ground, a thing of wood.

He ran his hand up the side—a big stake. A stake with a cross-bar at the top. A cross-bar! Bill Shepherd pulled a breath and jerked his hand away. A cross! He had plunged through a bush and tripped over a big wooden cross.

He sprang to his feet. He was standing on a grave. A ladder of aerial fire flared and flickered across the sky, and the scene was revealed in a flood of incandescence—a little graveyard recessed in a nest of bushes—a dozen mossy mounds and a little company of crosses. The crosses were gray and weather-beaten, leaning at a dozen different angles, their names hardly legible on the time-stained wood. Bill Shepherd felt his neck-hairs stiffen. Could this be the German front-line cemetery Madam Landru had referred to? This little company of neglected graves, the spot where the poacher had been slain?

He groped in a sodden pocket to find his cigarette lighter. Cupped between his palms, the little flare was only a glimmer in the rain. But it was sufficient light, held close, to reveal the lettering on the

cross Bill Shepherd had stumbled over. He bent to read the name.

Bill Shepherd dropped the lighter and fell back with a choked cry.

He forgot the pistol he had lost in the moss.

He forgot his intention to be wary in approaching the *château.*

Rushing across the grave-mounds, he flung himself into the underbrush; tore a path through the boscage on a straight line for the lighted window.

WHEN he came up under the sill, he was as thrashed, thorn-scratched and muddied as though he had clawed his way through a No Man's Land of barbed wire. But he did not feel the nettles clotting his trousers, the slashes on his cheek and hands. His nerves were as numb as though his circulation had stopped; his hands were cold, without feeling.

He gripped the thick stone sill, reared his head to a level with the casement, and peered through the leaded-glass panes. Then it was as if his heart stopped beating.

They were there. Around the hearth where they had been grouped when he had last seen them together. A bright log burned and cast their shadows across the long room, and they were silhouetted in a circle, their postures relaxed, the men talking and smoking, the girl with a glass of cognac on her knee. But they were blurred silhouettes as seen through the rain-glazed window; the firelight was diffused around them; their figures were mistily outlined as though each gave off an aura of steam.

Gabrielle Gervais, who had held him up on the forest road last evening.

Herr Kull, the German from Essen, who had been thrown by his horse in the woods and had come to the *château's* door with a bleeding head.

Putinov, the Russian savant, here on research from Siberia.

Marcel Tac, who had crashed through the bridge his antique French Fiat.

Doctor Arnoldo, who had come from Italy with an ambulance!

And Fielding, the English painter, who had been there at the fireplace when Bill Shepherd had seen him for the first time!

They were all there!

No one of them had fully explained his presence. All had come to that hearth under cloudy, mysterious circumstance. Bill Shepherd could hear Madam Landru's words go tolling through his mind. "The Battle of the Somme is still going on. The dead have never died in the Forêt de Feu. They are all here tonight. All together they have returned. The British. The French. The Russians and Italians. The Germans—"

Could those people before that fireplace be the folk of the old mystic's legend?

The name on that grave-cross in the forest had been *Siegfried Kull!*

Could all those people be dead?

CHAPTER XXI

THE WARRIORS

IT was not hard to believe of those steamy, unaccountable figures in that shadowy room where a clock had struck out of a silence since 1916. That fireside where heads had rolled made a good meeting place for a gathering of vagrant immortals. In that gutted *château* with its burned-out halls and demolished chambers the spirits of the dead would be at home.

Could they be the representatives of a host of such nocturnal wanderers—that girl who chanced to look like Edith Cavell, that shaggy-headed Russian with the bandaged shin, Herr Kull with the dark abrasion on his forehead, the little French bus driver with his lorry out of the past, the Englishman and the Italian who could vanish together in a thicket in the heart of the forest and reappear at a hearthside like this?

Bill Shepherd stared through the window with the rain running down his numbed face.

Voices murmured beyond the glass. That German whose name was on a grave-cross was gesturing, talking emphatically.

"—the Germans will win. We will not

be stopped by the Allied Line. You will see. The French cannot hold out much longer. Russia will crumble. Great Britain will be unable to cope with our air force."

The little Frenchman was leaning forward fiercely. "They will not pass! Remember that, Herr Kull! We stopped you at the Marne. You will never come so close to Paris again."

The Russian was laughing with his head thrown back. The Russian, who was, as well as a college professor, an airman. "So you think my great country will crumble, you Germans? Ho ho, do not make a mistake! Russia has appeared to crumble before. She has always been going to disintegrate. Hindenburg gave us a surprise, but it will not happen again. Always, knocked down, the bear stands up stronger than before."

The little bus driver lifted a fist. "France does not need this help from Russia. We know how to handle the Boche."

Herr Kull was half out of his chair. His voice came loudly, "I tell you now, little runt, were we not interned in this *château* by the storm—were it not that that American might arrive—"

Gabrielle Gervais was speaking. "You men are acting like fools . . ."

