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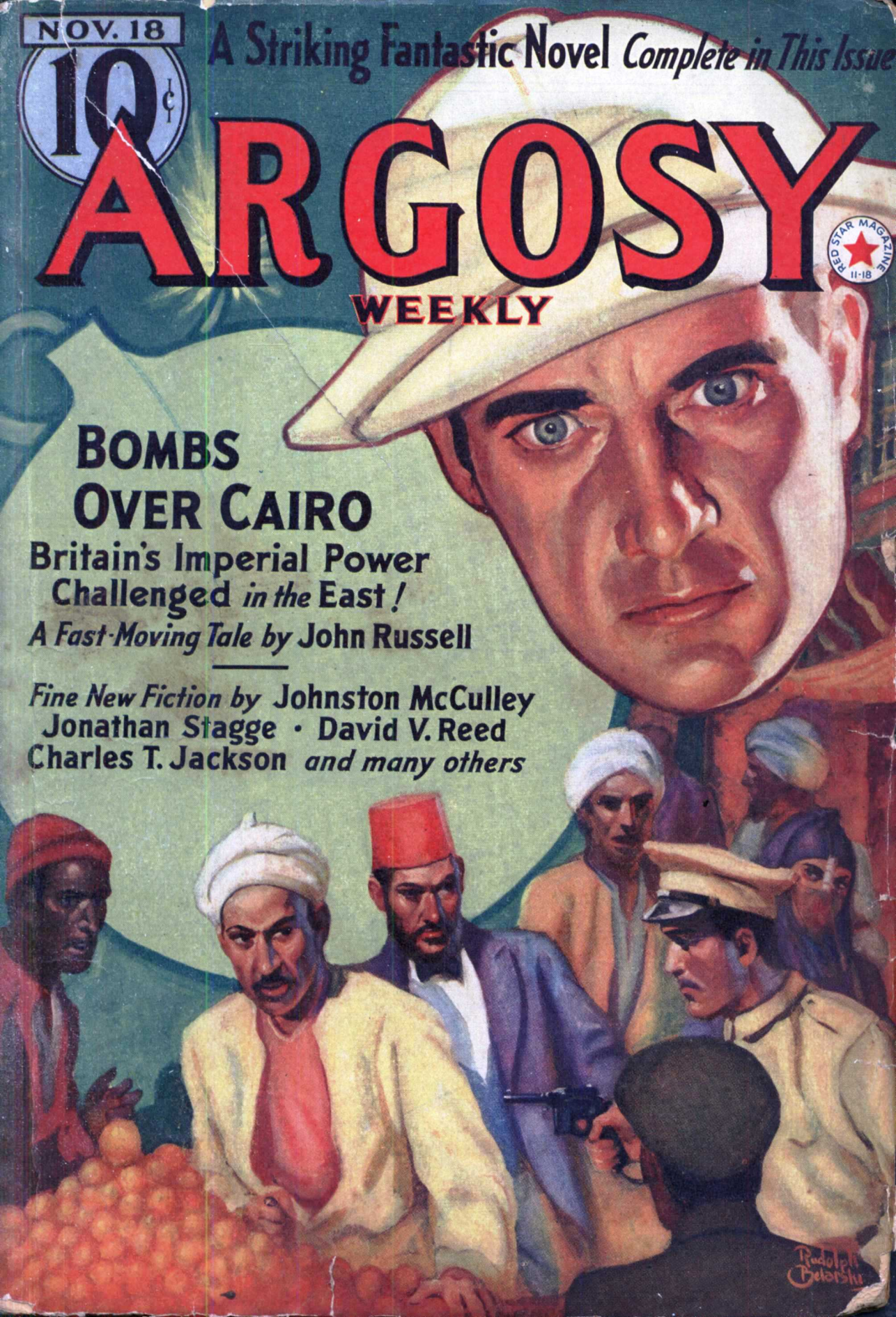

ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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Illustrating Bombs Over Cairo

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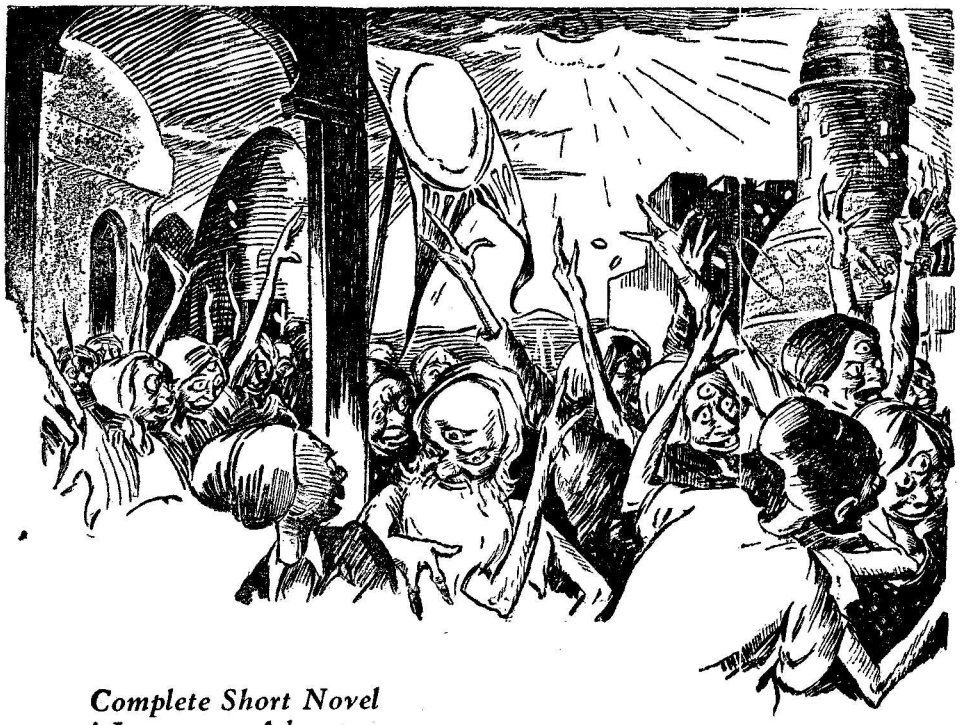


Complete Short Novel of Interspace Adventures

The Golden Boneyard

Back in the twenty-third century, they used to say that the citizens of Planetoid 404 were made of solid chunks of emerald. Ridiculous! They're made of ivory; and whenever the wind blows, a citizen cracks up. But an undisciplined American changed all that

CHAPTER I

CATCH FUN, SAILOR?

ENSIGN FLETCHER JONES leaned against one of the padded metal walls of his cubicle in the *Star-swallow*, and gazed pensively out into the blue-white emptiness of the sky. The hammering on the outside of the space vessel's hull suddenly began again.

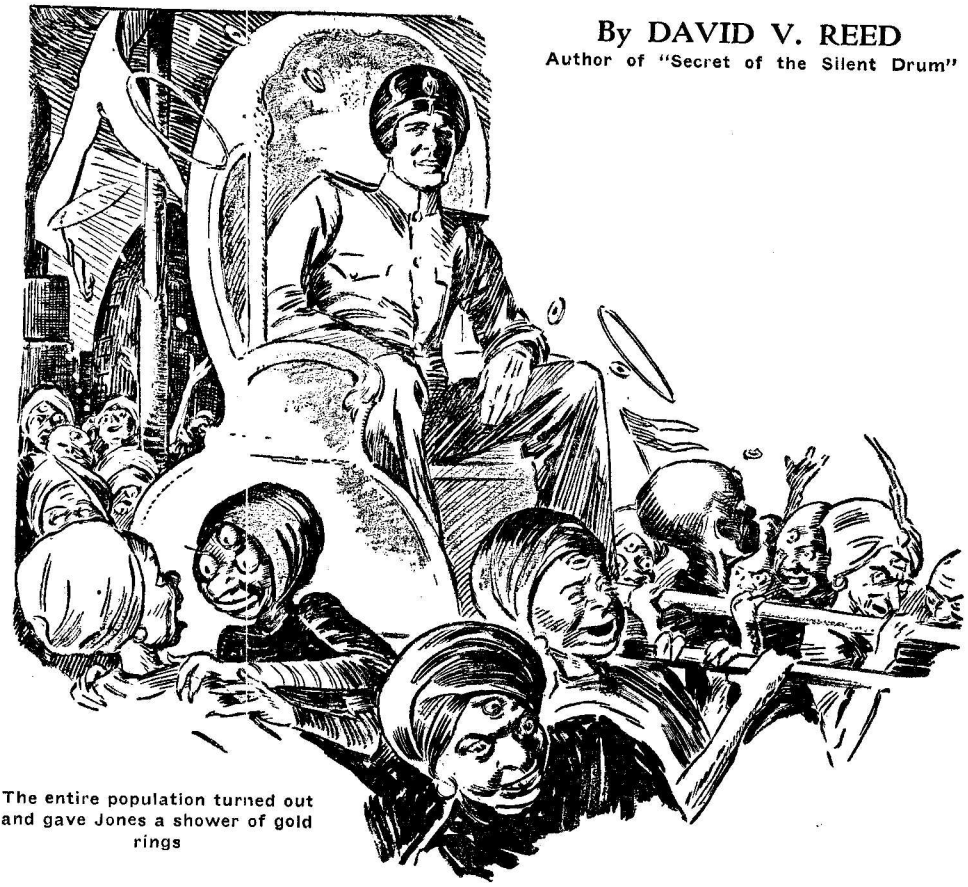
Jones scowled and began smashing the loose fist of his right hand into the palm of his left.

For two days, the *Star-swallow*, otherwise known as Unit 16 in the Interplanetary Colonial Service, had been lying to for repairs. From the crystal porthole near him Jones could look down to where, ten miles below the ship as she hung idly in the sky, there were tiny white puffballs that he knew were clouds.

Under those clouds lay life and people; more specifically, there was undoubtedly a high class bar and feminine company, and if one cared for that sort of thing, there was fresh, well-cooked food. All that

By DAVID V. REED

Author of "Secret of the Silent Drum"



The entire population turned out and gave Jones a shower of gold rings

lay under the *Star-swallow*—and Jones couldn't go down. His fist kept moving in an arc, his palm cutting the arc short.

There were, of course, excellent reasons; and Jones—who had his minor failings—was a fair-minded young man and admitted as much. Even from his prejudicial point of view, he knew that his own dilemma, and the circumstances which had brought the ship to its present position, were both his doing.

As a matter of fact, Jones was then under technical arrest and confined to his tiny cabin for the third time in the four-month routine cruise of the *Star-swallow*. His activities were limited to gazing out of the porthole, and thinking. All because things had kept happening.

Things, to be frank, like the stop-over at Church's planet, where the ensign had wandered one starlit evening into the courtyard of the staid Interplanetary Settlement and sung off-color lyrics to *My Interplanetary Baby*. By the time Jones had come out from the old-fashioned, underground jail, the *Star-swallow* was seventy hours behind her schedule. The USICS had promptly declared that they didn't like it, and it was said that General Headquarters had indicated more than a passing displeasure with the ship's Captain Castle.

Or, for instance, the amazing escapade of Ensign Jones in Exotica, where he had sojourned briefly at a bar frequented by Planeteers. Maybe someone should have warned Jones that his bright blue uniform and the presence of only one year's service star would make him the mark of every shady gent in the place. Or maybe they

should have warned the others about Jones.

In the end they attached Jones' slim salary to pay for damage to sundry tables, jaws, mirrors, chairs and skulls. And this time the *Star-swallow* was fifty-five hours later than before.

Well, the way between Exotica and New Pleiptes was long and lonely, and the ship carried two small crates of highly perishable, experimental seeds for transplanting. No one could have blamed Captain Castle, by now on a diet of aspirin, for trying to make up the lost time on the forlorn stretch.

And what had happened? Jones had managed to sneak out of confinement, gone to the navigation room and started a dice game that eventually included one or two fuelers and some men from the rocket chambers. With the result that the *Star-swallow* had gone off her course some three million miles, and the rockets on the starboard had eaten halfway through the plates.

In the end they locked Jones in and fed him dried beef. He was lucky they were still feeding him. But below—whatever body lay there—that was where Jones longed to be. Sometimes the hammering on the hull came in a rhythm that seemed to spell, in code, *ground liberty*—or variations on the theme. And Jones, who had no illusions about Captain Castle, and knew a spot when he was on it, knew also that his case was hopeless.

THE buzzer on the wall chose that moment to sound off. It had never sounded so much like a raspberry before. Jones unhooked the earphone and listened. He hung up, waited for the door lock to click open and allow him out, and swung down the narrow corridor. Outside the captain's cabin he tooted a little horn and slid open the thin door.

Captain Castle was sitting on a large sheet of canvas to protect the polished copper surface of the furniture from his grimy coveralls. On the massive desk before him lay a white mountain range of papers. The captain kept making a valley in one place and a peak in another. He didn't look up when he spoke. He held out a paper and said, "This yours?"

Jones took the paper, looked at it. It was a formal application for ground liberty. Across the bottom was scrawled: Fletcher Jones, Ensign First Class, USICS.

Jones said, "No sir. It looks like my handwriting, but I didn't write it." The sound of his voice, with alarm and momentary confusion blended in it, was more eloquent than Jones suspected.

Captain Castle raised his great leonine head. There was a large smudge of grease over his forehead, showing black in the furrows. His deep green eyes looked past Jones. "I didn't think it was yours, Jones. You've got more gall than any man I ever met, but this was too much."

His eyes dropped and began cleaning his fingernails with a penpoint. "Not that it would be an impossible request," he added, strangely. "Do you know where we are, Jones?"

"Well, sir, I know we're in an area of natural atmosphere because I heard the hatches opening, and once I saw a member of the hull crew outside without an ether-tunic. Yesterday Lieutenant Haddock came in with Mr. Anderson and my lunch. He said we were over one of the small planetoids."

"Ummmmm," said the captain, reflectively, wiping the pen. "You and Lieutenant Haddock haven't been hitting it off so well since that—uh—"

"No sir," said Jones. He could guess at only part of what the old man was saying, but he didn't like it. That crack about ground leave not being impossible for instance. That might be the captain's subtle way of telling Jones that there was another underground jail below.

Castle pushed away the pen and looked up at Jones. Fletcher Jones was a long, lean youth with very black hair and grey eyes, eyes that could look as guileless as a saint's. He was spotless in his uniform. His face was clean-shaven, his cheeks ruddy, his hands encased in gloves of pure white.

There was a deep silence, broken only by the sounds of the ensign swallowing.

Slowly the captain's gaze traveled back to himself, to the dirty oil that clung to his palms, the flakes of rust that stuck to his faded blue coveralls. He rubbed a hand across the stubble on his face, felt the sweat that glistened on it. Then he said aloud, as if to himself, "Who in hell is the captain here, anyway?"

Suddenly Castle rose from his chair. His voice was as soft as the first faint hint of a tornado. "Mr. Jones, in five minutes I want to see you outside. In your uniform. Don't bother changing. I want you to be helping bosun with the hot gun, understand? Make it three minutes. Dismissed, Mr. Jones."

Two minutes later, Ensign Fletcher Jones was running along the upper companionway, effectively hindered by a pair of heavy magnetic shoes which he carried, and which kept bumping into walls. He clambered up the ladder leading to the open portside hatch and strapped on the heavy shoes. Then he slid the hatch open a bit wider and stepped out on the hull.

Daylight had come several hours before, creeping with two moving suns that were like hot yellow eyes looking at him. The air was thin and cool, and the first wind Jones had felt in days ruffled his hair. All around him was a pale blue mist, nothing else. It made Jones feel fine.

The noise of the hammering on the starboard had a different note now, more of a treble whine in it as it smashed against the plates. It made Jones think of Lieutenant Haddock and the way his high-pitched voice had sounded, saying, "Wonderful place below, Ensign, wonderful place. Wish I could arrange for you to see it."

Jones growled mutinously.

THE minute Jones had laid eyes on the forged ground liberty application he had known that Haddock had been making arrangements. A fine thing to do, getting the old man all worked up at Jones again, trying to make it appear that Jones had brass enough to ask for leave. It filled Jones with a diluted resentment.

It was unwarranted, even if Jones had borrowed a month's pay from Haddock, telling him it was for a wedding present for his sister, and losing it in the navigation room in the dice game. What had Haddock expected? He never spent the money, and Jones was tied up, slowly refurnishing a bar in Exotica.

Haddock had been well named, Jones decided, and he would make plans for Haddock in the near future.

He glanced at his watch and thought, To hell with everything. He had to have another look below. He started dragging his feet along the hull, knowing he was going to the under-side by the rush of blood to his head, and he stood out from the hull at an angle, like a spoke from the hub of a wheel.

They had turned off the ship's gravity days before, and there were no rocket tubes going, which meant that the *Starswallow* had become a satellite to the body below them. The body with the high class bar and the feminine company.

That was when he heard, "Come up here, Mr. Jones."

Jones twisted into an about-face and saluted Captain Castle, who was half obscured above Jones by the curve of the hull. Jones was standing at a right angle to the captain then; he was horizontal, and the salute was slightly ridiculous from that position. He dragged himself back up.

"Like it up here?" said Castle.

"Yes sir. Lovely scene."

"Good, Mr. Jones, good. Follow me." The captain led the way to starboard. A dozen men as grimy as Castle were hunched over in a loose circle. Just as the captain approached, the hot radium gun began hammering again, its green blaze ripping into the metal hull. The captain waited until one of the men saw him.

"Don't salute me when you're holding that gun!" Castle scowled, after he had ducked. The bosun had risen saluting, and the green flame had described a remarkable arc as his hand came up with the

radium gun. He brought his hand down.

"Bosun, Mr. Jones here will assist you." Castle said it dryly.

The bosun, a short, stocky man, pushed his goggles up over his dark red hair The skin around his eyes was still clean and it made him look like an owl. "Like that, sir?" he said. "In dress uniform?"

"He's anxious to help. Aren't you, Mr. Jones?"

"Very anxious, sir."

The bosun screwed up his face and surveyed Jones over the tip of his short nose. The youngest officer on the ship was no mystery to him, even if he was beyond the understanding of most of the men. The thing was that he had to learn discipline.

There had been others—well, not quite—but others nearly like Fletcher Jones. In time they had made good officers. But the work on the hull. . . .

Castle glanced down at the plates and trudged away. The bosun scratched his head. "*Mister* Jones," he said. "How long has he been calling you that?"

"Long enough, Mike."

"Ah well, it's for your own good," said the bosun. "Ever help with a hot gun, Jones, my lad?" His grizzled old face was commiserating. "*Mister* Jones. That's bad."

JUST how bad it was, Ensign Jones had time fully to appreciate in the next two hours. Ten of the weighty alloy plates had been burned half through. The crew had had to take off every rocket tube in the area, take out the bad plates and start sealing in new ones. Then the rocket tubes would have to be punched back into place. In two days of constant work, the emergency repairs had replaced eight of the plates.

That meant, Jones calculated doggedly, that if he could manage to get down below now, he would have a little time to find that high-class bar.

But as the hours passed, the ensign found other things to occupy his mind. The twin suns were hot coals on his back. Once, when he had unfastened his stiff collar, Captain Castle appeared and recited to him from the Officer's Manual, the paragraph which maintained that the uniform was at all times to be worn in full formality. That included gloves and cap, but the captain graciously omitted the cap. The gloves were by then as black as Castle's look.

Jones was a pilot, a skilled technician. He applied his training to such tasks as pressing down on plates until he felt his fingers cracking. He lugged metal around the hull and felt the vertebrae of his spine giving up the uneven struggle to stay together.

He tried to forget his feet, but he couldn't move without moving twenty pounds of magnetized metal on each foot. The radium gun fried the outside of his face with dry heat, after it baked layers of grease under it, and the noise massaged his head with thunderbolts, seventy-two to the minute.

Mike called it quits about the time a peculiar gleam had begun to illumine Fletcher Jones' eyes. Jones stretched out on the hull, peering over the side, wondering where he got the energy to keep thinking about getting down. It seemed to him that he saw the clouds part and he glimpsed verdant fields below.

He couldn't hear his own voice when he asked Mike about it, and he couldn't hear Mike's answer; he couldn't have heard the angel Gabriel. But he read Mike's lips. Mike said that the green Jones saw was the retention by his eyes of the flame from the radium gun. He said other things, but Jones felt too sick to listen.

What happened after that was in a sense like the tragic union of two opposed destinies. The new shift came up to relieve Mike's gang, and they were led by Lieutenant Haddock.

Haddock, thin and gangling and dried-up looking, watched Jones as he began to shuffle away with the others. He pursed his lips, and when Jones passed him, he stopped him with his hand.

"Ensign Jones," he piped in his shrill

voice, "Captain Castle says you're developing into quite a one with the radium gun. With his permission, I've gotten you to take another trick up here with my gang. I simply have to see for myself how good you really are."

Jones didn't hear a word Haddock said; he didn't need to. The pursed lips gave him the story with damning clarity. He saluted, said, "Yes sir," dully, and went back to the hot gun. Under his goggles his eyes were gleaming again, gleaming with a dark, shadowy brilliance.

His chance came fifteen minutes after the gun had begun roaring again. For one magnificent moment, there was Haddock's left foot sprawled out near him, and Jones couldn't resist. He slipped his hand into the strop of Haddock's magnetic shoe and loosened it. Three minutes passed quietly.

The first time Haddock had occasion to rise and move to another point, his left foot suddenly came free of the shoe. He let out a yell like a steam whistle and slid down the hull on one foot like a skater. He stopped only when he came to the under side, from which he hung by his one attached foot, howling like a madman. The radium gun in his hands had punched a ring of holes in the hull before he could think of dropping it.

Jones was one of the first to reach him and help drag him back.

. . . "Of course, Mr. Jones," said Captain Castle, "there is no direct evidence. Whatever our hearts may tell us constitutes no objective evidence." He fumbled through the papers on his desk, withdrawing a sheet.

"I have here a request for ground liberty, Mr. Jones, and it has your name on it. I am honoring that request. You have thirty hours, and you may go down in the launch. You might also find the radium gun which Lieutenant Haddock dropped over the side. Dismissed."

Outside the captain's cabin, Jones saw the bosun. "Mike," he said, vaguely, 'pinch me."

Mike regarded Jones, shaking his head. "You're too damn greasy, Fluff," he said, holding his freshly washed hands at his sides. "Now, if you'd like to be kicked. . ."

CHAPTER II

BONEHEAD STUFF

THE launch was descending quietly, the compressed-air jets making scarcely any sound. It was as silent within the launch. Mr. Peters, who sat at the controls, faced Jones with an expression that was an even match in stupefaction.

The one thing Jones knew, looking at Peter's blank eyes, and seeing the surrender before the imponderable mirrored there, was that it was no dream. Jones had too much difficulty sitting, thanks to Mike's energetic effort, for him to be asleep.

There was no sense to it, Jones thought. He didn't like to think that he had finally driven Captain Castle crazy, but what else could he think? Even Peters, to judge from the way he shook his head from time to time, seemed to be aware that a question of someone's sanity was involved, and he did not appear to be too certain of his own.

In his mind's eye, Jones could see the *Star-swallow's* Dr. Price tapping the old man's knee with a hammer, and whispering things to Haddock. At any moment they would be calling Jones back to the ship, back to the dried beef, and away from the glorious yellow fields toward which the launch kept moving.

"Know where we are?" Jones broke the silence.

"Nope. Old man said they had a spaceport of sorts. There it is."

Jones looked out. Two thousand feet below was a field marked off with the crisscross stripes of a spaceport. A row of small buildings ranged in a line on one side. Beyond the buildings Jones could see a city of fair proportions, with intensely colored structures of odd shapes.

There were always odd shapes, odd colors. Only the high class bars and the feminine company stayed the same from

planet to planet. And this one, so far off the regular lanes of space liners, was probably a haven for artists and writers.

Especially writers; they always found some place where the scenery was unusual, living cheap, drinking easy, and women beautiful. Some of Jones' best friends were writers.

Not a soul came out to meet the launch as it settled to earth near the line of buildings. Jones stepped out of the launch, took a deep bend in his knees and smoothed the lines of his white dress uniform. His hair was brushed, his hands showed little evidence of grease, and a smile of anticipation flitted about the corners of his good-natured mouth.

They might declare Captain Castle crazy now, but Ensign Jones was going to be beyond reach for the next thirty-six hours. He said to Peters, "How many of the crew have come down on liberty?"

"Nobody."

"Huh?" said Jones. At least half of the fifty-odd men of the crew were useless in the repairing of the ship; they should have been somewhere nearby, blowing off steam. "Afraid to ask?" Jones said.

"Some of 'em asked," said Peters. "That was the end of it."

"Yeah," Jones said. "That settles it." The old man had finally snapped his control wires. Of the whole crew of the *Starswallow,* he had allowed only Jones on liberty. He shrugged and took the recall rocket from Peters and put it in his pocket.

But then, a moment after he waved so long to Peters, and stood watching the launch begin to climb back up again, Jones swallowed hard and fenced a wild, fleeting thought to a standstill. It was just barely possible, if Captain Castle had gone crazy enough, that he intended to leave Jones behind. And if Haddock took over, it would make no difference.

The ensign walked soberly toward the largest of the buildings, the one with a colored sign on one wall. There was still no one about. At the sign he paused, glancing over the various languages until he found the faded letters in English. Then he read: *Welcome to Yanna, Planetoid 404. May Your Stay Be Pleasant and Brief. Behave Yourself.*

A singular welcome, if Jones ever saw one. It was as if they had expected him, Jones thought, thinking also about the words *Planetoid 404;* they bothered him, but he couldn't quite remember what it was—something about . . .

Well, one thing it did seem to prove. That crack *Behave Yourself* was a clear indication that there were plenty of writers around. The place sounded as if it was used to action.

HE walked up to the front door. It was closed. And locked. There was yellow grass, Jupiter grass, growing near the threshold. "Certainly do a rush business here," said Jones. The grass nodded in the wind.

The city had been behind the spaceport, and Jones turned in that direction. Several of the overgrown lanes from the port converged to a road, and Jones took the road, seeing the city perhaps half a mile ahead.

He had taken about ten steps when he saw the gold coin lying in the road. He picked it up and examined it. It was about two inches in diameter, with a small hole in the center. There were no markings of any kind on it, and it was more of a huge ring than a coin. Jones grinned, crossed his fingers, and pocketed the gold ring. He walked slower now, keeping his eyes open.

His vigilance proved unnecessary. A few yards away he found another ring, then a third, and then a dozen more. He examined all of them. They were not uniform, but they were undoubtedly gold, all of them; and the road was covered with them.

As Jones kept walking the number of rings lying about increased until he couldn't help stepping on them. They were all over the place—dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands. Jones knew there were even more than that as he came within shouting of the city; and that proved one thing.

The rings weren't gold. Nobody left gold lying around on roads. He emptied his pockets of the rings he had collected and increased his stride. The damn stuff shot the sun back in his eyes until he thought he'd need sun glasses.

"All that glitters," he said aloud, "is not gold. Not this time, anyway."

Just as he approached the outskirts of the city, he saw two—well, two things—heading his way. Jones stopped short and dived off the road into a clump of yellow bushes; and though he was ordinarily concerned with his appearance, he gave no thought to his white uniform.

He flattened himself on the ground and tried to stop breathing.

And just as he had thought, they had seen him. That first pause had done it. He could hear them coming closer, and the dress uniform permitted no weapons. Why in hell hadn't Castle said—But that was why! That was the reason for his being there on liberty! Jones really stopped breathing then, but at the same time he clenched his fists.

One of them had come up from behind, the other in front. They stretched their spindly necks over the bushes, and two heads, one ivory-colored and the other bright red, were looking at Jones. Looking at him from each of three dark holes that Jones figured were eyes. Six arms, straight, jointed affairs, reached over and lifted Jones to his feet.

They were about five feet tall. They had three legs, three arms, three eyes. The legs and arms were like sticks, round and thin and hard-looking; the legs ended in long, two-toed feet, the arms in long, three-fingered hands.

They were dressed in an unfamiliar fabric that matched their own color, a large blouse or shirt, and long pantaloons. The trunk was most of them—a fat, shiny cube with rounded edges; and from it a thin neck led to round heads covered with colored turbans.

They were like some outlandish, lacquered dolls, standing there and looking at Jones. Around the trunk of each of them were long loops of wire, and on this wire were hundreds of the golden rings that Jones had seen. At that moment, a sort of catch-lock on the end of the wire, near the ground, opened—and a ring fell from the wire.

Each of them picked up the ring and tossed them into the road. The rings kept falling off every half minute, and they did the same thing each time, throwing them into the road.

The red one turned to the ivory one after two minutes of silent scrutiny, and spoke in a shrill voice. Jones thought: Haddock's cousins; I'm sunk!

He was over his fright. These two seemed to be nothing more than peaceable citizens, and he had probably aroused their curiosity by ducking. Jones looked at them, trying to remember where he heard or read about such beings.

They seemed to be made of some solid substance. Jones stretched out a hand and touched the red one. Bone—solid bone! At least it felt like that. They were like Earthly insects, with an exo-skeleton.

THE talking, interrupted once by the rings falling off, stopped; and the ivory one looked back to Jones. He said, *"Parlez-vous français?"*

Jones gasped, grinned, and answered, *"Oui, oui."*

He expected them to let loose a flood of French after that, having hit a language; but there was suddenly an awkward pause, a pause filled with some strange embarrassment. After a minute Jones realized that all the ivory one knew of French was what he'd said.

It was just as well; all Jones knew was *"oui oui."*

He made another try.

Jones said, "Either of you boys speak English?"

The red one shrilled, *"Oui, oui,"* but not another word after that.

"Oui oui your uncle," Jones said. "What kind of a game is this?"

The two conversed again and fell silent, their gaze on the ground. One of them

tugged at the other, and both began walking away on the road. The red one raised an arm in a friendly goodbye.

"Goodbye, boneheads," Jones called. That was tha—

Ensign Jones stopped dead in his tracks again. Boneheads, he'd called them. And this was Planetoid 404. It couldn't be—wasn't possibly *the* 404! He wiped the sweat from his forehead and began trotting along the road. He'd know soon enough.

The road widened and became covered with a hard, glassy substance. The rings were everywhere now, lying about in heaps. There were many of the inhabitants of Yanna walking about, all like the ones he had seen, except that there were also black, green, yellow and blue ones in addition to red and ivory. Each color was brilliant and unmarred, and together they formed a dazzling scene.

The houses were shaped like immense beehives, or else they were high-pointed pyramids. They were smeared with huge designs in patterns that formed a crazy-quilt, and there were cupolas and colonnades and arches, colored windows and spaciously arranged columns.

It was like being let loose in a dream's toyland, but it was pretty, in spots even beautiful. Everywhere, everyone seemed to be talking, and the sound of the high-pitched voices was a blanket of shrill, bird-like noises.

Jones saw at once that he was not a curiosity. True, many of them regarded him and waved to him, but they were apparently accustomed to the presence of humans.

He began walking through the streets, looking for other humans, watching the crowds at various open bazaars haggling for furniture, food, clothing.

There was the same kind of absorbed, make-believe charm about them as there was with children playing some absurd, but to them deeply earnest game.

All the while the rings kept falling from the wires that every one of them wore; and Jones saw several of them bend over and pick up handfuls of the rings to replenish those which had fallen off, doing it quickly and easily, and not interrupting whatever else held their attention.

There were shops of every description and the city had a sort of oriental festivity about it, an impression which was aided by the rather primitive civilization which was apparent to Jones as he strolled about, stopping now and then to look at an article, the keepers of the stalls regarded him with open eagerness.

Once he stopped and said to one, "American bar?"

The citizen to whom he had spoken looked blanker than usual, which was no mean feat because of their immobile faces. He made a motion like a shrug.

"Thanks just the same, bonehead," Jones said.

"You're welcome," said the bonehead.

Jones grinned. He knew where he was now.

This was *the* Planetoid 404, paradoxically the most famous recluse of all the worlds scattered in the vast reaches of space.

In the swift-moving life of 2270, A.D., where fifty years was the gauge of antiquity, Planetoid 404—better known as the Boneyard—had long been celebrated in ancient legend as the scene of a thousand unbelievable episodes.

For decades after its discovery, it had been guarded by Interplanetary Military and by treaty; and visitors to its soil were far between. It was still taboo to all the travel agencies; and no one knew much about the place, and magazine articles were often so much fancy.

They used to say of 404 that its inhabitants were made of nothing more than solid chunks of emerald or jade or sapphire, and that the surface of the little planetoid was covered with nothing less than the purest gold.

BUT unbelievably, the latter part—the part about the gold—that was true, even if Jones could vaguely recall certain courses in interplanetary biology which had analyzed a race of beings like the

boneheads. And now here they were.

What Jones had thought was gold—was gold; Every last ring of it. That was why Military had guarded the place, was still guarding it. For years, every penny-ante pirate in the system had sneaked in to do a little surface mining, and the blood had flowed freely.

They had never really explained the business about the gold. There was too much trouble as it was, without encouraging a thousand crooked syndicates to form and run the blockade.

And silence, in a universe filled with strange worlds, dotted with countless oddities that had been publicized, was usually enough to let a place sink into oblivion. If that wasn't enough—and it hadn't been for 404, really—well it was almost impossible to get to the place.

But how people got to 404 didn't interest Jones any more; he was sure that artists and especially writers did get to it. He was now feeling warm and secure in the knowledge that *he* had gotten to it, and he was an officer in the USICS, with no customs officials to answer to, anywhere.

When he left he could load his uniform and a garishly colored trunk with all he could carry, taking it quietly from the road, and so bring to an abrupt and splendid end all his financial troubles. He had better uses for it than wearing it as decorations on a wire.

Remorse welled up in him for one shallow moment as he thought of Captain Castle having his knees tapped by Dr. Price. Then normality returned and Jones remembered that he still had not located a high-class bar.

He stopped beside a personage whose striped cloth seemed to indicate an official. The official was standing next to a large flame that was guarded by an intricately woven system of glass walls all around it, walls with apertures, and the official was regarding it intently as the flame seemed to flicker.

Jones had seen many of the flames scattered about. He started to say, "Listen, old friend, I'm looking—"

Everybody in sight was suddenly diving into the street, scooping up the gold rings and putting them on the wires. Bells seemed to be ringing from a dozen places. The gold rings were falling to the glassy streets like a rush of rain, clinking merrily as they fell at an increased speed. The streets had become silent save for that sound. Thousands and thousands of rings in a tinkling symphony.

Once or twice Jones heard a sharp crack from somewhere. Everyone seemed to jump at the sound.

The flame, which seemed to be the center of attention, stopped its barely perceptible flicker, and at once the tension eased. In one of the adjoining streets a crowd had gathered for some reason, as they had farther up the street where Jones was. In a moment the bells stopped ringing and the life of the city resumed its course.

Jones hadn't been able to make head or tail of it. The striped official had disappeared, and Jones remembered the attitude of fear he had last seen on the fellow. Even now there seemed to be an excess of sound and nervous movement.

He walked up the street to where the crowd was. In the center he could make out a prone red figure, but what the matter was he couldn't see. The crowd was too big, and they kept jostling him with arms that were like iron pipes.

And there, farther up the street, Jones saw the little American flag, and under the colors, a sign: *American Bar. United Snakes Beer Here.*

"Very frank," said Jones, going in.

It was just as he had expected. In the cold shadows beyond the door sat a man dressed in white linens, and two informally dressed, very pretty girls sat with him. The three of them jumped up and yelled, "Welcome!"

Jones shook hands all around.

"My name's Ted Jackson," said the man. He was a medium-sized, pleasant-faced person with an easy air. "This is Doris, this is Sue. How'd you happen to get here?"

"I C S," Jones said, grinning. "We're ten miles up, making repairs. What kind of a place is this? What are you nice people doing here?"

"I'm a writer," Jackson drawled. "Getting up material for a book. There's a colony of us out here; some artists too. It isn't easy to be allowed here, you know. Takes plenty of sugar to live here."

Jones chuckled contentedly. "You seem to be well stocked with sugar," he said, moving closer to the girl Jackson had called Sue. She had deep brown eyes and a frank, ready smile, and her white bandanna looked wonderfully well against her tanned skin.

"My name's Fletcher Jones. Friends call me Fluff."

"Nice work, Fluff," said Sue. "I see you don't waste any time."

The other girl, blond and dimpled and lively, said, "Don't ask for beer, Fluff. It tastes like hogwash. Get a rocket special."

An ivory bartender had waddled up. *"M'sieu?"* he said, shrilly.

"Rocket special," said Jones.

"He doesn't squeak English," Jackson smiled. "You're lost around here without French." He spoke to the bartender. *"Mon ami désire votre fizzzzzzzz-boooom!"* He smacked his hands together and said to Jones, "That's the French for it."

"Just a minute," said Jones, grinning to himself. "These drinks are on me." It really was very funny.

He got up from the table and stepped outside, laughing. Just as he stooped to pick up one of the gold rings he heard Jackson yelling.

Then the sky fell on Jones and the glass street came up and hit him on the head. He went down under a barrage of hard blows that came from dozens of variously colored but uniformly irate boneheads. They were knocking the stuffing out of him, and he couldn't tell the sound of their shrieking from the ringing in his ears, and he decided to go to sleep. . . .

CHAPTER III

THAT MAN'S HERE AGAIN

WHEN Ensign Jones opened his eyes again, he was faced with a situation unique in his experience. Usually, after he had been induced to forceful slumber for an unspecified time, when he came to again there were no questions for him to ask. He had always known where he was, and why.

This time he knew, more from conditioning than from what he saw in the pitch darkness, that he was in jail again, and moreover, that the jail was another of the antique underground affairs with which he had an extensive acquaintance. It was the *why* that puzzled him. For once, Fletcher Jones didn't know the reason for his location.

Puzzled or not, his reactions were those of a veteran. He didn't try to sit up until he had tested his fingers by wiggling them, and raised both legs in the darkness.

Satisfied that he was all there, he grunted and groaned himself up to a sitting position. His hands explored for other traces of damage, and found his clothes in tatters, his knee coming through the trousers easily.

In a moment Jones realized that there was scarcely any part of his anatomy that was not available for easy inspection; he was as fully dressed as a Maypole, and the splendid white uniform was a miraculous attachment of unrelated strips of cloth.

A delicate hand found the lumps on his head, touched the sore spots on the cheekbones near the eyes. He wondered how many feet had taken the community excursion on his nose. Checking up on how much skin he had left was a more difficult matter; but from the way Jones ached and smarted, he made an optimistic guess that about half of what he'd had was still there.

Jones sighed, and the wind whistling through his teeth reminded him that a count was in order. He counted and sighed

again at his phenomenal luck. The kind of beating he had taken could be traded in anywhere for three teeth and a simple fracture of some useful member.

All Jones needed was a pair of pants and a six-month stay at a health resort. All he wanted was the pants and the names of his playmates.

But for an hour after that, it looked as if all he was going to get was a dark, damp silence, and possibly rheumatism. At the end of that hour Jones decided he had waited long enough. He yelled once, "Police!"

Somewhere heavy doors began banging, and presently a light was moving toward Jones. He could see the light bisected by the bars of his cell, but there was no one accompanying that moving light. Jones looked again, gulped, and yelled for the police with renewed vigor. In the cool damp of the cell he was suddenly perspiring.

The light had come within two yards of Jones before he saw what was happening. The light, an old-fashioned oil lantern, was being carried by a black bonehead, and the light-carrier had merged with the darkness as only black and black could merge.