Her voice faded out behind a burst of rain on the panes before Bill Shepherd's face; she was gesturing vehemently, the others were talking all at once. Hardly aware of what he was doing, Bill Shepherd pulled himself up into the window casement; pressed his face against the streaming glass. He heard the words "Kaiser," "Hindenburg," "Lloyd George," "Belgium." Voices muffled, elided together. The steamy figures gesticulated excitedly. Hands waved in altercation. Ghosts arguing the cause of a bygone Armageddon?

It was like listening to voices of dissension from the spirit world. Those shadow-people in the firelight were the stuff of dreams. Cock-crow, and they would all go away. The disputatious murmur grew louder in Bill Shepherd's ear like the babel of delirium. He knew this was hallucinary. He had hit his head somewhere. The voices were wind and rain on the window panes before his face, and the people were an illusion of firelight and mental unbalance.

The discordant voices seemed to rise. The girl who looked like Edith Cavell was scolding the Fiat driver in French. The shadowy Englishman joined the dispute. An exclamation in Italian. The Russian was on his feet, his misty profile wrenched in anger. The German's bald head bobbed furiously, his features contorted as in rage. Shadows merged in struggle, spun across the hearth and reeled out into mid room. The German and the Russian, faces transfigured in wrath, locked together, wrestling.

Chairs went back and wall shadows jumped. It looked like a blow. The German flew about on his heels, went backard toward the staircase in a drunken totter, passed out of Bill Shepherd's vision. There was a sodden crash. The Russian in mid room stood breathing heavily, wiping his hands on his chest. Silhouettes behind him were posed as figures in tableau. Then, deep-toned out of the picture, the alcove clock began to strike.

Explosion!

BILL Shepherd had never intended to join that scene. But he had pressed against the window without thinking. Old panes gave beneath his weight, lead caulking broke, he fell in through the casement in a great burst of smashing glass. It seemed to him he was there on the floor a long time on his hands and knees, transfixed, speechless, his posture frozen, powerless to move. The clock went on bonging, and little jingles of glass continued to fall from the jagged sill.

Then Gabrielle Gervais was beside him. The little bus driver. Doctor Arnoldo. And Fielding and the Russian were helping him to his feet. He could only stand wordless, paralyzed. Fielding was brushing his coat, brushing off fragments of broken glass.

"Are you all right, old man? Good Lord! you gave us a shock."

Bill Shepherd whispered, "I gave *you* a shock!"

"We thought you'd gone to Contalmaison."

Bill Shepherd began, "You thought I—?" and gagged.

"Corpo di Bacco!" Doctor Arnoldo's lean features relaxed. "We forget, Signor Fielding. Our friend, Shepherd, does not understand how—"

"Of course!" Fielding cried. "Stupid of me, Shepherd. Naturally you're as surprised to see us here as we are to see you. You stayed out there in that damned forest looking for us, what? I had an idea you'd see what had happened, and dash off to Contalmaison for help."

Bill Shepherd passed a hand across his forehead, staring.

"Didn't you see the dugout?" Fielding cried. "Didn't you see the cave-in? Lord, of course you wouldn't, the entrance was hidden in the bushes and camouflaged with vines! The doctor and I fell right into the bloody thing. It was there on the other side of that sapling thicket—I might've known you wouldn't see it—cunningly hidden as it was by the sappers who dug it during the War."

Doctor Arnoldo exclaimed, "It was screened over like an elephant trap! We fell right down through the vines. There we were seven feet underground. A subterranean tunnel, and that accursed beast we were chasing was running in the dark ahead of us."

"We couldn't see what it was," Fielding said. "It dived into that brush screen ahead of us, and led us into that pitfall. We ran after it down the tunnel. Shouted for you to follow us, but I suppose you didn't hear our yells for the thunder. My God, what a piece of engineering that tunnel is! Concrete walls and ceiling. Drainage pipes and ventilation flues like the London Underground. Must've been dug by the Germans before the Allied drive. Perfect subway for troops. Two miles under the forest and brought us straight to the *château.*"

"We were here in ten minutes," the Italian doctor pointed out. "When we arrived at the *château* I was astonished."

"We ran like hell," Fielding grinned. "Do you know where the tunnel comes up, Shepherd? Right under your Norman tower! I've an idea this Somme Front in Picardy is honeycombed with a lot of old German minings that have never been discovered since the War. They dug in like termites around here.

"Anyway, we came to a flight of steps and ended up in a stairway under the tower. Sure, we climbed up three floors through a lot of trash and ended in that room on the top floor of the *château* where we saw the big bat. That's where we caught the dog."

Bill Shepherd whispered, "Dog?"

"IN the darkness of the tunnel we didn't know what it was. But that's the prowler that scared us there in the woods. Remember, Archambaud said there was a stairway down from the top floor where we heard the beast howling? It must've gone down to the tunnel and chased out into the forest where it frightened us. Then we chased it back into the tunnel. Archambaud says he did not know about the tunnel because he never dared try that back stairway. But he says the German engineers did a lot of work around the *château.* Anyway, that was the prowler. Madam Landru's hound."