"M'sieu?" said the bonehead, his thin voice inquisitive.

"Get me a cop," said Jones. "Somebody locked me in here."

There was silence a moment. Then the bonehead said again, *"M'sieu?"*

This time Jones was quiet. It seemed that the only terrestria language any of these Yannites spoke was French. Somewhere, Jones thought vaguely, there was a moral to be plucked from this.

The bonehead was still standing in what Jones took to be an attentive stance. His black-clad, black body was leaning forward, and he looked unconsciously like an ambitious member of an assassins' society.

Thinking quickly, Jones said, *"Oui, oui."*

That did it. The bonehead echoed, *"Oui, oui,"* and turned to go.

Just then the doors began banging again. Half a dozen lights moved into view, again with no visible carriers. In the center of the lights that formed a semi-circle, a little man was walking toward Jones.

He was perhaps five feet tall, dressed in loose white linens that were too large for him. His face, even in that yellow-orange light, was as pink as a little girl's, where it showed behind a full white beard and moustache. His bald—completely bald—head was more of a sunset pink, and his nose was large and distinguished-looking.

Strangest of all was the way he appeared to be moving—as if he were walking on air. There was nothing but blackness all around him, to the sides, above, and below. The lights brought only him into sight, and they seemed to be floating alongside of him as he walked resolutely and soundlessly on an invisible floor.

TEN yards away from Jones he stopped, produced an old panama hat from a pocket, donned it momentarily, and then with a gallant gesture took it off and stowed it back into the pocket.

He advanced right up against the bars beside the first bonehead and said, in a voice that was a forlorn, low bass, "You are Ensign Bones?"

Jones gulped again, said, "Jones."

"Ah," the little man brightened. "Jones! That's better." He stuck a hand through the bars. "I am Dr. Horace Fitzjames, American consul at Yanna. I'm here to help you. You can be completely honest with me. I want you to tell me why you so publicly violated the law."

"The law?" said Jones. "Yes, of course. What law?"

"Come, come," Fitzjames twinkled. "Do you think I was born yesterday?" Jones looked at the ten-inch beard and bit his tongue. "You must realize," Fitzjames continued, "that a six-month sentence is a serious matter."

"Six months," said Jones, quietly.

"It isn't good," the little man agreed. "Any sentence over a month automatically deprives you of the right to apply for citizenship in Yanna, and consequently bars you from voting." He added, "We've been building a bloc of terrestial votes, hoping we'd be able to vote in a decent beer."

"I'm sorry," said Jones. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Look, Dr. Fitzjames, I don't like to ask for special favors after the way I've treated the beer bloc, but this is the way it is: I'm sort of an officer of an I C S ship, and I have a feeling that the captain expects me to rejoin the ship in less than six months."

"If your crime was premeditated," said Fitzjames, gravely, "it is going to be difficult to do anything about it."

Jones sneaked a hand up behind his head and smacked himself sharply. It was a comfort to have it aching from within again. "How can I convince you that it was not premeditated?" he said.

"You can't," Fitzjames said shortly. "How much sugar have you?"

"Sugar?"

"Yes, sugar. I'll take granulated if that's all you have, but I'd sooner have half the weight in lump form."

Jones said to himself: this is real, this is happening. He felt the bars again. It was becoming too difficult to speak.

"I can see, young man," Fitzjames said, "that I'm going to have trouble with you. Some fine people have asked me to help you, people like Mr. Jackson and Miss Sue Carroll, who vote a straight real-beer ticket. I was inclined to do what I could, even after your superior officer warned me about you."

"What officer?" said Jones.

"A Lieutenant Haddock, who had a note from Captain Castle. A very fine person, this Haddock; very light-hearted. He seemed to think the whole thing was a laughing matter."

"When did he see you?"

"About three hours ago."

"How long have I been here?"

"About three hours."

"But that's impossible!" Jones exclaimed weakly. "He wouldn't even have known I was in jail when he came to see you."

"Exactly, Mr. Bones. Now you see why I know that your crime was premeditated. When Lieutenant Haddock came to ask me to help you out of jail, you were not yet confined. How else could he have known of your impending crime, except if it was premeditated?"

Jones felt his head spinning until he thought he could make out an audible hum. Fitzjames was standing there, looking official and mildly triumphant. He said, "Your Captain Castle has already sent me enough sugar to pay your fine. However, in such a serious case as yours, I would not like to interfere with justice. I demand that you confess!"

"ALL right," said Jones. "I'll confess. I stole all the sugar. Ever since I was a boy I've been crazy about sugar, and when I saw it standing there before me, I couldn't help myself. I had to take it. I'm sorry."

"You stole sugar too?" said Fitzjames, excitedly.

"What do you mean—too?"

"That isn't why you're here." Fitzjames came up very close and whispered the words. "You're here because you took the gold rings. They don't know about the sugar. And you can trust me not to tell them. Not me." There was a quiet gleam in his eye.

"You mean it's a crime to take the gold rings?" said Jones. "Then why the hell do they leave them lying aound?"

"Never mind that now. You can trust me about the sugar. I don't like to obstruct justice, but there's no sense in aiding persecution. If you have the sugar, that makes it simple. Now tell me, just as a matter of form, why you took the gold rings. You know they're worthless here."

Jones lowered his head and took a deep breath. "It's Haddock," he said. "He keeps me hypnotized; he must have hypnotized me just before I came down. I

remember his great open eyes staring into mine—and after that all I knew was that I had to take the gold rings."

"But why," said Fitzjames, puzzled, "did he ask me to get you out?"

"Captain Castle must have found out. I'm all he has left aboard the ship, and there's mutiny coming. Haddock is leading the mutineers, but until we're away from here, he's afraid to try taking over. The captain must have forced Haddock to come for me."

"Yes," said Fitzjames, slowly. "It's all very clear now. That was the only way this man Haddock could have known you were going to commit a crime before you did it." He sighed. "I know how you feel."

"Not unless you've been reading *Alice in Wonderland*," said Jones, under his breath.

"It's like a story," said Fitzjames, lost in his own thoughts. He turned to Jones again. "Why do you keep hitting yourself in the back of your head, Mr. Bones?"

"I didn't—think you saw me," said Jones. "It's just that there's a great aching in it, and the blows seem to relieve me."

"Poor boy," came the deep voice, filled with sympathy. "Wait here, and be of good cheer. I'll be back presently."

The little doctor turned and began to walk on the dark air, the light following him, and then he was lost from sight. Only the first bonehead who had come in answer to Jones' yells remained. He leaned over and said, *"M'sieu?"*

"Oui, oui," said Jones, wearily.

The last light responded, *"Oui, oui,"* and it too moved away.

Half an hour went by. Jones sat with his chin on his knees, trying to understand the meaning of Lieutenant Haddock's happiness. One thing was certain. The happiness had to end. Or at least, it had to be transferred, and Jones felt himself to be the logical recipient. Haddock was not accustomed to happiness; the strain might hurt him.

The doors were banging again, and the lanterns and Dr. Fitzjames were returning, accompanied this time by a yellow bonehead exactly the doctor's height, who carried an enormous, simply-fashioned key of solid gold.

The doctor waved happily to Jones, holding a piece of paper in his hands. The yellow bonehead, his stony face reflecting the light, came up to the door of the cell, inserted the key, and swung open a massive barred door.

Jones crossed his fingers, stepped out of the cell, and felt pain jabbing his body with every step. The party of three went down a long corridor with no dimensions, turned for no apparent reason, turned again, waited while doors banged, walked up stairs—and there was daylight seeping through a window.

IN AN office strewn with gold rings, several boneheads sat at a desk. When Jones appeared they began to jabber away, and one of them, a cheery-looking fellow in Kelly green, produced a large ledger and a steel pen.

"There's a formality here," said Fitzjames to Jones. "You've got to sign your name here, in case they ever arrest you again."

Jones thought that was probable.

Jones silently picked up the pen, moved around so that his shoulders cut off Fitzjames' view of the ledger, and signed: *Harry Haddock, Lieutenant, USICS.* Then, feeling better, Jones closed the ledger and took Fitzjames' arm. They passed through the last door that way.

Jones stood a moment, blinded by the sunlight. When he peered through his lids again, Sue Carroll and Jackson and the lively blonde were standing before him. Sue said, "Tsk, tsk," and shook her head.

"Indecent exposure," said Jackson, laconically. "We better go to my place and get you a pair of pants."

Jones blushed. Beside him Fitzjames had produced two small folding parasols, which he now flipped open. Jones said, "Do you need both?"

"Certainly," said Fitzjames. "I sunburn

easily. Two suns—two parasols. Now about the sugar—"

He was still waving the paper he had held coming back to Jones, and he gave it to him. It was made out to Ensign Bones. It said: *100 lbs. granulated or 50 lbs. lump.* Fitzjames bowed, said, "You can trust me, you know," and walked up the street, the parasols bobbing with him.

Sue took the paper from Jones' hands. "We saw the doctor when he came up to negotiate for your freedom," she said, "so we know what you've been through. And stop looking after him that way. He's real enough."

"What is this about sugar?" said Jones, weakly.

"It's the only means of exchange here, outside of barter. That's where your trouble started. We thought you knew about the boneheads."

"Knew what?" Jones said. He looked at Sue. "For the last hour my conversation has been a series of *whats,*" he said, blankly.

"Let's walk," Sue said. "You really need trousers, you know."

CHAPTER IV

SWEET SUE, SCIENTIST

THEY went to Jackson's house, a low terrestial-type bungalow in the tropical manner, and sat down on the terrace. Jones put on a pair of gray dungarees and sank into a chair. "Let's have it," he said, sipping a cold drink. "What about the boneheads don't I know?"

"You don't know about the big winds?" said Jackson. "Well, it isn't much of a story, but it's queer the first time you hear it. If it weren't for the winds, these boneheads would live to be five hundred years old."

"That's all right with me," said Jones.

"It's all right with them too," said Jackson, "except for the winds. About forty miles from here there is an immense mountain, and there are always winds blowing through it. It's a sacred place to these people, so probably no one has ever been there to take a close look at it. But somehow, when the wind blows from there, it makes sounds of such vibrational pitch that it can shatter one of these boneheads to bits."

"You sound like Fitzjames," Jones said.

"Let me try," said Sue. She smiled at Jones and he took her hand.

"You're something of an engineer, aren't you?" she said, letting her hand lie still. "All you flyers are. Good. Well, I've had it explained to me and you should be able to understand.

"Every object or substance has a period of vibration, a point where it will vibrate in sympathy or harmony with a sound vibration of the same period. We have no way of determining the specific period of any specific object, except by experimentation.

"But have you ever seen a note from a piano shatter a pane of glass? That was because the vibration of the note coincided with the period of vibration of the glass. When a vibration hits the period of an object, if the vibration is strong enough, the object goes smash."

"How about—" Jones began.

"You just hold my hand and listen. I'll come to it. As I was saying, the object is smashed. Well, this mountain has a way of blowing up and making sounds of intense vibrational pitches—usually so high that they can't even be heard.

"That's why the boneheads watch their flames. They've shut air currents out, but a high vibrational pitch will make a flame flicker even if it can't be heard. When the flame flickers, these boneheads know that somebody's going to drop—and they try to stop it.

"Now, you were probably going to ask why it doesn't affect us. The answer is that vibration can shatter only brittle or bony substance. We have skin and muscle and tissue to absorb the sound before it can harm us, but these people here on Yanna are perfect targets for just what happens here. The sound literally shakes them to pieces when it hits right. You came just after a minor flurry, and maybe you saw

some of those who were hit. There was one outside the bar.

"The boneheads had to find a way of fighting the vibration, even if they did worship the mountain. So they hit on a defense. Every body or object has its own period. You can't tell what it is, and you can't gauge the note of the wind when it starts up. But you can do this: change the period of a body from moment to moment. Are you following?"

"Like a leopard," said Jones.

The girl took it in stride. "You can change the period of a body by either adding to or subtracting from its mass. Add a piece of glass to another piece, both of them are now equal to one different piece, and they share a common period, different from the period each had as an individual piece."

"Period," said Jackson, filling his glass again.

"I wish you'd keep going," Jones said. "This is damned interesting."

Sue patted his hand. "Just yell when you want me to stop. Where was I? Adding glass. Well, you can do the same thing by cutting off pieces of glass. And what the boneheads do is on that order.

"They wear long loops of wire around their bodies, and the gold rings on the wire. Each ring, as it drops off the end of the wire where the lock is, changes the period of the entire body from moment to moment. The rings drop slowly, ordinarily. Let a flame flicker, however, and they start showering.

"If, by the laws of chance, the note from the mountain hits the exact period of a body before it can change in the instant that it takes—bang! Usually the rings drop fast enough to split the note, or get away from it, and that saves plenty of boneheads. It saves them for a long time sometimes, but in the end the law of averages catches up with them, just as it does with all of us."

"There's a cheerful note," said Doris—the blonde.

Sue said, "Fluff, you don't seem to be listening."

"I'M LISTENING," Jones said. "The vibrations in the sound of your voice have just about shattered my self-control, but I'm behaving. I'm thinking—and wondering—about the gold. Why do they use gold rings? It seems like a tragic waste."

"It is," Jackson said, grinning. "It's the most shameful waste in history, but you can't talk them out of it. There have been, or there were in the early days, innumerable secret missions here, each trying to wean the boneheads away from using gold. They all had their own schemes, some of them good but not good enough.

"Of course that gold has drawn—er, promoters. Like bees, by Harry, to honey. But none of 'em has ever succeeded in getting it.

"The last one was about forty years ago when some Frenchmen brought in a contraption that was like a magnetic girdle with little steel balls that fell on and off. It was perfect, and all the Frenchmen wanted was the gold rings that they had made useless and unsafe by comparison."

"What happened?"

"Ten boneheads tried it out. It was the first and last experiment. They began playing around with the little balls, and then a wind came up and smashed six of 'em open. It was the darnedest luck; no ordinary wind ever had such an average. But that was the end. They still talk French, though, and they think all humans are either French or pirates or beer-drinkers. The beer-drinkers is because of Fitzjames."

"But why gold?" said Jones. "Why not anything else?"

"Several reasons, the most important of which is—let this sink in—that gold is the most common metal on this planetoid. It's all over the place. The boneheads reason from this that it was intended by nature to be used in saving their lives. Furthermore, every apparatus ever brought here definitely did not use gold. That made them even more suspicious, and the French experiment with steel—

they massacred the Frenchmen, by the way; they're really very fierce when aroused—that made them stop."

"Anybody," said Jones, thoughtfully, "try to work on the mountain?"

"What for?" said Jackson. "These boneheads never heard of Mohammed, and they take their mountain very seriously. They know that death comes out of it and they keep a respectful distance. They also have a way of compelling other people to stay away, if they like their health."

"I see," said Jones. His eyes were regarding the floor carefully. "They jumped on me because I touched their holy gold?"

"Unpardonable, old man. You don't need it, you know."

"Who says I don't?" said Jones. He was nodding his head. "Listen, tell me this. Does everyone who doesn't know—that is, when someone ignorant of this place first sees the gold and realizes that it is gold, do they always make a grab for it?"

"What do you think?" Sue said. "It always ends up the same way. The boneheads beat their ears down and Fitzjames goes down to get them out of jail. He's the only one who carries any weight with them."

"They say," said Jackson, darkly, "that he owns enough sugar to buy this place. Sugar can get you anything you want here."

"Except gold?"

"Except gold."

"What the hell else does one want here?" said Jones. He glanced at Sue and added, "Except Sue."

"Thanks," said Sue. "Have one on me."

"Later, maybe," said Jones, rising. "I've just seen the light. I've just heard a little voice explain to me why I was given ground liberty, and how Lieutenant Haddock knew I would be a client for Fitzjames. So I've got to take care of Haddock—and maybe myself at the same time."

"You're not thinking about the mountain?" said Sue.

"I love you when your eyes open that way," Jones said.

"Don't," she said. "You've only had a sample of what they'll do."

"It's your voice," Jones said. "It breaks me into bits. I don't know what I'm doing."

"I'll say you don't," Jackson said.

"If I can't support Sue in style," said Jones, "I won't marry her."

"If you go near the mountain," said Sue, seriously, "the only way you'll be able to support me is on your insurance. Got any?"

"No," said Jones. "Well, it's been a pleasant afternoon. I'm going back to the spaceport and see if I can't work out a way to call the launch. I lost my recall rockets somewhere. See you tomorrow."

"I'll go with you part of the way," said Sue.

Fletcher Jones and the dark-eyed girl walked away together. They went along in silence, holding hands after the first few minutes, until they came to the edge of the city. Jones turned to her, tilted her head up and kissed her. "Don't worry," he said.

She was still looking after him the last time he turned around. He waved to her and she waved back.

The launch of the *Star-swallow* was settled on the field a hundred yards from the row of buildings. Mike the bosun was standing against the side, smoking.

"Hullo, Fluff," he said. "You look just the way the old man and Haddock said you would, down to the limp you're sporting. But you're an hour later than they figured you'd be."

"Give me a smoke," said Jones. "Listen, Mike, I want you to do me a favor. I've got to take a look at something not far away."

"Trouble?" said Mike, lighting Jones' cigarette.

"Maybe not, if we're lucky."

"Haven't had enough, huh?" Mike said, swinging open the door. "Well, I guess if you're an hour late, it might as well be two hours."

CHAPTER V

GOLD IN THEM HILLS

"DOES that look like a mountain to you?" said Jones, pointing. The launch was under way now, and the bosum was busy with his controls.

"Wait till we're up farther." A few minutes later, Mike added, "It looks like it is. The holy mountain, isn't it?"

Jones scowled. "Everybody seems to know this place but me."

"Sure," Mike said. "If you hadn't been locked in you might asked questions when the old man had us stuff the hull with sound absorbers. Same way with the launch—take a look underneath later. The vibrations spread all over this planet, and about forty miles up."

He looked at Jones. "You want to go to the mountain? What for?"

"Swing her about," said Jones. The launch thrust her rounded prow toward the mountain. Far off the blue-black peaks rose over the yellow plains, half visible in the afternoon haze. The air was clean and cool. "I've got an idea," Jones said.

"What are you looking so grim for?" Mike said. "It isn't the first time." He added, "Mad at Haddock and the old man, huh?"

"Yeah. Listen, Mike. I can't understand this business about the gold. You know anything about it?"

"I should. I spent five years in the Military around here once."

"It doesn't seem possible," Jones said, "that they'd let it alone."

"That's the answer," Mike said. "It occurred to everybody at the same time. There's enough gold here to drive the interplanetary monetary system crazy. Originally it was discovered by a mixed commission of scientific explorers, so that from the start there wasn't any one country that could claim it.

"They told the Interplanetary Commerce Commission about it and the Commission saw a thousand years of useless wars coming up if anybody tried to claim it. So they crossed it off the books—acted as if it didn't exist, and kept it quiet."

"I think we're coming in too low," Jones said. "Kept it quiet?"

"Right. Well, they tried to keep it quiet, but nothing like that could keep for long. The next few years every sneaking pirate in the business tried to hijack the stuff and each other, and the boneheads had a merry time keeping them all off, getting guns from one crew to fight another.

"It kept up like that for a while, the boneheads fighting number four with five's guns, and getting guns from six to fight five, and then the Military was sent in to seal the place with a combination blockade and embargo and keep-off signs on their guns.

"After that you couldn't get in without a pass from the ICC. It's pretty much the same now, except that every nation has the right to allow a limited quota here each year. They don't need the quota; the place is hard to reach and there's nothing to do once you are here."

"Except get the gold," said Jones. "They allowed inventors to try getting it, didn't they?" The mountain was close now, rising perhaps five thousand feet from the ground in jagged, formidable ridges.

"There's a clause in the treaty," Mike said, weighing each word, "which says that anyone who is actually, and formally, *given* the gold or any part of it, may take a certain amount of it each year."