Fielding grinned ruefully. "The confounded beast was more frightened than we were. Spoiled my opportunity to investigate that peasant's grave. We could've bailed out the rainwater, and learned the answer, but I think I can tell you what he'd been up to. Those dated coins are the answer, Shepherd. The man was a ghoul."

"A ghoul," Bill Shepherd echoed huskily.

"Digging up old graves, see? There's quite a number of them in the forest—I've noticed them in the thickets. Germans mostly. Never transplanted into the memorial plots. Probably forgotten. Unknown soldiers. That peasant had nice pickings. Come out and dig up these unknown graves and rob the bodies of whatever silver or trinkets he could find. That explains the date on his miserable coins.

"The gas is easy. Spading down there in that hole he'd been digging, he probably drove the scoop through the rusted case of a gas shell, a shell that had buried itself in the earth and failed to explode. Hadn't been water in the hole, we'd have seen it. But that's what doubtless gassed him in that grave."

A thick voice spoke into Bill Shepherd's hearing. "Did you say, *mein herr,* there were graves?"

Herr Kull was approaching, dull-eyed, pale, his stare on Fielding, his walk slow and heavy-footed, like a dreary menace.

The Englishman and the others turned quickly to this speaker, as if they had forgotten his presence in the room. Fielding said quietly, "Yes, Herr Kull, I have seen in the vicinity of this *château* a number of German graves. There is a small plot of them not far from here in the forest."

The room wheeled and blurred on Bill Shepherd's vision, and the German stretched out of focus like a reflection in a convex mirror.

"*Ja,*" the guttural voice was saying. "I have spent years looking. From Verdun to Amiens I have searched. Every summer I come from Germany and look. But there are too many of them—there is no record—all I know is that he was killed in the Battle of the Somme." The mottled face nodded dully. "That is how I came to be riding in the forest last evening. I am looking for the grave of my only son. He has the same name as mine—Siegfried Kull."

"I saw it," Bill Shepherd whispered. "I saw it out there in the forest tonight, Herr Kull."

The room was steadying, coming back into focus. Feeling was draining back into his hands. He could hear reality in these voices; taste blood from a cut in his lip; smell wood-smoke from the fire and a musk of wet wool—his own coat-sleeves—cloth drying out in the warmth and beginning to steam.

Gabrielle Gervais was looking up at him, her eyes filled with feminine concern. "But are *you* all right, Monsieur Shepherd? Your lip—" she reached up with a handkerchief. "*Mon Dieu!* you frightened me terribly. Plunging through the window like that—"

"I was standing in the casement," he said in a flatted tone. The others were looking at him—Doctor Arnoldo with a sympathetic frown—Fielding in anxiety—Tac, the little bus driver, in bewilderment—the Russian, Putinov, interested, uncomprehending.

"I was standing in the window casement. I didn't go to Contalmaison. My car was stalled. I lost myself on the road trying to come back to the *château.* When I looked through the window, I—I saw you all in here. I climbed up into the casement to hear better. I thought—I thought I heard you quarreling."

"It was my fault," the little Fiat driver declared. "I took offence at a remark about my car. They said—these two passengers I brought tonight from Thiepval—that my Fiat was a rickety rattletrap, that it should not be allowed on the roads, that it was like France to keep a lot of old busses in duty that should have been discarded during the World War."

"The fault was mine," Professor Putinov growled. "I lost my temper. The subject of this absurd motor-bus took us into a discussion of European politics. A Russian can never discuss politics and keep his head. You would think I, who am supposed to be a psychologist and a student of man's mentality, would keep his head during any topic. To Herr Kull I wish to apologize."

Doctor Arnoldo said placatingly, "All the way up from Italy, bringing that old French general to his home by ambulance, we discussed the European situation. Always such discussions are futile."

The German moved his head from side to side, his expression shame faced. "I am the one who lost the temper. When the talk turned to Germany's war-guilt. Always I am hot-tempered on the subject, and my head tonight is not good from the bump when my horse unsaddled me. I apologize to you, Professor Putinov. *Ach, Gott,* did you hear that old clock go off when I slammed into it and gave it a jolt?"

Fielding put a hand on Bill Shepherd's arm. "I'm afraid we should all apologize to you, old man. Dinning around your fireside like this. We got talking about the Kaiser, and then Fascism, Munich and Communism, and there's always a row when you get arguing over the next war—"

And they'd been arguing over the *next* war!

Bill Shepherd walked over to the staircase, and sat down heavily, and began to laugh.

CHAPTER XXII

MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT

BILL SHEPHERD felt sick and foolish. He had made it all up in his mind. Turned a pleasant British water-colorist into a flitting haunt — an olive-skinned Italian physician into a Doctor Caligari—a Russian, a bus driver, and a girl had become, in the pale cast of his thought, the characters of a ten-twenty-thirty.

Seeing them now gathered about the fire, in this mellow light, they were only people—tired people, lost travelers as the girl had said.

Putinov, the Russian, was talking companionably to Herr Kull; Fielding, having busied himself in aiding Archambaud at boarding over the broken window, was now sitting with glass and pipe, his eyes closed, enjoying the fire's warmth; Arnoldo had left the room, to, as he said, bluntly, "locate the W. C."; little Tac was scrubbing mud from the sleeve of his bus-driver's uniform with something from a small bottle which the doctor had given to him. Gabrielle Gervais, at Shepherd's side, stretched and yawned.

Impossible as it seemed, the room was almost cozy and domestic, provided of course, that you did not remember its situation in this shell-torn *château*. With Madame Landru and her husband and dog retired to their sleeping quarters in a room off the kitchen, even the *château* did not seem as haunting as it had before.

Bill Shepherd, rousing from reflections in which he had scoffed at himself for his mystery-story imagination, found himself listening to Professor Putinov. The Russian from Tomsk talked well and amusingly. Although his manner toward his listeners was a little like that of a classroom savant patronizing students with large words. Bill Shepherd caught references to Freud, Kraft-Ebing, Saly-Saselle, Leibnitz, Podmore, Lambert and Heidbreder. And accented equivalents for "metaphysics," "extra-sensory impressions," "mass hallucination," "psychic trauma," "poltergeist activities."

"The French," Putinov was saying, "are perfect subjects for mass hallucination. Our little bus driver could tell you that he has seen many things in company with the villagers of Thiepval on nights when there was no moon and a German or a Russian, for example, could see nothing. The stories with which Madame Landru entertained us a few moments ago are typical. This back country in France is alive with such stories. For example, lycanthropy. But myself, I'm not interested in werewolves. It is the legends of the War that I am here to study."

"The legends of the War?" Herr Kull asked gruffly. He was trying to be amiable. He could not exactly warm toward the Russian, who had struck him a blow in the heat of argument, and his smile was a little like a sneer, but one realized that in smiling at all the bald-headed German meant to forgive his hasty-fisted companion.

"Yes," Putinov nodded, "the legends of the French Army and peasantry. The French have a sense of humor, very amusing. For example, there was the classic legend of the Cossacks at the Marne—the myth, incidentally, that filtered through the German advance and frightened Von Kluck into an unnecessary retreat from Paris. Of course everyone knows there were no Russian troops anywhere near the Marne.

"But the hallucinations persisted. The *poilus* insisted they had seen the Russian cavalry with their great fur hats and equally great fur beards. Ha! That was

funny. The Cossacks had not even passed the Vistula. But the French were so heartened by this mass illusion that it turned the tide of battle, and Russia, if I may say so, won the War even as the Soviet army today is likely to win our imminent next European embroglio."

"The Soviets seem very confident of their power," Herr Kull said shortly.

Professor Putinov retreated hastily from the point. "There was also an interesting legend that the Scotch troops in their pretty skirts had arrived in Belgium. One of the most entertaining of these myths was that about the Virgin of Albert—"

Doctor Arnoldo, who had returned to the room, said, lifting his eyebrows, "The Virgin of Albert?"

"I TOLD you the French had a sense of humor." The hairy professor chuckled. "So. The Virgin of Albert. Of course she was in a niche over a church door. The church had been shelled during the first German advance in which they burned the town. Although the walls were cracked and crumbling, the roof fallen in, the altar destroyed, the Virgin in her niche remained. Most precariously she remained. Hanging out over the street by a strand of wire—a big, wooden image, smiling down on those who passed below.

"The story was that she would fall the day the War ended. Ask anybody in the town of Albert and they will tell you that she fell plunging on exactly the day the Germans surrendered. Is that not a pretty myth? Ah. Who but the French could believe such a tale?

"Me, I found out an even more amusing ending. Quite a Russian touch. In falling, exactly at her specified date, the good image crashed down on the head of the local hero who was returning, covered with medals, from four years in the trenches defending his country at Verdun where he had not received a scratch. With true irony the pretty image bashed this hero's head in."

Marcel Tac protested angrily, "He is making fun of us! He has been making fun of us all evening. These godless Russians believe in nothing! I do not like to hear this man making fun of the French *mystique.*"

Professor Putinov laughed. "It is useless to protest against science, my little friend. I understand the French *mystique.*" The Russian included the others with a grin. "It is a beautiful balance of religious mysticism and warlike patriotic fervor. France nicely combines her soldiers and her saints. They go to war, if you will forgive me, like many Christian nations, certain that God is in a general's uniform directing their troops. Joan of Arc is a classic example."

"I will not listen to this foreigner belittle the Maid of Orleans!" The little bus driver's eyes blazed. "He would jeer at *le bon Dieu.* Mademoiselle." Tac turned to Gabrielle Gervais, "you should not listen to this infamous talk."

Gabrielle Gervais said in a low voice, "It is all right, *mon ami.* You must remember that people in other countries have other ideas."

Professor Putinov grunted. "I do not mean to harm anyone's feelings. If forty million Frenchmen wish to believe that God is on their General Staff, I would be the last man in times like these to hope it is not true. I have an idea the French Army at the Maginot Line may need Divine leadership."

Marcel Tac said hotly, "The French army will take care of the situation." He puffed his chest. "I am in the first reserve. Daily I await my call. I would not be afraid to be first to go. My father was in the last war. My uncles. I am ready to defend my country. *Non,* I want to be the first in the line. I do not remember the last war, but I will have my share of the next one, you may be sure."