"How much?"

"You should worry."

"I am worrying," Jones said. 'Maybe they'll give it to me."

"I get half," Mike said, dryly, "for chauffeuring you here."

"Make it a third. See that place over there? The yellow spot behind those three peaks, where it's almost flat. Think we could land there?"

"If we can't," Mike said, "we'll be buying the old man a new launch, and I can't afford it."

"Give me the wheel," said Jones.

The ensign took over the controls, and the launch began easing down toward the yellow spot which Jones had pointed out. The tiny plateau was overhung by two slanting boulders which made it impossible to come straight down, and it was surrounded by craggy lesser peaks with scarcely a break in their uneven guard.

Jones, however, was a pilot. Under his hand the launch darted in and out like some round metal bird. It slipped through a notch with a hand's breadth left on either side, vaulted a huge stone, swerved under one of the leaning boulders and dropped gently to rest.

Mike let out his breath suddenly. He wiped his forehead.

"You sound like an exhaust pipe," Jones grinned.

"Exhaust is the word."

Jones jumped out of the launch, Mike following. Overhead a formation of clouds were moving in silver and tan majesty. The twin suns of Yanna slanted down and shone in the polished metal sides of the launch, and the quiet lay gently on everything.

"Feel any wind, Mike?"

"Just this blessed breeze."

"Think maybe it's hokum about the wind from the mountain?"

"Might be. Might just be a good place to suspect about vibrations."

"Let's take a look."

MIKE hesitated for a fraction of a second, looked at Jones' thoughtful face, and followed him to the edge of the plateau. Two sides fell away in sheer hundred-foot drops; the third side was a difficult slope, but negotiable. Jones slid down and Mike came after him. For the next few minutes they kept jumping from place to place, moving more or less in a slowly descending circle.

"Remember we've got to climb back to the launch," Mike panted, once. "I didn't train it much as a retriever."

"Listen," said Jones, standing on a rock. He stopped and cupped his ears. "Hear that noise like running water?"

Mike nodded.

Jones dropped toward a triangular formation of rock, the centerpiece of which stood up like a pyramid. Falling away from the pyramid was a graduated range of boulders, forming a miniature mountain range. They stood like teeth; and where the gums of the teeth should have been, there was a deep gorge half hidden by an overslung flat rock that must have weighed a thousand tons.

The flat rock made it impossible for any wind to come directly down to the under part of the range. Jones and Mike crept down under the rock and into the gorge. It was wide, very wide, at the far end, and narrowed to some six inches as it reached the part of the range where both men stood.

If the sound had been like running water before, there was no sound now. There was only the suggestion of sound, a vague and distant and powerful sound that never came into being, or was muffled somewhere in the deeps of the mountain.

Jones pointed to the under part of the range. There were holes that pierced the entire range. Some of the holes were very small, some were two feet in diameter, but all were deep and convoluted and worn smooth.

From under the range a swift wind blew. It was impossible to gauge the velocity of that wind; it seemed to be sucked in somewhere before it had reached halfway up; but it was shaking the ledge, and it was difficult breathing there.

"Got it figured out?" Jones shouted. He started back. When they gained an upper step and continued climbing, he said, "It's like a reservoir down there. The gorge acts as a funnel to collect wind and forces it down through the range. Then another wind down there joins it."

"That's what I thought. What about the holes?"

"That's the answer, I think. It's nothing more than a tremendous pipe organ made out of natural elements." Jones laughed and looked at Mike. "A pipe

organ," he said, and stopped laughing.

"It frightened me," he said. "Imagine that damn thing being the determining factor in the life or death of countless living beings. Makes you wonder at the futility or stupidity, or whatever you want to call it. Why don't they come up here and blast the thing apart?"

"Take too long," Mike snorted. After a moment he added, "That's the way it goes. Religion. Go figure it out. Somewhere once they learned to fear this thing. After they'd feared it for a couple of ages, they gradually came to love it out of self-defense, because people can't just go on fearing without making up excuses. So they decided to love it. That tied their hands."

"Then why the wire loops and the gold rings, if they love it?"

"They have to love it while it's here. If it were to blow up all at once they'd find a new religion and breathe easier."

"There's the launch," said Jones. "We weren't as far away as we thought." He paused, then said, "Go ahead. Say it."

Mike looked at Jones and answered. "I'll say it. What are we talking philosophy for? What's going on in that rattlebrain?"

"I wanted to be sure we thought the same way. If my luck holds, this is going to be a big responsibility."

"What is?"

"This mountain. I'm going to blow it up."

"I won't bother asking you how. Just tell me why."

"First, I need the money: simple economics. If I blow up the mountain, the mountain won't blow up any more boneheads, and they'll give me the gold. Second and third—Haddock and the old man; it would kill them. Three birds with one stone mountain."

"Like that, huh?" said Mike. He pointed to the plain below. "You know what's down there—those specks? There must be five thousand boneheads by now, which means we've been spotted. There'll be more coming."

Silently, Jones climbed into the launch after Mike and flipped open the throttle. The air jets rushed down the scale to silence and the launch lifted. Once they were clear of the mountain, Jones looked down. The boneheads were motionless, watching the tiny launch speed away.

They were in view of the *Star-swallow*, lying serenely in air like a toy suspended against a blue sheet, when Mike spoke. "Fluff, how you figuring to blow up that mountain?"

Jones grinned. "If it can hit notes that shatter boneheads, why isn't it possible for a note to shatter the mountain itself? Why not?"

Mike frowned. "Maybe the law of averages. Maybe its range can't hit that note. The theory's good, but what can you do about it?"

"Help out the law of averages," Jones said, with a wry grin. "God helps those who help out the law of averages."

CHAPTER VI

ROCK-A-BYE ENSIGN

"AT EASE," said Captain Castle to Ensign Jones. The captain turned to Lieutenant Haddock. "Disreputable looking, isn't he?"

The lieutenant seemed to be having some trouble with a smile. He kept trying to keep it off his face; but then just as he succeeded he would look at Jones again and it would return, slowly at first and then bursting into blossom.

Now he pursed his thin lips and nodded. Captain Castle withdrew a pack of cigarettes. He held the pack out to Jones.

"Tell us about it," he said, mildly.

Jones, erect and silent in his tattered coat and gray dungarees, lit the cigarette. "Nothing much to tell, sir. I met some nice people, had a drink or two, and ran into a little trouble."

"*Little* trouble?" Haddock choked off a chuckle.

"Didn't last long," said Jones, composed.

Castle smiled. "Now, Jones, tell us what

happened to you." His dark blond mane of hair was brushed, and he appeared to be in excellent humor. "You're usually very talkative, you know."

"Yes sir. If you will excuse my mentioning it, sir, you signed my liberty pass for thirty-six hours, and I have some time left. With your permission, I would like to withdraw. I want to go down again."

Castle's face clouded. "Go down again?"

"I wouldn't advise that," Haddock said, forcing the shrill words from his pursed lips. "Jones, I advise you against it."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Haddock." To the captain, Jones said, "You asked me to bring back the radium gun that was dropped over the side. I located it, sir, but the people who had it wouldn't give it up to me until I proved it was ours. I offered to bring them another like it to show them. I'll bring them both back when I return."

"Ahhhhh," said Castle, slowly. "I begin to understand. Jones, it's taken me four months to get on to the way your mind works. You want to take down one of the hot guns and burn your initials into the boneheads who gave you that going-over. Don't you?"

"That, sir, is the furthest thing from my mind."

"Is it now? You wouldn't wager, would you, that the thought might creep up on you once you had the gun? Never mind." The captain sat down, annoyed.

"Listen, Jones, the work on the hull has been going well. We won't be here for more than twelve hours. Technically, that ends your ground liberty, no matter what the pass says. But I'll do this for you. I'll give you ten hours, and let you have a hot gun—if you'll give us a detailed account of what happened to you."

He crushed his cigarette with a deliberate move and looked at Jones. "The lieutenant and I aren't ghouls, Jones, but I confess we've waited for this moment a long time."

Ten minutes later, a furious, red-faced Jones left the captain's quarters. He could hear the laughter ringing down the corridor as he went to his cabin. Mike was standing outside, waiting for him.

"You going down again?" Mike said.

"I paid for it. Listen, Mike, I'm getting the hot gun, but it won't be loaded. The old man didn't fall for the story about having to show a duplicate. He smells a mouse."

"He smells you," said Mike, dryly. "I found out that while you were down the old man sent Peters to look for the gun and he found it."

"Jeepers!" said Jones. "That cooks me. I've got to have a loaded gun." He eyed Mike speculatively. "Remember what I said about giving you a third of what I get? I'll make it two-fifths. Just make a mistake when you give me the hot gun."

"You're breaking my heart," Mike said. "Two-fifths of what you're letting yourself in for could keep me in a hospital a month."

"You won't do it?"

"I didn't say that, did I?"

Jones opened the door to his cabin. "Mike," he said, solemly, "no matter what happens, remember this: I love you."

"Come back with the gold," Mike grinned, "and you can have a kiss."

JONES washed himself thoroughly, bandaged those parts of himself within reach and rubbed himself down. He paused before his coveralls, decided not to chance raising suspicion, and donned the last of his dress uniforms. He went down the corridor to the launch chamber where Mike was waiting. A radium gun was lying on the floor beside Mike.

"Old man had me on the carpet," Mike said, sourly. "He said to tell you that you had ten hours, and the way he said it he meant ten hours. And he expects the launch right back. So now what?"

"Nothing. Let's go, and I'll work it out on the way."

Mike shrugged and followed Jones into the launch, carrying the radium gun. Ten

minutes later the *Star-swallow* was fading from sight. The late afternoon heat made the air shimmer, and when the launch had ducked under the clouds and started its slow angle toward the mountain, everything looked distant and unreal.

The clouds were turning dark blue on their under sides, and the mountain had become black, like an enormous chunk of coal that someone had thrown in the middle of a gold expanse of sand. A lone, high-flying bird with great wings went by once.

After some minutes, Jones said, "We'll do it this way. You might find it tough getting off the plateau, so we'll go down to the flat boulders on the lower side. You stall the boat a second and I'll jump."

"How about getting back?" Mike said.

"Easy. There won't be any mountain when you come back."

"Look, Fluff," Mike said, "how will you get back?"

"Maybe I'll come to the plain."

"Right in the middle of five thousand boneheads?"

"If I have to," said Jones, looking down. Below there were more than the five thousand boneheads Mike had estimated. They looked like colored beads rolling about. No sound came up from the throng that watched the launch sail over their heads; the plain was silent and forboding.

"Your last hope's gone," Jones grinned. "No sign of the Military."

"If they ever get their hands on you away from that mountain, they'll tear you to bits. They'll do—"

"Come in horizontal," Jones said. "Straighten out."

"It isn't worth it," Mike said. "I never heard of anything so crazy."

Jones grinned. "It isn't worth worrying about. Nothing's going to happen. I'll just waste some time making passes at the mountain and then I'll come back. But I want to try. Can't you see that, Mike? I know that nothing's going to come of it, but if I don't try it'll be a sour taste in my mouth for a long time."

He paused and the grin returned. "And then, what if it worked? What if I really knocked over this pile of stones? What do you think the old man would be able to say?"

"You've heard him often enough," Mike said. "You should know."

Jones stood up and gripped the radium gun in both hands. Mike stuffed a pair of goggles into Jones' pocket and opened the side door, holding it against the wind with an outstretched foot. "Good luck," he said.

The launch slowed down lazily, crept up to the flat boulder, and then for an instant it held and trembled in mid-air. In that instant Jones jumped.

He landed ten feet below on the balls of his feet, fell forward slowly, slid the gun out of his hands, continued stretching out with his hands to check him, and was flat on the rock.

Then he got to his feet, shot a test burst of green flame into the stone. The launch circled back and he laughed, waving to Mike. It had been moving slowly enough for him to see the worried wrinkles on Mike's forehead.

Jones looked out over the plain. He could see the boneheads more clearly now, and he could see the colored dots that were coming together from all directions on the plain, coming toward the mountain. He waved to them and ducked under the ledge. He dropped down beneath the boulders and went close to the first hole in the miniature range.

The wind was strong in his face and it had a sharp edge. There was more noise now, and it seemed as if the noise alone was shaking the ledge. Jones scowled, thinking of what strange symphony the hot gun was going to make when it undertook the counterpoint. . . .

IT WAS dark when Jones fancied he heard the hiss of compressed-air jets. He had crawled out for a short rest from the hot gun, and he was sitting on top of the boulders.

When he heard the air jets, he turned

and looked up and there were the amber lights of the launch from the *Star-swallow*. The launch came by slowly, a faintly luminous spot in the blackness, and Jones shouted.

Three enormous spotlights shot three white lances at Jones and stabbed the boulder and swept over him. Then the lights were playing over the terrain, until they disappeared from sight.

Jones sat down to look at the plain again. A thousand fires flickered in the night, and around the fires sat boneheads, waiting. They were half-seen flashes of color around the blue and orange of the fires, and everywhere else there was only the darkness and the deep, murky, purple-black of a sky without stars. From the plain, snatches of meaningless sounds were occasionally swept up, and then it was quiet again.

Twenty minutes later, Jones saw the little flashing light overhead, somewhere in the mountain. "Mike!" he yelled. The light turned and aimed at Jones, but it was still too far off and it was lost somewhere before it reached him. "Coming!" The voice floated down in the wind.

And there was Mike, picking his way among the rocks, with only the light he carried to seek out his footing among the treacherous crevices that defaced the mountain. He kept coming laboriously. When he dropped down on the boulder beside Jones, he turned off the light and said, "Hullo. You all right?"

"Resting," Jones said. "Thanks for coming. I was wondering how the hell I was going to get out. The boneheads seem to have gotten up quite a reception committee for me down there. Fine thing, landing that boat up there at night. Damage it any?"

Mike grunted. "Too scared of the old man to damage anything. And remembering the way you got in helped a little too. Now listen to this. The boneheads called Military and they called the old man. I covered up by loading the empty gun, but he came down in the launch three hours ago and heard the hot gun going, so you're in for a charge of stealing radium shells.

"Also a certain Dr. Fitzjames—I see you got to the jail today—was attaching your salary for fifty pounds of lump sugar, and he swears that you won't leave Yanna without paying."

Mike sighed. "You should have seen the old man hopping around. If I were you I'd sooner go down to the boneheads. Well, you got everything?"

"What's the rush?"

"The rush will be apparent shortly. You have been here some nine hours, and so far you haven't gotten a brass ring, let alone gold. You ought to be pretty damn sick of it by now."

"I am damn sick of it," said Jones, "but I'm a man who has learned to appreciate liberty. I was given ten hours and I'll take ten hours."

Mike said, wearily, "Don't you know when to give up?"

"No," said Jones. "Give me that light. You sit here and wait. Or you can look in; it's a very pretty sight."

"So are you," Mike said, "but if I had guts enough to try getting that boat out of here again—" He gave Jones his flashlight and sat down. A tiny yellow flame sprang up in his cupped hands and he lit a cigarette.

Jones picked up the radium gun and played the light down into the gorge, climbing down. He threw the little beam on the holes of the range, then snapped the light off. The gun in his hand blasted out and a green blaze smashed into the jagged edges of the hole.

Mike leaned over the edge of the boulder and looked down. He could see Jones' face in the fierce green light, the lines of his jaw tight and unmoving, his gray eyes reflecting the green and staring intently ahead. He was like a statue, with the muscles of his bare forearms gathered into long cords, and his legs firm on the hard uneven bottom of the cavern.

"Hey, Jones!" Mike called. It was like conversing with a cannon. Mike dropped halfway down and threw a handful of

gravel at Jones. The gun stopped suddenly.

"Jones," Mike called, talking to the darkness. "Why didn't you play around with the little holes? They're the ones that usually give the highest pitch."

The flashlight flipped on in Jones' hand. "Go bury yourself," he said. "You take one look and you figure it out. Maybe you could play me a tune on this pipe organ? Anyway," he added, "I'll give it a tap for you, just to make you happy."

The green light hammered out again, the edge of the flame eating into the stone at the end of the range. The next instant both men ducked their heads and pieces of metal sang over them. There had been a sharp, splitting noise accompanied by a sound like the twanging of a string, and the radium gun had shattered to bits in Jones' hands.

OVERHEAD there was a slow, gnawing sound, and the flashlight suddenly shot out a long beam. Jones held a bloody right hand over his head, pointing up the narrow shaft of light.

"Mike! It's going!" In the thin beam of light Jones saw the huge section of stone slowly, so slowly, moving away from the upper ridge of the mountain. It separated and hung in mid-air seemingly, and then it was turning over and falling.

Mike jumped into the gorge and stones jumped after him. The whole mountain seemed to be moving, and then there was an almost noiseless crushing sound. It was as if a hammer of a hundred thousand tons had beaten down on an immense, padded anvil; only imagination could have furnished the noise.

But there wasn't any noise, and the only way Jones had of judging it was from the way the impact gave his body a savage, torturing shock that almost knocked him insensible. The light fell from his hand and went out.

There were far-off sounds like a broom sweeping across a rough floor, and other shocks, and a ringing like a deep-toned bell. Bits of gravel and stone kept flying down, and then clouds of sharp-edged dust; but the dust was harmless.

Then, right beside Jones, no more than twelve feet away where the range was, the whole mountain seemed to open and he could see the plain and the fires on it, and he heard for one stifling moment the high, mingled screams of many voices.

It was blotted out. A small dark object fell across the picture, and then blackness followed it, wiping out the scene as if a window-shade had been pulled over it. The sides of the gorge moved and shivered as if in fright. Again the sweeping noise returned; and at quick intervals, a dull popping as if there were toy balloons being burst.

Each bursting was followed by a shower of gravel that came from below and stung where it hit.

That was the worst of it. After that it was quiet.

"Mike!"

From far off, "Yeah."

"Where are you?"

Somewhere a little light went on. Before him Jones saw a huge stone lying, wedged into the gorge. The light was coming from the other side of it; the wedge hadn't quite reached the bottom of the gorge, and there was about six inches of free space under it, and from there the light came—the light of a match.

Mike was in the gorge, cut off from Jones by the huge stone wedge.

"You all right, Mike?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Fine. What happened?"

Silence a moment, broken by a scuffling. The light went out and came on again, but this time it was higher, leaking past the sides of the wedge. The light moved again and Jones could see the top of the stone that imprisoned him.

He was surrounded on five sides; twice by the walls of the gorge that had saved him, once by the wedge that had fallen in, once by a wall that had come into being where the range and holes had been—he could feel it with his foot; and finally, there was a ceiling some three

feet overhead, where other rock had sealed the gorge.

"Mike, where are you? I can't get out."

"That's what I thought," came Mike's voice. "The gorge is covered by part of the same rock that separated us. I can get out easy eno—" there was a scratch somewhere—"ufff! Matter of fact, I'm out!"

There was a light again, coming through a small crack overhead. Mike was standing on the rock over Jones, striking matches. "Got the flashlight?" Mike called. Jones felt the stone floor where he sat and found it. It snapped on and he passed it through the crack to Mike.

"What are we going to do?" Jones said.

"What do you mean—we?"

Jones let out a roar as the light went out. He began swearing his holiday oaths, but the close echoes hurt his ears and he stopped.

Mike's voice floated down. "You did it, all right. You ought to see this mountain —it looks like somebody sat on it. Can you hear the way those boneheads are yelling?"

"Only one of them. How the hell am I going to get out?"

"I'll take a look at the launch," Mike's voice came complacently. "Don't go away now."

Fifteen minutes went by. Jones had tried every direction anew; it was impossible to move more than five feet in any of them. He sat hunched over and thought of what had happened, but it was too much to believe. He moved his hands around him, feeling the walls of stone.