Bill Shepherd regarded this martial outburst with an averted smile of cynicism. It was a touchy subject—this next war. A little too touchy for tired people at three o'clock in the morning. Herr Kull's features reflected resentment again.

The German muttered, "Perhaps this

little private will not be so anxious to go when *Der Tag* arrives. I would go myself if I was not too old. My son was in the war; I have always been proud to have given my only son."

BILL SHEPHERD thought the conversation had taken a dreary turn. These Europeans were unaccountable. Fifteen minutes ago he had walked with the bald-headed German to the grey little cemetery in the underbrush where Herr Kull had shed fatherly tears over the mossy mound of his son. Bill Shepherd had wondered then how anyone could be proud of such an obscure ending for a son. There was no heroic record on the cross. Only a name. It had seemed to mean a lot to Herr Kull, merely to know that his son had been buried.

Muttering to himself, the German rose and stalked from the room. Conversation lagged. Everyone yawned, and, uncomfortable in damp clothes, they shifted in their chairs. Certainly there was nothing phantom-like in these faces harsh-lined with fatigue. The specters had gone.

There was no more mystery here than that pause in the conversation which superstitious people believed invariably arrived at the quarter hour. Of course Gabrielle Gervais had still to be accounted for. Shepherd found himself watching the girl speculatively. He liked her quiet demeanor and the dark gleams of firelight in her hair. Stubborn chin. Self-reliance about the mouth. An un-selfconsciousness that he approved. He hitched closer in his chair.

He said in a lowered voice, "Not thinking about your romance with the horse-eater, were you?" He grinned.

She frowned, "You are still suspicious of me?"

He said, "I'm always suspicious of women, particularly nice looking ones. But I wanted to thank you for the loan of your pistol. I'm sorry I lost it out there in the woods."

She said, shrugging, "That is all right. My uncle will not miss it. He has a house full of guns. He is a collector in Paris."

"That's how your coupé comes to have a Paris license?"

"*Oui,* that is how."

He couldn't help admiring her tenacity. This runaway bride yarn—Plot 33—was her story and she stuck to it. He gave up a languid effort at indirect cross-examination—suddenly in the fire's warmth he was drowsy—and lounged back in his chair, listening to the drift of conversation. Herr Kull had rejoined the group, and the talk which had been skirting the edge of power politics was resumed.

The old argument.

Bill Shepherd didn't get into it. He knew nothing about such abstractions as Communism, Fascism, and Munich. He could only have voiced prejudices. Little Tac had spoken a provocative word on the Czech steal, and Fielding was defending Britain's policies. But the Englishman's comments were reserved.

And he spoke quietly.

"Art," he was saying, "is my only real interest. War is no longer an art. The fine tactics of cavalry and infantry maneuvers have gone forever. It has become a problem in economics. There is nothing artistic about a boycott or an embargo."

Gabrielle Gervais asked dryly, "Was there ever anything artistic, Monsieur Fielding, about a lot of men killing and wounding each other?"

Doctor Arnoldo interjected a suave, "But there are many artistic wounds, *mademoiselle.* Wars are not without certain compensations to humankind. Consider, in the last war, the development of plastic surgery. Many new techniques were evolved in the wartime hospitals. For example, the improved methods of trephining and giving blood transfusions. I doubt if surgery would have advanced to its present stage had there not been wars."

The girl's eyes were caustic. "You doctors. You talk as if surgery was the end and not the means. *Eh bien,*" her smile went down at the corners, "to a surgeon we are all no more than guinea pigs. Pain does not enter the equation, one would think."

THE Italian smiled loftily. "Perhaps pain is but a way of testing character. Or a restraint on human recklessness."

He looked at Bill Shepherd, amused, asking confirmation. "For my own part, I believe there is too much emphasis in the medical profession on opiates and anaesthetics. The man who endures pain builds character. Regard Mussolini, who was wounded badly in the trenches. Adolph Hitler. Even Stalin. These are men who endured hardships almost Spartan."

Bill Shepherd was too tired for philosophic controversy. The room was humid. Drugged by the fire's warmth and fatigue, Bill Shepherd dozed.

His head, nodding, gave an upward jerk. Was that a face at that window? A dream? He could have sworn he had glimpsed a face peering through the watery pane—right there at that window beyond Herr Kull. Nothing there now. His overworked imagination had been at it again. Half asleep, he had glimpsed the German's reflection on that dark square of glass.

He nodded sleepily, pretending attention to some comment from Professor Putinov. Voices and room retreated once more from his consciousness. He caught himself slumping in the chair; pulled himself upright. Then suddenly he was stark awake. Shocked to attention in his chair. That sound was no dream.

Organ music! Bellowing into the room, fortissimo! The pealing martial strains of *The Watch On The Rhine!*

Everyone rose to his feet astounded by the music which rolled into the fire-lit room like harmonic thunder. The German national anthem was followed by the *Marseillaise*. Patriotic little Marcel Tac stiffened to salute. As he did so, the music marched into the national hymn of Italy. Doctor Arnoldo said faintly, "That must be coming from Rome." But then they were listening to the booming, measured chords of the Russian national anthem. The astonishing concert ended with the Miltonic strains of *God Save The King.*

In the silence that abruptly followed, the party at the fireplace stared at Bill Shepherd, at one another in unbelief.

Bill Shepherd exclaimed, "A radio! I didn't know there was one in the *château.*"

Fielding blurted, "But where would a program be coming from at this time of the morning?"

There was a diversion in the passageway to the kitchen. Clatter of wooden shoes coming at a gallop. Shadows posed on the room's threshold. Madame Landru and Archambaud—the caretaker with his mouth open like a robbed purse; the old woman's eyes glowing out of the dimness like bicycle lamps.

Bill Shepherd cried, "Was that radio in your room, Madame Landru?" and was choked off by the expression on her face.

Madame Landru's voice droned into his hearing like a knell.

"There is no radio in the *Château de Feu!*"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Take Your Punishment

By PAUL O'NEIL

Remember, George Branson: It takes half a lifetime to find out what the old man meant

GEORGE BRANSON had entered the police station, casually, many times during his life; but now, with fear giving him perception, he realized that he had hardly seen it. He had never really noticed the harsh smell of disinfectant, the rickety, dusty old chandeliers, the drafty cold of the place.

He shivered, some part of him which had grown soft during the easy years quailing as he crossed the desolate marble floor. The jail, upstairs, would be worse.

The desk sergeant had his cap on the back of his head. His uniform coat, unbuttoned, hung open just enough to disclose the shiny leather of a shoulder holster. He needed a shave and his beefy hands were dirty. He stared at George Branson for a moment and then asked, "What's your name?" as if he had been affronted.

George Branson was overcome with a helpless wish to please this gross man, to make him smile the way you wanted to make the school bully smile when you were a kid.

He gave his name politely. The policeman scribbled briefly, looked up again, and then turned, with infinite boredom, to stare out the window. There was a billboard across the street and the desk sergeant appeared to be looking at it. George Branson looked at it, too. He read it twice, carefully.

The desk sergeant turned his head slowly, in irritation, and said, "You can sit down on that bench."

He sat down. It was early in the morning, and there was little noise. A door banged somewhere along an echoing corridor, and in the basement a motorcycle exhaust roared for a few seconds, accenting the silence. The desk sergeant found a match and sucked on it.

The awful loneliness which George Branson had been fighting swept over him. He had an expensive automobile, and his overcoat was new and from a good tailor, and his wife's name was sometimes in the society sections. But none of these things could protect him now.

George Branson had not thought of his father save in a vague, momentary way, for twenty years. Both he and the town his father had known were changed. Their beginnings were almost forgotten, now, in the years which had brought the city theaters and traffic and plate-glass show windows, and had made him successful and conservative and heavy.

But in this moment of need George Branson, closing his eyes, remembered how his old man had died. He'd almost forgotten that boyhood phrase—his old man. Travail sharpens the memory. He'd been sixteen, awkward and gangling. Scenes and sounds and smells from that day came back to him, sharp and nostalgic.

THE town had sprawled on the frontier. He remembered the mills on Front Street, the smell of newly cut fir and of tidewater, the scream of the saws. There had been dirt streets, ankle deep in muck when it rained, wooden sidewalks, saloon doors, horses drooping in buggy harness, and squat Coast Indians beaching their canoes. It had been a tough town.

His old man had died of a gunshot wound, a forty-five slug through the back. He'd died stretched out on the green plush sofa which Mrs. Rose Madsen, a mill man's wife, had shipped around the Horn. His old man had been the town marshal. He remembered how Ad Schram, the saloonkeeper, had come running into the

house that night to say, breathlessly, "They want you down at Madsen's, sonny. Your pa's hurt bad."

He had felt one great, dizzying surge of faintness when he walked into the lamplit room and heard the old man's breathing. But his father said, sharply, "Kid. Ain't you ever around when you're wanted?" just like he had a hundred times.

He wasn't scared, then. He was bewildered. The old man lay there, breathing hard, looking at him. Then the old man said, talking with sudden difficulty:

"Kid—you just take—your punishment like a man."

He hadn't quite understood that, hadn't seen the broad meaning his father might have intended for the words. But the old man didn't say anything more and in a few minutes he was dead.

No, he hadn't understood, then, but now he was reaching back through the forgotten years to borrow strength.

His father's words had sharp, hard meaning now; and because they had, George Branson found himself remembering his father with a startling clarity.

The things he knew about his old man's early life he had pieced together from casual talk. His father had grown up in Montana. He'd been a roustabout in a saloon, and then he'd punched cattle. But by the time he was twenty he had been a peace officer.

Men on the dodge drifted back and forth over the northern border in those days. A gunman who wore a star was either dead or possessed of a reputation in a hurry. His old man had stayed alive longer than most. There weren't many towns left that needed men like him when they'd come out to the Coast.