From time to time he heard high-pitched calls, and then someone whistling the chorus to *My Interplanetary Baby*. Mike called down, "You there, cave-dweller? I found the boat. Somebody's been throwing rocks at it, but it's all right. I can get it off easy enough."

"Mike, it really happened, didn't it? I mean, it worked, huh?"

"Yeah." Silence. "You ought to see it. Listen, Fluff, you're safe enough in there, aren't you? I'm going up to the ship and tell the old man you're still alive. I don't think those boneheads will bother you; they've quieted down. Take care of yourself. Back as soon as I can."

Some time after that Jones imagined he heard the hiss of air jets and he swore at his imagination. For a moment he was startled—the gorge seemed to move. He rolled his jacket into a bundle and put it under his head. Then, shivering with cold and spent with fatigue, he tried to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

GOLD FISH-HOOK

FLETCHER JONES awakened to a reveille blown by a radium gun directly over his head. He sat up and hit his head against the stone wall. Daylight was creeping in from a dozen tiny cracks in thin gray streams.

"Hey Jones!" someone yelled. "You still alive?"

"Right!" Jones yelled back.

"Alive, is he?" someone shouted. It was Captain Castle. Jones could hear him moving around and talking among the men outside. The radium guns went off again and stopped when they had blown a three-inch hole alongside of one of the cracks.

Looking through the hole, Jones saw part of Captain Castle's face. There was a baleful eye glaring down at him.

"Ensign Jones!"

"Yes sir."

"Stand at attention when I speak to you!" The baleful eye could see.

"It's impossible, sir. I can't do more than crouch."

"Then crouch at attention, damn you!"

The eye moved away and a mouth came in its place. "You know what you've done here? You've blown up a mountain—a mountain that doesn't belong to you!"

Jones was holding his ears against the echoes when the eye came back. "Get your hands off your ears! You know what it's going to cost you to pay for this mountain?"

Castle stopped talking, his voice catch-

ing at the thought; and then there was no one at the hole, and Castle's voice coming down, raving. "Three hundred hours late and he's down there holding his ears! Three hundred hours!"

Then the two guns were going again and Jones cursed and howled and tore his jacket into rags, making stuffing for his ears and wrapping them in place, and through the stuffing the echoes were driving nails into his head. He thought of the gun that had shattered, but it was no help.

The hole had been widened to a six-inch diameter when Lieutenant Haddock appeared framed in it, his pointed jaw sticking into the cave. The guns stopped going and Haddock shouted, "Helloooo—Jones! Got some news for you! Captain Castle is making arrangements for you to pay for the mountain from your salary."

He smiled a lean smile, and Jones could almost see the venom dripping from his lips down into the cave.

Someone called the lieutenant then, and Jones heard Haddock say, "Coming back? Fifty thousand at least? Do I understand you to say—sugar? Let me have those field glasses immediately."

Moments passed and then Haddock stuck his jaw in again. "Jones, there are fifty thousand of the inhabitants of this place marching here. I'm going for Captain Castle and help." He disappeared.

Jones called, "Hey! Anybody out there?"

Peters showed a sad face at the opening. "About ten of us," he said. "You know what the fish said? If they overcome us, we're supposed to remember the traditions of the service and go down bravely. Meanwhile, he went up. How do you feel?"

"Where's Mike?" said Jones. "What the hell is going on outside?"

"Mike disappeared this morning. Get back from the hole. We're in a hurry. Maybe this'll help you a little." A long silver flask was passed through the opening. Jones opened it, took a swallow and sat down.

The two guns were eating at the hole, blasting it to dust. They kept up steadily for an hour; and when they stopped, Jones was curled into a ball on the rocky floor, gasping.

Two men dropped through to him, helped him to his feet and lifted him up. Peters grabbed Jones' hands and pulled and together the three got Jones out. Jones stood there dumbly, looking around him.

The noise had stopped now, but he could still hear it, and there was a warmth inside of him that was fighting it and winning.

The mountain didn't seem to be any too steady, but there was little left of it as he remembered it. The flat boulders, the gorge, the range, were gone. Jones blinked and looked out at the plain. From where he was standing, the mass appeared as a blot on his vision at first.

The plain was covered with boneheads, and the sun shone down on the variously and brilliantly colored mass until they seemed to look like fancy flake icing on a cake, or like confetti.

"WHAT'S going on down there?" said Jones. Waves of sound kept washing up the sides of the mountain from the plain. From far off Jones saw what appeared to be a long procession winding its way through the throngs below.

They were carrying something that looked huge and white in the distance. Jones turned to the men around him and saw Peters standing with his head tipped back and the silver flask to his lips.

Peters gurgled. "First-class frenzy down there all day," he said. "The fish said he'd bring back help. Have some fortitude." He passed the bottle to Jones.

Jones looked at the flask, thoughtfully. "I'm hungry," he said.

"I'm thirsty," said Peters. "Please pass the bottle." He began to gurgle again, put the flask down for a moment and pointed. "Here comes the fish," he announced. "That's the end of your appetite."

The launch of the *Star-swallow* had sped

into view from around the mountain, crowded at every window and logy from its burden. In a few minutes Lieutenant Haddock was scrambling down from the perch where the launch had landed. Six men of the crew in dress uniform, and carrying side-arms, followed him.

Haddock seemed to have aged twenty years in the time he had been gone. "Jones," he said, as he came down, "you're out, eh?" He said it again, vacantly, looking down into the hole and then at Jones; and it was evident that he was thinking of other things.

"Out, eh?" He seemed to remember where he was and he said, "There's no danger, Jones, no danger at all." His voice was higher than ever. "Fact is, it's quite the other way. Quite the other way. Yes, quite. Out, eh?" He finally returned to where he had started.

Suddenly Peters was standing in front of Jones, facing Haddock. "We know 'sno danger, fish. Certainly 'sno danger if you're here, fish."

Lieutenant Haddock stepped back and pursed his lips. "You're drunk!"

"Impossible!" said Peters, leaning over and putting an arm around Haddock. "I got'n allergy for this stuff. It never affecsh me." Peters heaved a long sigh, his under lip trembled and a tear fell across his cheek, hung on his lip and fell off.

"Ensign Jones!" Haddock piped, taking Peters' hands off his shoulders, "As the ranking officer here, I hold you respons—"

The great shout that rose up from the plain drowned Haddock out. The mass below had moved up close to the foot of the mountain, and roar after roar trembled in the air. Haddock trembled with them. He looked down and saw the gigantic white chair that shone in the sunlight, twinkling in every beautiful colored crystal until it appeared to be made of diamonds.

"Oh-h-h," said Haddock, holding his face in his hands. "It's true!" He had gone pale, and now his wandering eyes fastened on Peters. "Give me that!" he shrilled, lunging for the flask, wrenching it from Peters' hands and tilting it back to his lips in the same instant. He drank deep.

For that instant, and possibly half a minute after that, there was no sound and no movement; no movement save the exemplary bobbing of Haddock's Adam's apple. And when he put the flask down, there was a long sigh and a score of men released their breaths, and Haddock last of all. He waved vaguely toward the launch.

"Let's go," he said. . .

AFTER that it was like a dream—like one of Fitzjames' dreams, Jones thought. The launch, scarcely able to move, made two trips and collected the crew; and when they knew what had happened, they produced several more flasks.

The launch deposited them all at the foot of the mountain, and only a tight cordon of garishly-dressed police among the boneheads saved the men of the *Starswallow* from being trampled to death.

It was an open-air madhouse; the noise kept swelling, the colors of the boneheads were a gyrating wheel, and the heat from the suns and the numerous flasks and the back-slapping came together and became an undistinguishable riot.

They took Jones and lifted him up to the seat of the twenty-foot throne, a throne that was made entirely of sugar. And then they lifted the throne and began parading Jones in it, moving through a mob that must have contained a hundred thousand citizens of solid bone, citizens who were not wearing any wire loops or gold rings.

It kept up like that for an hour, until the rocking of the throne and the fatigue that still clung to Jones combined, and he fell asleep.

They wakened Jones only to get him into the launch, and some time after that he was carried out of the launch and put on another and larger throne of sugar, and then the parade through the city began.

It was a wonderful sight, Jones knew; but that was all he knew. The entire population of Yanna had turned out for him. They stood crowded on every available inch of space, waving from the bee-hives

and the pyramids, screeching from the tops of buildings.

And then they began the shower and the air was filled with gold rings flying at Jones, and even after he had had one eye closed by them and borrowed a collapsible ether-helmet from the guard of honor which the crew of the *Star-swallow* formed —even then an occasional well-aimed shot stunned him.

So the procession swept into the main square of the city, with Jones ducking the golden hail and looking like a monster in his helmet, and now and then lifting it up so he could take a nibble from the arm; he had torn off an arm of the throne and he kept sucking at the sugar.

And all the while he kept nodding to the swirling colors and murmuring, with becoming graciousness, *"Oui oui, oui oui."*

But when Jones saw Captain Castle, he knew that even Fitzjames' dreams had to end. The captain was standing on the balcony under the flags where every human in Yanna had been gathered, and there was Fitzjames with his pink head glowing like a light.

Jones thought he saw Jackson and looked for Sue and found her, but she was lost again. Then from the balcony Jones made a speech, and the silence while he spoke was awesome.

"I did it," he said, "with my little hot gun."

They went crazy. The *oui's* rang out until a roof on one of the buildings caved in and spilled boneheads on each other with a sound like a million castanets.

Pandemonium de luxe.

Then hundreds and hundreds of boneheads came running through lanes formed in the square, and each of them was carrying an enormous sack filled with gold rings. And as they brought in more and more sacks, gradually they began to push the throng out of the square.

A company of ivory boneheads came up to Jones. One of them handed him a huge scroll and everyone applauded, then the bonehead said a few words and again there was applause. From the crowd of faces around him, Jones saw Fitzjames, and he motioned him over.

"What is he saying?" Jones said, wearily.

"My dear Bones, all this gold is yours!" Fitzjames beamed, and bending over, he whispered, "Now about the sugar—"

But Jones had already fainted.

WHEN he opened his eyes again, Captain Castle was standing beside him. "Three hundred and ten hours late," he said, and there was no feeling in his voice. Jones knew what that meant.

"Jones," Castle said, "I'm going to peel your skin off like a banana and fry you with air friction." He brushed a hand across his face. "Like a banana," he said. "Let's go."

He meant business, all right.

Jones got to his feet, but Fitzjames had come over to Captain Castle and was whispering things to him. Beside Fitzjames stood Sue, and nearby were Doris and Jackson—and last of all, Mike. Jones took one of Sue's hands and one of Mike's. "Well, kids?" he said, grinning.

"Sh-h," said Sue, wagging her head at Fitzjames. Jones looked at Captain Castle's face and moved back out on the balcony. The entire square was filled with sacks of gold rings, standing row on row, surrounding the launch and men from the *Star-swallow*.

And they were all his. Jones passed a trembling hand over his moist forehead. He swallowed. He looked at his hands and feet and swallowed again. He supposed that eventually he would get to believe that all this wealth was honestly and truly his own.

The houses that faced on the square were still filled with cheering mobs, and the din was like strident music under the conversation.

"Fluff," said Mike, his eyes dancing, "if I ever called you any harsh names—" He broke off. "Where did you find this girl? You know what she did?" Mike was squeezing Jones' hand.

"Sh-h," said Sue. "Here it is."

Castle and Fitzjames were approaching them, and Castle's face had turned the color of an underripe olive. Fitzjames was saying, ". . . the law, the strict letter of the law. I'm consul here," and Castle was trying to brush him off.

"Jones," said Captain Castle, quietly, "get down to the launch."

"Yes, sir," Jones said, "but this gold—"

"Yes, Mr. Jones?" It was scarcely a whisper.

"I don't know how much of it we can carry, sir, but—"

"We'll carry none of it, Mr. Jones." Jones had to read Castle's lips.

"Ulp," said Jones. He steadied himself. "It's all mine, sir."

Captain Castle's unusually piercing eyes fastened themselves on Jones' and Jones swallowed his bleat of protest, contenting himself with making flapping motions with his hands, both feeling and looking like a badly trained seal.

"I'm not a freighter," said Castle. "We've no stowage."

"Well, sir, the treaty only allows me to take a small amount each year. I don't want to burden you, but I'm sure some of the men wouldn't mind giving up some of their furniture to provide space."

"Furniture?" Castle said, quietly. "Are you contemplating the willful loss or destruction of government property, Mr. Jones?"

"The law must be observed," said Fitzjames, suddenly. "I'm consul here and room or no room—"

"Do we understand each other, Mr. Jones?" said Castle.

What Fletcher Jones might have done or said at this point, had not both Sue and Mike crushed his hands, remained problematical. As it was, Jones looked at Sue and saw laughter in her eyes, and quickly he looked at Mike, and saw him biting his lip out of a grin.

Jones knew a signal to keep his mouth shut when he saw one. He shut up.

But then, when he wanted to salute and leave, he could free neither of his hands, and Sue said to Fitzjames, "Your bags are packed, Dr. Fitzjames. They're waiting."

Captain Castle closed his eyes and faced Fitzjames, "Why?" he said.

Fitzjames took the opportunity to glance first at Sue, then at Jones. He put a hand up to his beard and said, "Mutiny, Captain."

"Mutiny." Castle just said it. His eyes were still closed.

"Can't I explain to you, Dr. Fitzjames," he said in a reasonable voice, "that I am expecting no mutiny? That if a mutiny should occur I would crush it with my bare hands? Look at my hands, Dr. Fitzjames. Do they look as if they could crush something like a mutiny?"

Beside him, Jones saw Sue motion to Fitzjames behind Castle's back. Her mouth formed the word, "Hyp-not-ized." She nodded her head sadly and then looked at Jones and squeezed his hand.

Mike had to turn his eyes away. Slowly, Jones began to feel a well man again, and inside him a warmth glowed as he looked at Fitzjames and Captain Castle.

"Captain," said Fitzjames, "I'll waste no more time with you. I happen to know that your own quarters can accommodate two persons. As consul to Yanna I have the right to demand of any American vessel passage to the next port of call. I am determined to be of service to my country at any price. You can't leave here without me."

"My quarters?" said Castle. He looked around at Jones, then at Mike. "You're going to share my quarters?"

Fitzjames nodded vigorously, and his white beard bobbed up and down.

The captain rocked on his feet a moment, and then he shouted, "Three hundred and ten hours late!" and the veins on his neck stood out. His dilated eyes roamed the room and he roared, "Haddock!"

Lieutenant Haddock appeared from somewhere, rolling as he walked. His chin was damp and he was smiling sheepishly. "Yesshir," he said.

"Listen, fish," said Castle, softly. "Who he hell do you think is the captain here, nyway?"

Haddock answered: "Youshir."

"Then pass that damn flask over here!"

SEVERAL feet away, in the ensuing quiet, Sue whispered, "Don't worry bout the gold, dear. Just wait until the aptain wants potatoes and the cook takes look in the sacks."

"Don't thank me," Mike whispered. "I nly carried the stuff, but it was her idea."

"You ought to keep Lieutenant Haddock ell oiled, Fluff," Sue said quietly. "He ld me that your captain had made plans bout your not getting any of this gold. ot," she added, "that I wouldn't marry poor man."

Well, having Fitzjames along would fix at; and Jones knew he had Sue to thank r that, too.

They were walking out of the building en, hand in hand, and ahead Captain astle was leaning heavily on Lieutenant addock as they went out together.

Jones turned to Sue.

"In three months, August 1, plus three ndred and ten hours," Jones was say-g, "we'll be in New York. If you get tters signed with Mike's name, you'll ow the old man has me locked up. oner or later he'll remember one of the hot guns isn't with us any more. But you'll be there when we come, huh?"

Sue said, "Huh."

"What I liked," Mike said, "was the idea of Fitzjames coming to Sue with a story about mutiny and Haddock being a hypnotist. Wonderful job, showing him what his duty was."

"Thanks, Mike," said Sue. "I'm very fond of you. I think it began last night when you were getting Fitz to translate your explanations to our bony brothers. And that terrible beer was no help."

Mike said, "What I like especially is the idea of the thing."

"You mean the two-fifths?" Jones said. "It's a clear half."

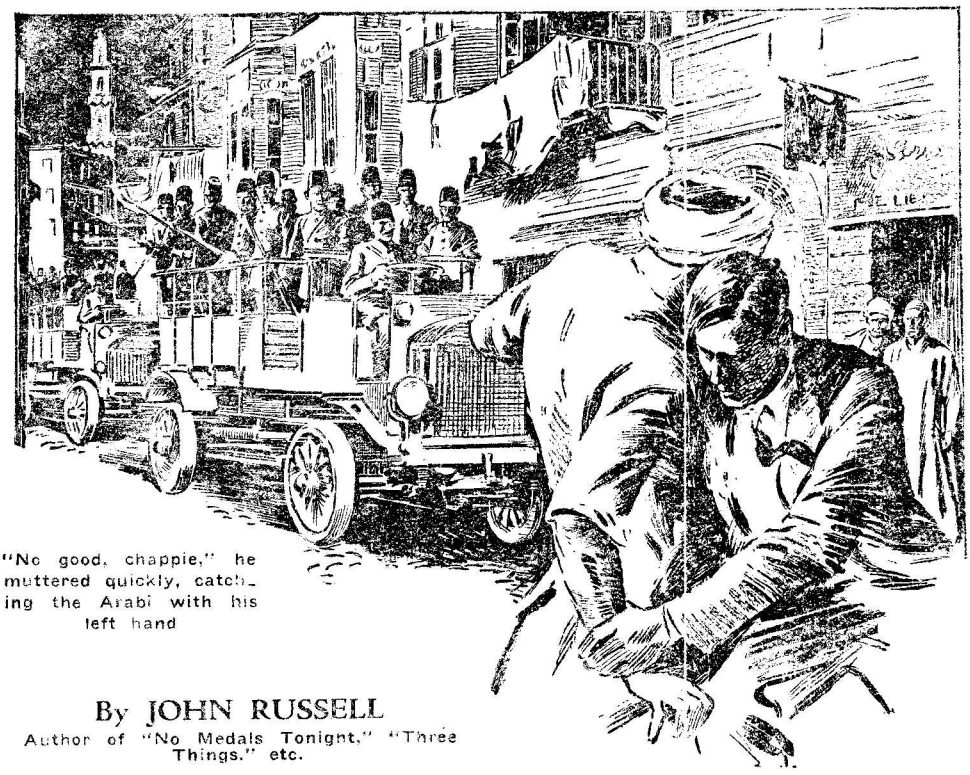
"Of all the mercenary—" Mike said. "What I mean is that this is the last stand for the clean-living school of thought. They say there's a special Providence for guys like you. You must be way up on the list. Only now I'm thinking about a fool and his money."

"I'll take care of that," said Sue. "This fool also has a honey."

"Oh, Mr. Bones," Fitzjames called, coming up behind them. "Will you carry my bags, please?" He was beaming at all three, and then as he stroked his beard, he bent closer and said, "I think we can speak in confidence here. Now about that sugar. . ."

THE END

Bombs Over Cairo



"No good, chappie," he muttered quickly, catching the Arabi with his left hand

By JOHN RUSSELL

Author of "No Medals Tonight," "Three Things," etc.

The wily Egyptians have a word for it. With this word in his mind, and a hard-won pomegranate in his hand, the too-humble Mr. Bunley discovers with what discordant voices the East can call

THERE never could have been so innocent a tourist to land in Egypt; not since somebody spoiled the Egyptians. His name was B. A. Bunley, and he reached the seaport of Alexandria by working his passage as a pantryman on the tramp trader *Norwich*.

What he wanted was to get ashore and see the streets of Cairo, the way they used to be sung in the old song—and straight off.

He packed his imitation crocodile grip with a frayed shirt and two pairs of socks, drew his accumulated pay of sixteen shillings in dirty paper piastres, and prepared happily to hop the wide world.