George Branson remembered how his old man could go for a gun. His father had kept the inside of his holster coated with talcum powder, to cut down friction; and he practiced that draw every day of his life, the revolver blurring into his hand like magic. He hadn't been a big man. But his eyes were bright and cold and blue, with a hint of fanaticism, and you sensed, in every move he made, a quick, deadly efficiency.

They made storybook heroes out of men like his father these days; but George Branson, living in the same house as a kid, had never seen anything unusual about him.

He'd never liked the old man. Right and wrong had been as sharply divided, in his father's mind, as black and white. The old man had never lost his temper, but he had meted out punishment to his son as inflexibly as he had enforced the law. There had been no appeal, no reasoning, no middle ground.

George Branson had always envied the other kids for the way their families treated them. He thought about that, realizing how the habits of his boyhood, harshly learned, had endured.

They had become a part of him, as real as his flesh.

HE HAD never conquered his resentment to realize how his old man's code had been forged by the hard years. George Branson remembered, with a little start, that he was fifty-five, now, three years older than his old man had been on the night of his death. The knowledge of his old man's courage kindled a hard pride in him.

The Brady gang had killed his old man. There had been twelve or fifteen of them, a tough, sullen, desperate lot, who wanted to take the town over. His father's reputation had stopped them for a long time.

But one night—the night his father died—they cleaned out a saloon and left two men dead in the sawdust by the bar. The old man, cutting across lots, got there too late, but he knew where to find the Brady gang.

He knew, and so he went there alone, with the direct, unhurried efficiency that had always governed him. And he found the Brady gang.

They were in a tumbledown barn on the edge of town. There was a candle guttering on the floor, and they were standing

behind it, waiting. The old man walked in with his thumbs hooked in his belt, and smiled and said, softly,

"Any of you monkeys packin' a wagon?"

There were minutes of silence. Then one of the gang walked around behind the old man. His father had stood like a rock with that man behind him. After a while another of the crowd came forward, with sweat on his face, and laid a revolver down by the candle. So did three more. But one of the four, with another gun in his pocket, moved into the shadows and shot the old man in the back.

He died for his brashness. The old man, kicked halfway around by the awful impact of that slug, shot his attacker through the lungs before he hit the floor. The Brady gang carried both of them into town.

"Take your punishment like a man," the old man had said.

The desk sergeant called, "Branson!"

George Branson stood up slowly. A jailer led him through a swinging door and into an elevator. After the elevator had stopped he stood looking around a barred enclosure. It was not a nice place, the jail. He thought, shaken, how it would be to pace behind bars enduring the endless passage of hours. Somewhere, down a barred alley, a drunk was yelling incoherently. George Branson squared his shoulders.

He was standing like that when they brought his son out of a cell.

George Branson found the will to look at the boy, his hope, the vessel into which his pride had poured, with detachment; to say, harshly "I could bail you out. Perhaps I could smooth this over. But I'm not—not this time. You'll have to take your punishment." Then he said softly, like a man saying a prayer, "Remember this in forty years."

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

ONE correspondent arrives this week with a song on his lips and in his mind a vast scheme for improving ARGOSY. It is a scheme calculated to plunge the editors and a large number of authors into feverish activity; and its originator has outlined it at such length that we're going to step aside at once and let you get into the letter. Afterward we may attempt a brief rebuttal.

A. L.

I wonder what's become of your Peter the Brazen, Singapore Sammy, Gillian Hazeltine, Rusty Sabin (remember "The White Indian"), John Solomon, Madame Storey, Tizzo (remember "The Firebrand"), Ivor Kildare ("The Naked Blade"), Jimmie Cordie et al, Smooth Kyle (the guy who drove the "Midnight Taxi" —remember?), Bill Peepe (Fred MacIsaac's cockeyed press agent), and many other old-time ARGOSY characters (Semi Dual and Zorro, to name a couple of more) who seemingly have passed into a limbo of mixed type and recalcitrant authors.

Has it never occurred to you, Messieurs the editors, that you might have erred in so blithely consigning these hoary favorites to the scrap heap? In the current ARGOSY, an Argonotes writer plaintively asks for stories about China referring specifically to Peter the B. and Cordie; and you reply—in quite as plaintive a tone—that those writers are now in with the slicks.

Well, all right. Suppose they are. So what?

So the logical thing to do would be to get two other writers to write Chinese stories a la Brent and a la Wirt. The author supplanting Brent would have to invent a new character similar to Peter the Brazen—say, Barry the Brassy—and be able to write frolicsome stories of modern China in the light and airy vein that characterized the writing of George F. Worts (or Loring Brent, if you will). It would be a hard job to find such a writer, I'll admit, but not an impossible one. Alfred Batson, with the proper training, would have been able to fill the shoes of Brent-Worts.

The important thing is that the new character —Barry the Brassy—be as much of a handsome, devil-may-care Hairbreadth Harry as was Peter the B. And, of course, Barry would need a girl friend to be to him what madcap Susan O'Gilvie was to Pete. Similarly, the writer replacing Wirt would hang flesh on the skeletons of Jimmie Cordie. Red Dolan, the Fighting Yid, and company and so create new roysterers who would cut throats in Northern China a la Cordie.