But first he waited to see Tony Populos, the stalwart Levantine cook who had endured most of his youthful questionings throughout the voyage from London. Tony had been down on the quay as soon as they tied up, it seemed, and was now climbing back up the gangplank with a blue telegraph form in his hand.

That squint-eyed autocrat, usually genial enough, was rather brusque about something. "I no can go to Cairo wit' you," he announced. "My brother, he no come meet me like I tol' you. . . . See?"

He waved the telegram before the eyes of Bunley, who waved it aside. "It's all Greek to me—I mean, it's all Egyptian."

said Bunley. "I wouldn't know the difference, chappie!"

There could have been nothing dumber, nothing simpler-minded, than his smiling idea of a joke. It drew a grin even from the smartly uniformed officer of harbor police—and a hard-boiled bunch of international eggs they are!—who stood on duty nearby. It even restored his Oriental suavity to the dark-browed Tony Populos.

"Ha. Sure—tha's fine," he laughed in his big chest. "But listen. If my brother is no there, no use for me to go there. Better you wait till next trip. Then I tak' you to Cairo: me."

"But I want to take Cairo myself, old fruit!" protested Bunley.

"Ya-as. Sure. But lissen I tal' you—es like this. . . ."

Still plausibly talking, he led Bunley off across the deck, past the donkey-engine, to the outer rail where he leaned idly tearing the telegram into small bits. "You better not go."

"Not go? Of course I'm going!" exclaimed Bunley, wide-eyed. "I told you how all my life I've been planning for this tour. Just in fun."

"Ya-as? My g-hoodness; what you think you could saw?" asked Tony, with a satiric squint over the smoky, cluttered roadstead where the only clean things were the swift-cutting gulls and the white police launches—both in search of their proper carrion.

"Oh, I don't mean this," sniffed Bunley. "I mean, by Crikey—the real article. The beauty, the charm, the enchantment! It's been a dream with me: my first Oriental city! Why shouldn't I take it?"

"Well, I tal' you," said Tony. "You won' like it. In Cairo now es too noisy —too much national commotions. Too much anarchist business damn-well blow-you-up!

"Besides," he confided, "my brother tal' me how the big general who everybody s-hate so much—you know; you 'ave read? Ya-as. The big commander-in-chief. Well, soon he comes back to tak' con-trol in Cairo himself. Maybe even tomorrow."

"Beg pardon. What's that to do with me?"

"I'm tal'ing you. Maybe plenty riots and confusions. No good place for young faller like you."

"I'm off, old fruit," declared Bunley, breezily. "All I ask would be the address of that right cheap hotel you spoke of. You'll let me have that, won't you?"

TONY looked him over, paternally. Beginning at his thin, cracked shoes, his wrinkled suit, and then his round, earnest face and button nose.

He showed no subtlety of interest in the poor pantry-man beyond a certain philosophic wonder, perhaps, at his utter simplicity. Anyone might have wondered at that.

Yet the boy was no mere fool, either. He carried a set of books in his bunk: Smiles's *Self Help,* an old *Hand-book of the Mediterranean,* and a paper-bound copy of Byron's *Turkish Tales.* It gave a perfect picture of Bunley: the image of that dumb, romantic, guileless lower-middle-class Briton who has sufficed, somehow, in spite of all philosophies and all history, to keep his stupid country in the hegemony of nations. . . .

Tony might have been pondering these matters, with or without malice, while his somewhat saturnine face revealed the white teeth. "All ri'; I tal' you," he said. "You go to the Hotel Fayoum. Es in the shoemakers' quarter in the Arab city. Give them my name; and if anybody bothers wit' you, you say—*Malaish!* So."

"*Malaish,*" repeated Bunley. "What does that mean?"

"Ha. You don' know? It mean, 'No matter'. You jus' say that, and maybe you get through all ri'."

Bunley nodded in bright understanding.

"And one more thing," continued Tony Populos, his genial self. "You know what es a pomegranate?"

"Pomegranate?" queried Bunley. "Why, of course—it's a fruit. I never ate one, but I know what they are."

"Fine. I am ver' fond of pomegranate myself. Now in the Medirieh Square, just at the corner near to Hotel Fayoum, es a little fruit shop. There they have the finest pomegranate in all of Egypt. In the early morning they come in—about six o'clock. Then they have the dew on them; ha—so delicious!"

The cook smacked his lips. "You get me one of those, ha? You bring me a pomegranate?"

"You be sure I will!" cried Bunley, shaking his hand delightedly. "And thanks so much, Tony. I'll be all right. I'll be back soon!"

"Ya-as: I hope so," said Tony Populos, on his teeth. *Malaish!"*

So that was the way B. A. Bunley went on to see the streets of Cairo—in a section where angels might have feared to tread. The only item that annoyed him was their noise. Whoever first heard the East a-calling never told in how many discordant voices it can call.

THE name of Tony Populos carried weight, right enough. It made the scowling proprietor admit him to the grimy barracks labelled *Hotel Fayoum,* where he showed Bunley to a dark and smellsome cubby-hole apparently at some time devoted to the culture of goats. Bunley thought the time had come to try his magic password.

"Malaish!" he said.

Thereupon the proprietor murmured apologies and promptly ushered him up another stair to another and grander cubby-hole where at least he had a window, with a view.

A dismal sort of a view, though. Looking out he saw masses of old, ramshackle buildings like a jumble of soiled packs of cards, always leaning over toward each other. Here and there stood a few scabrous domes like battered whip-tops turned wrong end up; a few meaningless towers like children's play blocks.

That was it. The whole place gave the impression of a youngster's disorderly play-box—the box of a disorderly youngster, too!—with a broken-down phonograph always twanging away somewhere under the rubbish.

It was the same when he went out into the streets as any tourist should do, in search of native life, local color. . . .

The life was there: crowds of shuffling, jabbering, boisterous people; *fellahin,* Bedouins, Syrians, Arabs and 'Gippies; clad mostly in misfit pants and vests, or stuff like worn-out sheets and bedgowns or the cover of a rat-eaten couch.

The color was there: every complexion from boot-black to mustard-yellow—and he noticed as a curious fact that every face of every shade seemed to turn toward him with a scowl; this gave an effect of noise of itself, being a kind of curse.

No—and no use blinking it: Bunley's contact with his first Oriental city could hardly have been counted a success. If anybody had been following to keep tabs on him, that person would have had a sad report of this pilgrim's progress.

If it was true that all his purpose was to find beauty, charm and enchantment, he made an awful botch of it. All he did find as he explored the vicinity of Medirieh Square was a hurly-burly like Whitechapel on a Boxing Night. From lowbrowed cafés and coffee-shops came tides of ugly, thick-throated men who swirled back and forth loudly discussing nothing intelligible.

Everybody seemed either drunk, or mad, or very angry about something. Everybody seemed to resent his mere white man's presence; stepped on his feet, kicked his shins. Until finally somebody bashed his hat down over his nose and while he groped blindly, picked his pocket. . . .

"Malaish!" said Bunley; but as he had to say it to the inside of his hat, it was too late for any good to come from it.

Later still, when he climbed to his roost in the Hotel Fayoum that evening, he found his crocodile grip had been rummaged and the better of his two pairs of socks had been stolen.

He complained to the proprietor, who scowled again, but apologetically added *"Malaish!"* before Bunley had a chance.

So when Bunley said "*Malaish!*" it only sounded like an apology for his own robbery; and that was too late, too.

MEANWHILE the clamor of Cairo still pursued him. Hereabouts was a blatting hurdy-gurdy, and thereabouts, was a blaring cinema; half a dozen street orchestras of pipe and tomtom squealed and banged against each other in endless cacophony.

The hum of the human hive, the hubbub of pullulating humanity on the roofs hardly lessened with the hours. This incredible capital never slept. When the clatter of its traffic might have faded, it talked, it quarreled all the more.

And then the chickens began.

Bunley loathed chickens—the sound of them. He had a Cockney's conviction that the place for a chicken is a plate—or else in its original sin waking the welkin for some theoretical countryman. He had an idea, though, that they sometimes slept. Not these Egyptian chickens. Unless they took it in relays.

The result was, however, that they helped to keep his eyes and his ears open the whole night through. When he sensed the real dawn, before six o'clock, he crept down the stairs. And now, to be sure, he came to an utter silence.

Cafes, bazaars, dwellings were all closed. Except for a few slinking cats the streets of Cairo were absolutely empty. There seemed something uncanny abroad, as of a spell overcast upon the place. Medirieh Square was the precinct of a tomb where a Portent brooded, waiting, a finger on its lip.

Bunley crossed toward the one bead of a night-light still showing. It issued from a little shop just at the near corner of the Square; and the same was a fruiterer's shop—sure enough. In front, was a little low stand set forth with neat piles of various fruits and vegetables. Inside, in close converse, stood two Arabic men like a pair of sheeted ghosts.

They started and stayed staring at the sight of Bunley, who had come up behind them suddenly like a ghost himself. . . .

One of these men was extremely tall and muscular. He had a fierce hawk face. He was built like an athlete; like a professional cricketer; with sinewy bare arms and corded neck. He regarded Bunley with a strange, challenging fixity.

Bunley, like an embarrassed intruder, took to examining the fruit. Oranges, bananas, custard apples—and a pile of wonderful pomegranates. *Promegranates!*

"Oh," he exclaimed. "Why, of course; there they are. I never tasted one, but I'm sure they must be delicious!"

While the hawk-faced man turned to whisper frantically with his companion, Bunley picked up the top-most pomegranate of the pile. It was a luscious-looking fruit; as large as a big orange; but ruddy, flanged—curiously heavy.

"How much is this?" he asked.

"Er—half a piastre. Er—no, not for sale!" stammered the hawk man . . . and made to snatch it back.

BUT Bunley was a pretty fair cricketer in his own right—and his own left, too. With the one he held the pomegranate; with the other he caught the fellow's wrist. This was no time for passwords. "No good, chappie!" he warned, quickly. "It's too late!"

And in fact it was too late—for any sort of action he might have meant. For just then the air was split by a wedge of sound nearby: the deafening whoop of an auto siren that paralyzed its own reflex. As around into Medirieh Square—just beside the shop—swept two huge motor cars.

The first was filled with grim-appearing military men, with drawn pistols ready. In the second, surrounded by guards, sat a stolid, soldierly personage decorated with many glittering medals and holding a great gold-hilted sword between his knees.

Following close-on came thumping a whole train of clumsy motor-lorries that seemed to spill out at every jolt like so many peas a trail of greenish-clad 'Gippie soldiers. These took post swiftly at the

street corners, with bayonets gleaming.

The whole thing had flashed and passed and left its pattern like some fantastic kaleidoscope, with a calliope attachment now fading away into the distance. . . .

Bunley and the hawk man had remained fixed as they were, motionless. Now Bunley released him; and paid over meticulously a last half-piastre, which he found in a waistcoat pocket where he had also hidden the return half of his railroad ticket to Alexandria.

"Thanks so much," said Bunley; and left the fellow in a sort of Arabian night's daze—able only to murmur, *"Malaish!"*

SO THAT was the way that B. A. Bunley completed his tour to the streets of Cairo. When he came back aboard the tramp trader *Norwich* at Alexandria it was the weary hour of the afternoon, and at least the dirty, cluttered roadstead was gratefully quiet. The seagulls were resting among their windrows of flotsam, and the only white launch in sight seemed to drift aimlessly, with no intent, as if taking its own siesta.

Yet there was nothing weary about Bunley; only his usual wide-eyed innocence as he stepped up the gangplank, and incidentally and squarely onto the hard-boiled corns of the officer of harbor police, who perhaps was drowsing on duty himself, but came awake smartly enough.

"Beg pardon," said Bunley, blithely.

His voice carried across the deck to the ears of Tony Populos, where it certainly gave a startle to that brawny Levantine cook. He was standing there against the rail, and by a curious coincidence he was tearing up another blue telegraph form.

He turned with a squint of something more than amazement, to see his poor pantry-man home again. "Ha! My g-hoodnes, es you?" he exclaimed, with a certain incredulity. "Well-l, tha's fine," he was able to add. "And how did you like Cairo?"

Bunley came straight up to him. Nothing could have been simpler, dumber, more confiding than the shabby figure with its wrinkled clothes and its round, earnest face. "I didn't like it much, Tony," admitted Bunley, with his open smile. "For a fact—just as you said—it's too noisy."

"Too noisy," repeated Tony, nodding.

"But I saw—"

"Ya-as? What did you saw?"

"Just the way you said I might. I saw the commander-in-chief."

Tony blinked. "You saw the commander."

"The big general, you know."

"The big—general."

"And for another thing, I did exactly as you asked, old chap," continued Bunley. He opened the little imitation crocodile grip he was still carrying and groped inside of it. "I brought you," he announced, "a pomegranate."

"You brought me," repeated Tony, in the same mechanical manner, "a pomegranate. . . ."

Whereupon Bunley produced that trophy and held it on his cupped palm; and indeed it was a handsome object to behold. So firmly smooth, so compact, and flushed with a luscious, ripe color.

He held it out as if for admiration; and the eyes of the two men met above it—the cook and the pantry-man—the saturnine racial mongrel and the guileless pure-bred Briton.

And they were both brave men, too, each in his own way; for in this test of secret values, in this moment of undercover, tense drama which they had reached together, neither of them flinched or so much as quivered. Only it was Tony who got the jump.

"All ri'," he said, philosophically, without the least change in his satiric tone. "All ri'—then we both go to Hell ri' now!"

IN THE flick of a hand quicker than any eyes could follow, he snatched the pomegranate and lifted it over his head to smash on the deck between them.

Bunley's answering action was cumbered somewhat with the crocodile bag—was just a shade delayed. But his cricketing swipe sufficed in time

to knock the thing out of Tony's fingers and high into the air. It sailed in a beautiful roseate arc, and fell into the nested machinery of the donkey-engine.

The result was a fairly good small version of Hell, sure enough. An explosion like the clap of doom tore the engine to bits and drove a hole through the ship's forward deck like a young crater.

Noise! For some few split seconds matters were surely noisy in and about the tramp trader *Norwich*. While the blast echoed between quay and quay over Alexandria Port and waked its dreaming; while a million sea-gulls rose in screaming protest and a pipe twittered frantically to set the white police launch in motion, there burst another roaring on every stunned perception.

This was the big-chested roar of Tony Populos, fighting madly to throw himself over the outer rail.

Three times he almost made it, with Bunley clinging to him tooth and nail. Tony, of course, had the strength of three pantry-men—but Bunley still clung.

Until the harbor policeman recovered sufficiently to hop across the deck and hurl his hard-muscled weight into the struggle. Then he got in a clip on the conk with a revolver-butt that made the cook collapse with a groan, so that they could snap the hand-cuffs on him.

"Awf'ly sorry, old chappie," said Lieutenant B. A. Bunley, of the Royal British Naval Intelligence Service. And he looked it, and he meant it.

"But by Crikey—you nearly out-guessed me after all, Tony! See here, old fruit—did you actually—were you meaning to blow us all up with that silly bomb?"

Tony's angry snarl left no doubt.

BUT it was the harbor policeman who was chiefly annoyed. Not so much at the noise; but some of the pieces of the donkey-engine had ripped his nice, new, form-fitting tunic like so much shrapnel.

"I must say I think you cut it rather fine, Secret Service!" he complained. "Why the deuce did you have to hand him the blasted thing?"

"Had to make sure, my lad," explained Bunley. "Don't you see? How else could I prove that Tony Populos, our popular cook on the *Norwich* trader, was the very same as Tony Populos—and a lot of other aliases—the head of the Inner Anarchist Council for the Mediterranean?"

"Oh, I don't doubt you inside johnnies are darn smart," fumed the policeman, rubbing a sore corn. "But you didn't fool me much."

"No?" queried Bunley. "Well, what did you know about the case?"

"Why, of course we knew there was an anarchist plot on to assassinate the commander-in-chief. There generally is, around Egypt. And we always expect some Sherlock in disguise, like you. And of course we were wise to that pomegranate dodge—as a change from pineapples!"

"You had the telegraphic code?" asked Bunley.

"Sure, we had it. This bloke Populos got two messages about his 'brother.' That meant the general. The first said his 'brother' was 'due home at No. 6 Pomegranate Street, Cairo.' That meant the general was due to be blown up at six ack emma. It was a plain enough message: only a simple code."

"Greek to you," said Bunley. "And by what time did you harbor policemen figure that out?"

"Oh, about ten ack emma."

"That would have been a lot of help to the general," observed Bunley. "And how about the second telegram?"

"The second message said that his 'brother' had 'failed to arrive at No. 6 Pomegranate Street, Cairo.' So we figured the general must have escaped."

"Yes," said Bunley, thoughtfully. "The general escaped, all right. . . . But you see, all this meant some pretty sharp fooling of Tony Populos."

The captive cook heaved in his bonds. "You didn' fool me much, neither!"

"No?" asked Bunley, wide-eyed.

"Not for long; not me!"

"Well now, just for fun, Tony. Whenever did you first begin to suspect me?"

"I suspec' you since London, of course. I was s-hure so soon as you say you don' know 'Egyptian language.' Ever'body knows there is no such thing. Besides, didn' I already found a Greek-Arabic dictionary with those other books in your bunk?"

"MY MISTAKE," murmured Bunley, somewhat crestfallen. "So you sent me with your anarchist password to get damn well blown up in Medireih Square. . . . By the way, old chap, what did that word really mean, in code?"

"For any white stranger it meant 'pass this man along; but be sure he no come t'rough alive.' " Tony's dark face was contorted with his swallowed rage. "I don' understand yet 'ow they missed getting you at the end!"

"And the general, too," suggested Bunley.

"Ya-as; and the general. 'Ow they must 'ave bungled—the fools! I hope they get caught!"

"Don't worry about that," put in the harbor policeman. "The commander's 'Gippie guard gathered in your whole darn crew this pip emma—bombers and all!"

"But still," persisted Bunley, "I don't see either why you tried so hard to argue me out of going up to Cairo, Tony."

The cook showed his teeth. "That was to mak' s-hure you *would* go—h-innocence!"

Bunley seemed truly shocked.

"I'm afraid you're really a bad and narsty sort of man," he pronounced. "And I'm afraid you're going to have a number of years to think it over."

Whereupon Tony began to bluster, as Levantines, even the most clever and satiric, will do. "Oh, you ain' got me yet. This is Egypt: I got plenty good friends here. Lawyers, judges, all kinds," he boasted. "Me, I done nothing wrong in Egypt."

"No?" said Lieutenant B. A. (Babs) Bunley, politely. And he let his eyes rove simply aft over the wreck of the donkey-engine to the flagstaff of the *Norwich*, where a certain stupid, patient, much-put-upon and long-suffering old red cloth was still flying.

Not being in uniform, he could only take off his bashed-up hat with a casual manner. "I'm afraid that won't help you much, old bean. I'm afraid the answer to any legal noise like that would be *Malaish!*"

Marcos Zappa's blade flicked out and found another throat

Don Renegade

Start now this exciting and romantic novel of the gallant days of Alta California

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

MARCOS ZAPPA, a burly, tattered fellow, is set upon by four rogues and carried away to a shack in the hills. There he is left alone with an elegant caballero who introduces himself as Don Pedro Garcia.

Quickly Don Pedro makes it clear that he knows the truth about Marcos Zappa. He knows that this man is really Don Felipe Hernandez, once a member of the Viceroy's staff; that he now wears a band around his forehead to conceal the brand of the renegade. *El renegado* Don Felipe Hernandez was proclaimed, because his love for a Mexican girl led him to help foment a native uprising. He was banished from his own caste, and eventually he joined a crew of pirates.

THEN Don Pedro explains how he plans to use Marcos Zappa. The sinister don seeks revenge against a certain Señorita Manuela de Vasquez, who has spurned him, and against his successful rival, Miguel de Gandara. So it is Don Pedro's scheme to present Marcos Zappa to the world as a gentleman, a role which the latter can easily carry off; then Zappa is to win the heart of Señorita Manuela and to slay her suitor,

This story began in last week's Argosy

Don Miguel. At last Don Pedro will reveal the bogus caballero to be a renegade.