Suppose that H. Bedford-Jones has run out of ideas for John Solomon (as he certainly must have, after all these years). Well, okay; get some new writer to either continue the John Solomon yarns or create a new character to replace John S.

I realize as well as anybody that the ARGOSY of the early 1930's was in danger of being almost completely stereotyped because of the vast amount of "character" literature that was published; and I appreciate what the present editors have done in cutting down this plethora of character stories. But it was a mistake to cut down so thoroughly. Being editors, you must realize the tremendous force that character stories exert in holding readers—circulation. He who follows the adventures of an ARGOSY character does so as avidly as a ten-year-old follows the adventures of Flash Gordon in the Sunday comic strips. I write from experience.

But enough of this twaddle about character stories. I say print more of them, but always bear in mind that there is a delicate equilibrium between character and non-character stories. Let us on to speak of other things.

For example, let us consider the new editors (or is it editor? I am always confounded by the editorial "we" used in Argonotes). Fear not, editor(s); all that I have to say is of a highly laudatory nature (Ah! Are those sighs of relief which I seem to hear?).

The present staff has shown a very fine flair for discovering new writers which has been unheard of on the ARGOSY since the days of Bob Davis. Charles Rice MacDowell, William Gray Beyer, Howard Rigsby, Eric North, and other newcomers have been real finds.

I can't think of anything else. Your inside illustrations are swell, your covers are bad and

always have been, and I love you in spite of your faults.
HOLLIS, N. Y.

We are grateful to A.L. for outlining his idea so thoroughly, and we have a deep respect for his knowledge of ARGOSY history. But it doesn't seem to us that the re-furbishing of celebrated characters would work out very well. Set an author down to make a tracing of Peter the Brazen, with slight variations, and almost inevitably the result would be stiff, lifeless and dull.

It's much more satisfactory to let an author work with characters that are his private property. Peter belongs to Mr. Wirt, and only Mr. Wirt could make him walk and talk convincingly. So it seems wiser to trust our authors to give us their own characters—people who we hope will eventually join the heroic company of Peter the Brazen, Hazeltine, and so on.

WE HAVE another introduction to make this week. "Dynamite Boss" is F. M. Tibbott's first story in ARGOSY, though he has been writing for more than twelve years and was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* not long ago.

Mr. Tibbott has been around a bit. He's punched cows in South Dakota; he has worked as a rodman on the P.R.R., and eventually his railroad building took him to Nicaragua, where some kind of poison nearly finished him. He returned to South Dakota, this time in the U. S. Forestry Service; and later on there was a ten-year period of piano manufacturing —a curious contrast to his other activities. But now Mr. Tibbott has settled down on a farm in northern Maine, and there he is writing steadily. Writing, we hope, for us.

Looking Ahead!

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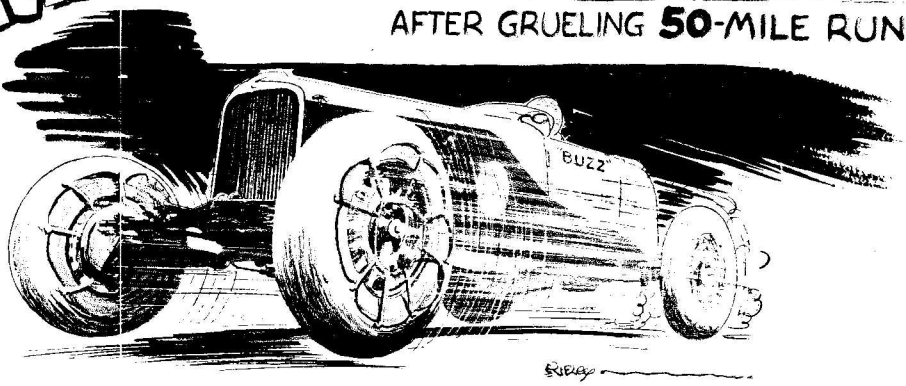

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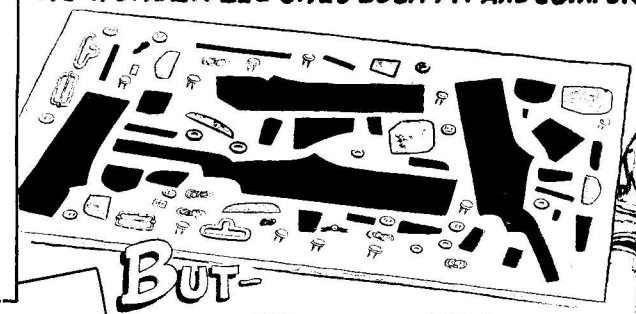

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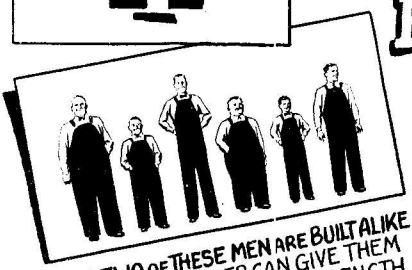

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