The thought of revenge against his caste and the promise of gold win Marcos Zappa to this plan. Accordingly, a few days later the richly attired Don Marcos Zappa rides toward Reina de Los Angeles. On the highway he encounters a carriage beset by highwaymen; he helps to vanquish them—and discovers afterward that he has rescued Señorita Manuela de Vasquez and her father. And the young caballero with them, who saved Marcos Zappa's life at one point in the fight, is Miguel de Gandara, the man Zappa is committed to slay.

AT A gaming house in Reina de Los Angeles that night Marcos Zappa meets Bardoso, formerly his comrade in piracy. Masquerading as a merchant, Bardoso is planning a raid on the town; he is aware that Marcos Zappa has been hired by Don Pedro Garcia, though for what reason he does not know. Before Don Marcos leaves the gambling house, Anita, the alluring daughter of the proprietor, warns him that the *commandante,* Capitán Cervera, is suspicious of him. And when Zappa returns to his inn, Capitán Cervera suddenly confronts him. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

YOUR SERVANT, DON MARCOS

MARCOS ZAPPA studied the *capitán* with chill arrogance. He was remembering how Anita Gonzales had hinted at the *capitán's* interest in him, and wondered at it. If this official visit meant trouble for him, Marcos Zappa hoped that Don Pedro Garcia had power and influence enough to furnish aid when it was needed.

"In what manner may I be of service to you, *capitán?*" he asked.

"I tried to reach you before, Don Marcos, but was unable to do so. First, I wish to thank you for going to the assistance of Don Juan de Vasquez and his party."

"Any man would have done as much," Marcos Zappa replied. "Did I err in slaying one of the rogues?"

"You did the public a service, Don Marcos. We have been troubled greatly by highway robbers recently. And I also wished to meet you, *señor,* to assure you that if I or my men can be of any special service to you while you are within my jurisdiction, you have but to inform me."

"Thank you, *capitán.* Does your duty impel you to be as courteous as this to all travelers?"

Capitán Cervera smiled slightly. "It is true that we are sometimes more eager to serve some than others, Don Marcos," he admitted. "I have heard a whisper that perhaps you are here on a semi-official mission of some sort and are entitled to aid from all officers."

"Whispers are often misunderstood, Capitán Cervera."

The officer smiled again. "I have no wish to intrude on official secrets, Don Marcos. Your affairs are your own. But I repeat that I and my men are prepared to serve you at any time."

Marcos Zappa bowed slightly.

"I thank you again, *capitán,* and shall not hesitate to call on you for help if I need it."

Capitán Cervera bowed and stepped aside, and Marcos Zappa went on to the patio door. There he bade Carlos amuse himself for the remainder of the evening with the other servants, and strode alone beneath the arches toward his room.

Marcos Zappa gave a sigh of relief. The rumors spread by Don Pedro Garcia no doubt had come to the ears of the *capitán,* and he was at the old game of trying to ingratiate himself with a man of influence who might be a good friend in the future.

But there might be another angle of reasoning. Possibly this Capitán Cervera was not merely seeking the favor of a man of influence; perhaps he was only pretending servility while he watched and listened and waited, ready to pounce if he learned that Marcos Zappa was not all he appeared to be.

MARCOS ZAPPA was not destined to reach his chamber without another interruption. A shadow moved beneath the arches, a figure appeared in the light cast by a torch fastened to the wall. Marcos Zappa saw a robed Franciscan walking

slowly toward him, and stepped aside to let him pass.

But the *fray* did not pass. He halted and looked up at Marcos Zappa and smiled. He was an old man with a cadaverous face, yet there was peace and kindness in it.

Kindness in his voice, too.

"You are Don Marcos Zappa, are you not?"

"I am, *fray.*"

"I am Fray José, *señor,* from the Mission San Gabriel. A part of my duty is to serve the chapel here in Reina de Los Angeles at times. Come to me, my son, if you ever are sorely troubled."

"You expect me to be?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"Do any of us, being mortal, escape troubles, my son? When you visit at San Gabriel—which no doubt you will—call on me in the cloister."

"Gladly, *fray.*"

"I am in constant communication with my superiors in Mexico, *señor.* I am proud to say that I am trusted with many commissions and secrets.'

"No doubt the trust is worthily placed," Marcos Zappa said, courteously.

"We Franciscans of the missions, as you well know, must be many men. Religion is not enough. We are men of business, growers of stock and grain, employers of other men, judges of offenses and the law—and physicians."

"So I know, *fray.* And your specialty?"

"One of them, *señor,* is medicine and surgery. I received a communication recently from Mexico which contained information about a certain method of treating the skin when it had been marred. . . . But I am keeping you from your couch, *señor.* I only wished to greet you, and make you welcome to San Gabriel. I am to be found there after tomorrow. My tour of duty at the chapel here is ended."

Marcos Zappa bowed his head swiftly as the *fray* made the sign. Then the elderly Franciscan shuffled on over the stones beneath the arches, to enter the kitchen of the inn.

Marcos Zappa was frowning. There had been a message in the words of the *fray,* a hint of more knowledge that the Franciscan had betrayed openly.

"A pirate's life is clean and open compared to this one of mine," Marcos Zappa muttered.

There were no more interruptions. He opened the door of his chamber and entered. Only one candle in the candelabra was burning, and Marcos Zappa made haste to light the others. In a corner was a brazier filled with coals, which had taken the damp chill out of the room.

A choking sob caused Marcos Zappa to whirl around quickly, his hand going to the dagger in his sash. Then he remembered the little bedwarmer.

MARCOS ZAPPA chuckled and turned toward the couch. In the semi-darkness he saw two round eyes staring at him, a mop of unruly black hair above them and a twisted mouth and trembling chin beneath.

"Ho, Rosa!" he said. "I had forgotten you. That is not much of a compliment, eh? Have you warmed my bed well?"

"*S-sí señor,*" she stammered.

"You have been weeping. Your cheeks are stained with tears. Your pretty eyes will be swollen."

"I am sorry, *señor.*"

"You do not like this work of bed-warming, eh?"

She did not answer, but sobbed again.

"Do you go to chapel, little one?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"*Sí, señor.* I am a neophyte."

"Then you will not lie to me about a certain matter. By your hope of salvation, you will tell the truth?"

"The truth, *señor,*" she said.

"Tell me, then: are you still a child of innocence in some matters?"

"*Sí, señor.* I swear it!"

"And you weep because you fear I may destroy that innocence?"

She hesitated a moment.

"I know what is expected of one, *señor.* My father compelled me to come when the landlord requested it. I—I almost ran

away while you were gone. But they would have found me and beaten me."

"Fear me no longer," Marcos Zappa said. "Out of my bed, and get on your robe."

She slipped out of the bed quickly and was there before him in the half-light—a naked, lithe form. An instant later she had pulled on her single garment, and she stood back against the wall staring at him.

"Here is a piece of gold, Rosa."

"I dare not take it, *señor*. If I do, they will think—" She could not go on.

"If you do not, you will perhaps be beaten at home. Take the gold and continue to be my bed-warmer until I instruct you otherwise. And tell your father that you still have innocence, and will continue to have it for all of me, and that if he or others do not believe you, you will go to the chapel and swear it before Fray José, who is my friend."

"Oh, *señor!*"

She stepped forward to take the gold piece, and suddenly she gripped his hand and began covering it with wild kisses.

"May you be doubly blessed, *señor!*" she cried. "I thought it would be with me as it has been with my sisters and many others. And I would remain true to Juan."

"Who is this fortunate Juan?"

"He works in the fish market, *señor*, and he is eager to marry me in the chapel, as fine ladies and gentlemen are wed. But we have had no money with which to do it. But this gold piece, *señor*—I can give my father a part of it, and Juan and I can use the rest to be married and have a hut of our own."

"There will be another piece of gold for a wedding present," Marcos Zappa promised, "and I'll see that old Fray José performs the ceremony for you. But will your Juan believe, if I give you so much gold?"

She lifted her head proudly. "He has much love for me," she replied. "He trusts me. He knows that I would not lie to him. So he will believe."

"Get you gone, then!"

She clutched his hand and kissed it again.

"*Señor*, I swear that some fine day you will be repaid for this good deed," she said. "Juan and I will seek eternally for a way to repay you. It is a sacred promise!"

Then she opened the door and darted out into the patio, sobbing and laughing at the same time. And as Marcos Zappa prepared for sleep he remembered her promise, and laughed.

But there came a time when he did not laugh at it.

CHAPTER IX

THE CUP THAT BETRAYS

ON THE following day, Don Pedro Garcia made a formal call on Marcos Zappa at the inn, and had a goblet of wine with him. They sat at a table beneath an open window. Marcos Zappa observed that the native servants trembled if Don Pedro happened to glance their way, and his presence made even the landlord nervous.

"This visit paves the way for you to visit me at my *casa* openly, when it is necessary for us to talk," Don Pedro said.

"I understand, *señor*. But I shall be discreet. It would not do for us to seem too well acquainted, or betray anything like close friendship."

"The fiesta at San Gabriel starts tomorrow. It will be a good idea for you to ride in that direction. Half the people in the *pueblo* will be going. You will have a chance to meet the Vasquez again."

"A fiesta always did appeal to me," Marcos Zappa replied. "You will be present?"

"Watching you from the near distance, to see that you get on with your work," Don Pedro growled. "Do not allow yourself to forget your real reason for being here."

"I forget nothing, Don Pedro—nothing."

Shortly after Don Pedro had departed, and while Marcos Zappa was sitting in a corner of the big main room of the inn, there was a sudden scurrying of servants.

The landlord put on a clean apron quickly, and a carriage and riders stopped in front of the inn.

"Welcome to my pigsty!" the landlord called. "This is the day my house is honored."

Marcos Zappa looked up with interest, to see Don Juan de Vasquez entering the room with Don Miguel de Gandara a step behind him. They observed Marcos Zappa instantly and strode toward him as he got quickly to his feet.

"Ho, Don Marcos! We have come to see you," the Vasquez called.

"Bearing an invitation," Don Miguel added.

"Two invitations, perhaps three," the Vasquez corrected, laughing. "First, we bid you to the fiesta at Mission San Gabriel tomorrow. After that, I hope to have the pleasure of your company at my hacienda, which is not far from the mission."

"And I at the hacienda of my parents, which is only a mile from that of Don Juan," Miguel de Gandara put in.

Marcos Zappa bowed. "I thank you both," he said. "It is my pleasure to accept all invitations."

They talked for a time and then departed. After they were gone, those in the inn looked upon Marcos Zappa with even more respect. Don Juan de Vasquez did not honor everybody with a personal call. Generally, the elderly grandee sent a servant with a message.

MARCOS ZAPPA instructed Carlos to have his horse ready for travel at an early hour in the morning, and to prepare to accompany him on his mule. He inspected his packing cases and got out some splendid attire to wear. He asked the landlord for directions concerning the road to San Gabriel, and the landlord replied that he would only have to ride with the crowd.

No difficulty there.

At the hour of promenade, Marcos Zappa strolled around the plaza alone, receiving the respectful salutes of the townsmen and many bright glances from the *señoritas* when their *dueñas* were not looking.

But when dusk came and torches and candles were lit in the main room at the inn, he was to be found at the head of the table with Carlos standing behind his chair, and a beaming landlord approaching him, grinning and rubbing his hands together briskly.

"And what do you have for me to eat this evening, *señor?*" Marcos Zappa asked.

"The largest, fattest duck in all Alta California, Don Marcos, soaked in sweet cream for seven hours before being put into the roasting oven. Stuffed with pickled peppers and the hearts of artichokes softened with wine. Garnished with hares' ears stewed in spices."

"A tasty tidbit," Marcos Zappa admitted.

"Also flakes of fish baked with strong cheese. And a meal pudding made with the boned breasts of nightingales encased in guava jelly."

"Let the serving begin," Marcos Zappa said.

He dined alone in splendor while others in the room watched him enviously as they consumed their common roast mutton or goat stew. When he had finished, he whispered to Carlos and arose to stroll through the room and out the front door.

They did not need the landlord's servant this time to show them the way. Again they went cautiously through the narrow, dark street, and when they came to the patio gate of Esteban Gonzales' house of pleasure, Carlos handed Marcos Zappa his mask.

Gonzales greeted him warmly, and Marcos Zappa played for a short time at a card table, winning a little. Tiring of that, he went to the corner where the dice were rattling in the box. But the play was not high nor the players enthusiastic, so he strolled away again and went into the patio.

It was pleasant there.

He sat at a little table near the fountain, enjoying the musical tinkle of the water in his ears and the perfume of the roses.

A servant brought him a goblet of sparkling red wine.

"With the compliments of the *señorita,* my master," the servant whispered.

"Thank her for me," Marcos Zappa replied.

He put the goblet down on the table, not inclined to drink at the moment, sprawled in his chair and watched the reflection from the torches playing through the tumbling water of the fountain.

"You do not like my wine, perhaps?" a soft, mocking voice behind him asked.

SUDDENLY, Señorita Anita Gonzales was beside the table, smiling down at him. Marcos Zappa sprang to his feet and placed a chair for her, then reseated himself so closely that he could reach out and touch her bare rounded arm.

Her eyes were flashing tonight, and her breathing was rapid.

"Do we have your *dueña* with us this evening?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"Si, señor. My *dueña* is present, in my garter. But perhaps some time when I know we are to meet, I shall forget to bring my *dueña* with me."

"You are pleased to jest," he said.

"Be not too sure, *señor,* that it is jesting. I have always known that some day I would meet a man who would seem to me to be different from others. And then—?"

Marcos Zappa glanced at her swiftly. Her eyes were brilliant, her nostrils dilated slightly, and her breast rose and fell quickly. She put her bare elbows upon the table and leaned toward him, trying to hold his eyes with her own. He caught the sweet odor of her perfume.

"Señorita," Marcos Zappa said, measuring his words, "you are a woman much to be desired. But, as perhaps you know, there are times when a man may not follow his inclinations."

"What mean you, *señor?"*

"There are times when, regardless of how he dislikes it, a man must put aside all thoughts of love and pleasure and give strict attention—"

"To his duty," she broke in, to end the sentence for him. "Oh, I know, *señor!* A man on a mission must not let his mind be led astray. Yet a strong man can attend to his duties and his pleasure both. Is it not so? Why not drink your wine? It is a special rare wine I sent you."

Marcos Zappa smiled and lifted the goblet, saluted her, and brought the glass up under his nostrils to catch the bouquet of the wine. His eyes narrowed slightly as he lowered the glass a few inches, lifted it and inhaled slowly again.

"I am sure 'twould be better wine, *señorita,* if your lips touched the glass first, if you shared the drink with me," he said, extending the goblet toward her.

She shook her head. "I have no need for wine tonight, *señor.* And I seldom drink it at all. Do you think, perhaps, that I must have wine to warm my blood?" She leaned toward him again, and her voice was husky.

"THIS rare wine of yours has an unusual bouquet, *señorita,"* Marcos Zappa said. "I have encountered it before in my travels. The bouquet is caused by a certain drug. A few drops in a glass are enough."

"I do not understand you, *señor."*

"The drug makes the senses run riot and wrecks caution and reason. Unscrupulous men have used it to win women, I have heard. But never before have I known of a woman using it to arouse affection in a man. It is called the elixir of love, is it not?"

"Señor!" Her face flamed.

"Why would you have me drink it when you are near me, *señorita?"* he asked. "Do you perhaps expect me to become inflamed and make amorous advances, and then would you cry that I have tried to mistreat you? Is it possible that your father and some of his trusted servants would then appear to make accusation against me? And how much gold would I have to give him to keep the affair quiet and my name from being besmirched?"

"Señor! Do you dare insinuate—*?"*

"This is a fine house and lavishly furnished," Marcos Zappa observed. "The usual percentage from the gambling tables scarcely accounts for the richness displayed. It is evident your father has other sources of income. Shall we pour the wine on the ground, *señorita*, and make believe that this episode never happened?"

"You will tell your suspicions to the world, no doubt," she said.

"It is a rule of mine to allow every man to stand upon his own feet," Marcos Zappa told her. "If he makes a fool of himself once, experience will teach him not to do so again. Let other men meet and resist their own temptations and conquer their own weaknesses. I have all I can do to conquer my own, which are considerable."

"*El caballero*," she said, softly. "I thank you!"

"Why did you try it on me, *señorita?*"

"You are evidently a man of wealth. You have a great name, and undoubtedly would pay anything to keep the breath of scandal from tarnishing it. Ah, *señor*, I am ashamed. I am happy that you did not fall a victim."

"It is a sordid affair for such as you."

"For such as I? I am the daughter of Esteban Gonzales, and he operates a house of pleasure. When my father commands, I obey."

"He forces you to take part in these affairs?"

"Who am I to criticize my father, *señor?* He told me it was born in me—the power to make fools of men. He said I served weak men right if they had to pay for their folly."

"It is scarcely their folly, when they are drugged and not responsible for their actions. Your beauty is drug enough. Get you a husband, and let your father procure some other girl to use as a siren."

"A husband, *señor?* I swear to you that I am fit to be a wife. But the sort of man who would wed the daughter of Esteban Gonzales is not the sort I would have. And I have had a taste of abundant living in my father's house. I could not endure to wed a poor man and live in a hut."

She sprang up quickly, flashed him a glance, and disappeared through a doorway.

CHAPTER X

BLADES AT NIGHT

MARCOS ZAPPA chuckled softly after she had gone. He emptied the drugged wine on the patio floor, watched it run slowly between the flagstones, and replaced the goblet on the table. He was wondering how many men had fallen victims to the tricks of the Gonzales.

A few feet from him was a high bank of ferns and flowers, and now a man emerged from behind it. Marcos Zappa sat up straight and dropped his hand to his dagger. But he relaxed when he saw that the man was Bardoso, the pirate chief.

"Marcos Zappa, *amigo mia*, I witnessed that unhappy little affair," Bardoso said. "Damnation and death! That pretty little wildcat had been giving me the eye also. No doubt I was on the list."

Marcos Zappa laughed softly. "Naturally, they would try to victimize a rich merchant."

"A rich merchant and a fine grandee—ha! Would they not shiver, *amigo*, if they knew the truth of it?" He lowered his voice. "I promise you that when we raid hereabouts I'll pay special attention to this establishment. We'll shake the ill-gotten gold out of Señor Gonzales' pockets. And mayhap carry away the tricky little *señorita* on the schooner."

"Calm yourself," Marcos Zappa warned. "No harm has been done to us. They did not catch me in the net, and now that you are warned they'll not catch you."

Bardoso spoke cautiously again: "This work you are doing for a high-born, whatever it is—shall it take you much longer?"

"I have scarcely started."

"*Dios!* I am tired of being a merchant, and my own work is done."

"Search for amusement," Marcos Zappa suggested. "Find a way to slay the tedious hours. Go to the fiesta tomorrow at Mission San Gabriel."

"Ha! Me get that close to a church? One of those old *frays* could look straight at me and tell I am an ungodly man. He might even try to bring me to a state of grace. Can a man be a proper pirate with a cutlass in one hand and a crucifix in the other?"

"Have you enjoyed a fling here at either the dice or cards?"

"There is another thing, *amigo*." Bardoso confided. "These games are too tame to be exciting. They speak of high stakes in the playing, and they mean two or three pieces of gold. What do they know of high stakes?

"Do you remember last year in Baja California when one of our men, being out of gold and jewels, bet his right leg from the knee down on the turn of a card, and lost? Ha! Life is so tame among these people."

"I've had enough of this house of pleasure," Marcos Zappa said. "You may do as you please, Bardoso, but I am returning to the tavern. In the morning early, I ride to Mission San Gabriel for the fiesta."

"I'll leave the house with you," Bardoso decided. "It is more fun to sprawl in the big room at the inn and listen to men telling lies."

They passed through the main gambling room to the front door and were let out into the front patio. Esteban Gonzales was not to be seen, and Marcos Zappa wondered whether his daughter had reported her failure.

They had to wait a moment at the front gate, for the usual custodian of the portal was absent. But he soon returned and let them out, and they removed their masks and started along the narrow dark street toward the plaza. Carlos walked a few feet behind them.

"I shall go to the fiesta at San Gabriel," Bardoso said. I'll lose myself in the crowd and learn what I can, and possibly inspect some of the haciendas in the vicinity. I have been informed that two in particular would furnish rich loot. After this raid, amigo, we'll return to Baja California and take our ease for a few moons. Then I have in mind a trip down the southern coast toward Chile—"

"*Señor!* On guard, *señor!*" the shrill voice of Carlos suddenly rang through the air behind them.

DARK forms rushed at them through the darkness. But these assassins of the night were not assailing a fat merchant and a pleasure-loving grandee muddled with wine, as they thought. They were attacking men off a pirate craft, whose wits and skill at any form of fighting had kept them alive

Marcos Zappa felt a knife slash his left sleeve as the first rush came, and lurched aside as he whipped his own dagger out of his sash. In the darkness and in that narrow street with adobe walls on either side, there was no virtue in trying to use a long blade. These men might have him before he could get it from its scabbard.

The dagger was best. He struck with it and knew it had found a target; he heard a man give a cry of pain as he reeled out of the fighting. Bardoso had his back to the wall and was bellowing for them to come at him.

Marcos Zappa brushed aside another man and sprang to Bardoso's aid. Three rushed them as they stood side by side against the wall. Bardoso leaped forward to meet the rush, knife ready, and Marcos Zappa guarded his back. So they had fought on several occasions, with howling pirates around them.

Bardoso got his knife home in the breast of one, and a blow from a bludgeon staggered him. Marcos Zappa sprang forward and warded off another. And now he darted to one side and whipped out his blade.

His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. Only two of their foes remained. Marcos Zappa could see them faintly as they moved in the darkness, and with the long blade he could keep them from coming too close until he had an opportunity to finish them.

"At the scum!" Bardoso shouted, reeling forward again. "Try to stand against

us, will they? Puny landsmen! Cold steel does it! If I had me a cutlass—"

He still reeled from the blow he had received from the bludgeon, scarcely knew what he was doing. The two assailants rushed Marcos Zappa again. Once more he felt a knife blade brush his body. His sword licked out, and one of his foes gave a scream and fell.

The other turned to flee, tripped and sprawled. He was up as Marcos Zappa reached him, screamed with fury and attacked like a madman with his knife. But he ran upon the point of Marcos Zappa's blade, and fell.

Carlos had run shouting down the street and into the plaza, and his cries for help rang through the night. Bardoso shook his head to clear it and looked around for more foes, but found none. Marcos Zappa knelt at the side of the last man he had run through.

"This try at robbery has cost you your life," he said.

"We were told . . . to kill you," the dying man gulped. "Gonzales . . . offered us gold—"

SO that is the way of it!" roared Bardoso, who had come near enough to overhear. "This Gonzales feared you would tell how you outwitted the *señorita, amigo,* and expose his little trick of squeezing gold from men. We shall deal with this affair ourselves, eh?"

"I agree," Marcos Zappa said, as he got to his feet. "This is not an affair for the soldiery."

"We fight our own battles, we gentlemen of the sea. So this Esteban Gonzales would have us stuck like pigs, eh, because we know too much? We shall return to his pernicious establishment and—"

"Beware!" Marcos Zappa cautioned, suddenly. "That dolt of a Carlos has roused the troopers. Here they come with torches. Allow me to handle this, Bardoso, since I have met their *capitán.*"

"Gladly, *amigo.* The less I talk to the soldiery, the better."

Five troopers charged across the plaza and into the end of the street with Capitán Cervera leading them. Accompanying the soldiers were two men who held flaming torches aloft. Weapons gleamed in their flickering light.

"You are unharmed, Don Marcos?" the *capitán* cried, as he stopped panting at the scene. "We came as soon as we heard the alarm."

"Four rascals attacked this honest merchant and myself as we were walking through the street," Marcos Zappa explained.

"And smashed me on the head, *señor el Capitán,*" Bardoso roared. "Is it impossible for you to keep the peace hereabouts? Have honest men no protection from these cutthroats? I shall write to His Excellency the Governor, about it."

"We do what we can," the *capitán* answered, wearily. "But rogues are numerous and the soldiers are few. I have asked that more men be stationed in this district, but those at Monterey have not given them to me."

Capitán Cervera inspected the bodies of the slain men by the light of a torch.

"Rascals who loiter around the Gonzales place," he said. "You have been to the house of pleasure, *señores?*"

"We visited there for a short time," Marcos Zappa admitted.

"No doubt these rogues saw you depart and followed to attack and rob you. It is fortunate that you came from the fray so happily. Don Marcos, it is time for rascals to learn that it is an unhealthy exercise to attack you."

"I thank you for the compliment, *capitán.*"

"I'll have the bodies carried away and exhibited in the plaza tomorrow as a lesson to others of their ilk. You may proceed where you will, *señores.*"

Marcos Zappa touched Bardoso on the arm, and they went into the plaza and started around it toward the inn through the murky night.

"I liked the way you called me an honest merchant," Bardoso said. "Your words had the ring of truth in them. If I listen to you

long, I shall commence to believe it myself. Well, *amigo,* we are safely out of that trap. Let us wait until the soldiers have gone, then return to the house of pleasure and see this Señor Gonzales."

CHAPTER XI

SALUTE THE SCOUNDRELS

THEY waited and watched in the darkness until the bodies of the slain rogues had been carried away and the soldiers were gone, then quietly returned through the dark street. At the patio gate of the Gonzales house, a frightened man eyed them.

"Open quickly!" Marcos Zappa commanded. "We have important news for Señor Gonzales."

The gate was opened. From the attitude of the man who opened it, it was apparent that he had not expected to see the pair alive again.

They hurried across the patio and sounded on the massive front door with the knocker. The door was pulled back immediately.

The doorman's eyes bulged when he beheld them, but he said nothing. Bardoso's clothing was rather unkempt and Marcos Zappa looked like a man who had been exerting himself. The excitement in their manner told the doorman that something was wrong.

"Where is Señor Gonzales?" Marcos asked.

"He is at present in his private room, *señor.* Pardon me, but you are not masked."

"Ha! Masks are off!" Bardoso exclaimed.

"I'll inform Señor Gonzales that his presence is desired," the doorman said.

"You will remain here at the door and attend to your business, little owl," Bardoso told him, with a glare that made the doorman quail. "We know the way to the private room."

"But he is entertaining a guest—"

"He is about to entertain two more, the entertaining fat rascal," Bardoso broke in. "You attend to your door, little brother of the rabbit, or I'll twist off your ears!"

The doorman was considerably startled by this belligerence from an inoffensive merchant. But before he could think of anything to say or do, Marcos Zappa had started toward the door of the private room, and Bardoso hurried after him.

Marcos Zappa hurled the door of the private room open and stormed in with Bardoso at his heels—and stopped in abrupt astonishment. Seated across the table from Esteban Gonzales was Don Pedro Garcia.

Bardoso closed the door violently and stepped quickly to Marcos Zappa's side. They both held their daggers. Gonzales' face had turned ashen.

"Señores! This intrusion . . . desist, I beg of you. We are having private conversation," Gonzales stammered.

"You did not expect ever to see us here in your place again, eh, *señor?"* Marcos Zappa asked. "You sent men to waylay and kill me after I had left your house, because I had learned how you and your daughter—"

"What is this, Don Marcos?" Pedro Garcia cried.

"I accidentally learned that this man and his daughter play a little game of confusing some of their customers and making them pay gold to save their names, Don Pedro. So this Gonzales planned to have me assassinated."

"And I happened to be walking with Don Marcos, and they tried to kill me also," Bardoso added. "You must answer for that, Señor Gonzales."

"Four rascals tried it," Marcos Zappa resumed. "They are all dead now, and their bodies in the hands of the soldiers, to be exhibited in the plaza."

"Dios!" Gonzales breathed.

"And we have returned here to settle with the man who ordered the rascals to slit our throats," Bardoso said. "How do you wish to die, Señor Gonzales?"

Their voices were high, and penetrated to the room adjoining. The door was pulled open, and Anita Gonzales glided into the

private room, her color high and her eyes wide with fear. But evidently it was not for her father she feared.

SHE saw Marcos Zappa and Bardoso standing there with daggers in their hands, she gave a wild cry and rushed forward—and threw herself in front of Don Pedro Garcia as if to shield him.

Don Pedro growled at this open show of affection, and thrust the girl aside. But her gesture had been enough to give the key to the situation. Marcos Zappa looked at Don Pedro meaningly.

"Is it in your mind, *señor,* to protect this rogue of a Gonzales?" he asked.

"One moment, *señor,*" Don Pedro begged. "There has been a sad mistake here, and possibly the fault is mine because I did not make Señor Gonzales acquainted with certain facts. I am happy to find you unharmed, Don Marcos. And you also, Señor Bardoso. *Señorita,* kindly leave the room."

"They will kill you!" she cried.

"Leave the room instantly!" Don Pedro shouted in a voice of rage, as he saw Marcos Zappa's meaning smile. "Get you gone, and do not listen at the door."

He sprang to his feet and thrust her from him, and she fled from the room terrified. Then, Don Pedro Garcia turned back to face the others, making an obvious attempt to regain his composure.

"Don Marcos, how do you know that Señor Gonzales sent men to slay you?" he asked.

"One confessed it as he was dying."

"Indeed? There has been a sorry mistake made, as I have intimated."

"Sorry for those who tried it," Bardoso roared. "Now we'll break up this little nest We'll carve this animal of a Gonzales to small bits—"

"Slowly, *señor,*" Don Pedro warned. "Let us be calm. When you strike at this establishment of Señor Gonzales, you are striking also at me. I am his silent partner in this enterprise. Let us all have a thorough understanding of the situation. Be seated, and have some wine."

Marcos Zappa and Bardoso stared at him. They dropped into the nearest chairs and Don Pedro Garcia poured wine into goblets and offered it, giving a glass to Gonzales also, who accepted it with shaking hand.

"I drink first to assure you that this wine is not drugged," Don Pedro said. "Señor Gonzales, I should have explained to you, and then this error would not have been made. I tell you now, and you will keep the secret, knowing you will merit and receive my displeasure if you ever disclose it. Both these men are associated with me in certain affairs."

"With you, Don Pedro?" Gonzales asked.

"*Si.* Señor Bardoso and I are interested in a certain enterprise. And Don Marcos Zappa—who is not really a don at all, but a scurvy knave with a secret which I shall not relate at present—is attending to a certain important business for me. So, in a manner of speaking, we are all linked together and should not be at one another's throats."

"Had I but known—" Gonzales began.

"Since nobody has been harmed except the cutthroats you sent, the jest is on you," Don Pedro told him. "You and your daughter tried to work your little swindle on Marcos Zappa and had your trouble for nothing. It is my fault for not informing you of the state of affairs. Now, let us all be friends."

"Peas in a pod," Bardoso said.

Don Pedro Garcia's eyes glittered. "I do not relish that remark, *señor,*" he said.

"Ha! You blaze up at me, and an instant ago you said for all of us to be friends. Never will I understand you high-born gentlemen."

"Possibly not," Don Pedro replied, with some sarcasm. "Now, attend me! I have said nothing to Señor Gonzales of *how* I am associated with you two others, and you will keep that a secret. Nor do either of you two know how I am associated with the other. Let there be no betrayal, for such a thing may ruin important plans."

"Understood," Bardoso growled.

"THE truth must not get out," Don Pedro went on. "Don Marcos Zappa must continue to be such. Bardoso must remain the merchant. And Señor Bardoso's little trick of getting gold from men by aid of drugged wine and his beautiful daughter must not be exposed. You understand that we all are together in these things?"

They nodded that they understood.

"So, you two were simply attacked by robbers, *señores,* on your way to the tavern. That is the story. The men who attacked you are dead. Nobody but you two heard the name of Señor Gonzales mentioned by one as he died. So all of us are safe. Let this be the end of it."

Marcos Zappa got out of his chair. "I shall return to the inn," he said.

"And I shall go along with you," Bardoso added. "I have had enough for one evening. Being abroad after dark is a dangerous business for an honest merchant."

Gonzales walked with them through the house and to the patio gate, probably to indicate to his employees that everything was on a friendly basis. Marcos Zappa and Bardoso went cautiously along the narrow dark street again, this time without being molested, and so reached the corner of the plaza.

"That Don Pedro Garcia! There is a blue-blooded grandee for you," Bardoso said. "There is a man for youth to pattern after! To be the informant ashore for a pirate crew is bad enough—"

"So he is the one?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"He has been for five years, long before you joined us, *amigo.* He betrays his own kind to us. He lets us know where and when to strike to get the most loot, and I give him a large share of our takings. With stolen gold he maintains his fine position. Even now, *amigo,* he is planning with me raids on two great haciendas—the homes of his friends."

"Do you know which two?"

"Certainly, *amigo.* It is all planned. The estates of Don Juan de Vasquez and Don Miguel de Gandara."

"His personal enemies, as I happen to know," Marcos Zappa said.

"To be a secret pirate and betray his own kind is bad enough for one of proud and noble blood. That is being what one calls a renegade, is it not?"

"It is," Marcos Zappa said, with bitterness.

"Your pardon, *amigo.* For a moment I forgot the brand on your forehead. But you were termed renegade only because you loved a native girl and fought for her people. You did not betray your own sort for gold."

"That is something."

"Partner to a pirate, that elegant Don. And what scurvy trick he has engaged you to play for him, I know not."

"That must remain my secret for the present," Marcos Zappa said.

"Retain your secret, *amigo.* But, worst of all, for him to be a silent partner in a house of pleasure where men of his own rank do not enter unless a mask cover their features, and where they are drugged and fleeced of their gold—"

"Let us cease talking of him, Bardoso, and speak of something cleaner."

They entered the inn, and Bardoso went to a corner near the fireplace to spend an hour relating details of the attack in the dark street and getting comfortably drunk. Marcos Zappa retired to his chamber. He would have to be up early in the morning to start for Mission San Gabriel.

CHAPTER XII

HACIENDA DE VASQUEZ

IT WAS a gay cavalcade he encountered on the highway. Gallant caballeros on spirited steeds, elderly couples in fine carriages, men and women on mules and in lumbering carts, many plodding through the dust with bare feet, but all alive with the spirit of celebration.

As Marcos Zappa came within sight of the sprawling mission buildings, with Carlos a short distance behind him on his mule, Don Pedro Garcia appeared from somewhere and rode beside him.

"You have not forgotten your real purpose in being here, *señor?*" Don Pedro asked.

"I have forgotten nothing, Don Pedro. I have accepted invitations to visit with Don Juan de Vasquez after the fiesta, and also with Don Miguel."

"Excellent! The way is paved for your success. Keep in mind that here is an opportunity for you to avenge yourself on the class which disgraced you and turned you out, and at the same time gain gold."

"I am remembering."

"Keep me informed as to your progress in the affair," Don Pedro instructed. "Now, I'll ride ahead. We are mere acquaintances, remember, and I must not seem to be too friendly with you."

A gay throng was surrounding the mission buildings when Marcos Zappa arrived, dismounted and turned his horse over to Carlos. Guitars were tinkling, men and women were singing, and off to one side was a group of dancers. There was a profusion of flowers everywhere.

Marcos Zappa showed the usual amount of interest in the mission. He went through the buildings and finally entered the garden, and there a hand touched his arm. He turned to find old Fray José smiling at him.

"You came, my son," the *fray* said.

"I am delighted to be here, Fray José."

"Is your visit to our country proving of profit?"

Marcos Zappa looked at him sharply. "It depends on what a man calls profit, *fray*. I may say that I am thoroughly satisfied."

"That is well, my son. Feel free to visit me at any time, if you need counsel or if you merely wish to converse. I have had news from Mexico recently, and you, being far from home, may be interested."

"I'll call on you gladly, *fray*. I am to visit in the neighborhood for several days."

Marcos Zappa bowed and walked on, to pass through the merrymaking crowd again, and Fray José looked after him thoughtfully. But Marcos Zappa did not get far before Don Juan de Vasquez found him and led him away to a corner of the garden where a wide table had been spread with a feast.

THE motherless *señorita* was there with her grim *dueña,* other girls with her and a group of the younger men was hovering about just beyond range of the *dueña's* glare. Marcos Zappa bent for an instant over the *señorita's* hand.

"I am happy that we meet again, *señor,*" she said. "I did not thank you enough for what you did for us that day."

"Don Miguel did more than I," Marcos Zappa replied. "It is good of you to remember me at all, *señorita.*"

He sat down at the table a short distance from her, but saw she was watching him continually while she talked to others. Wine was poured, and Don Juan saluted earth and sky with it, and they drank. The feasting began.

Native servants carried heaps of viands to the table. There were cold roast meats and fowls, fruits, spiced pickles, delicacies of every sort, hot sauces which burned a man's lips if he did not butter them well before eating.

"Don Miguel has not honored us with his presence," Juan de Vasquez said. "He has been moody of late. I have noticed it particularly the last two days. Let us hope he is not coming down with some serious illness."

"You are to return home with us, Don Marcos, are you not?" the *señorita* asked.

"Your father has been kind enough to invite me, *señorita,*" Marcos Zappa replied.

"Certainly, he is coming home with us," Don Juan declared. "The guest chamber is aired and ready. I'll send word for Miguel to ride over this evening. When you are tired of this merrymaking, Don Marcos, we'll start. It is only a little more than a mile."

So Marcos Zappa was riding beside the Vasquez carriage a little later. He caught the *señorita* looking at him repeatedly, and saw her smile and flush. He remembered what he had come here to do, and strove to act as a caballero would under

the circumstances if he desired to make a serious conquest.

Don Juan's hacienda was a famous establishment in the district. The great house had large patios and extensive gardens. It was lavishly furnished, many of the trappings having been imported from Spain by way of Mexico.

Carlos took Marcos Zappa's horse and went to the servants' quarters. Don Juan escorted his guest to the chamber set aside for him and waved him inside.

"My house is yours, *amigo,*" he said.

A bodyservant was waiting with warm perfumed water and silk drying cloths, and Marcos Zappa cleansed his face and hands. The man poured wine for him, and as Marcos Zappa sprawled in a chair and drank, the servant cleaned the dust from his boots and removed his silver spurs.

"The evening meal will be served in the south garden, *señor,*" the servant said, when he had finished. "The steps at the end of the corridor lead down to it."

The servant withdrew, and Marcos Zappa arose and walked to a window. He looked down into the garden, which had a high adobe wall surrounding it. Flowers banked the wall, a fountain splashed, and caged birds were singing.

AS HE watched, Manuela de Vasquez strolled from the house to look at the table where the servants were preparing for the evening meal. Marcos Zappa found his heart beating quicker as he looked at her.

It would be a pleasant task to play at love with this girl. She had beauty, grace, and just enough vivacity; she had been carefully reared and trained. It might be difficult to break through the wall with which stern convention had hemmed her in.

Others were in the garden when he descended. But after the long meal was over, Marcos Zappa strolled toward the fountain with the *señorita,* her *dueña* content to remain sitting beside the table and watching. This man, she probably had been told by Don Juan, was a privileged guest.

As they walked around the gurgling fountain, Marcos Zappa and the *señorita* talked of many things, and he in a rather serious mood. She seemed to be watching him closely, at times seemed puzzled at his manner.

"No doubt, *señor,* you are very popular among the fine ladies at the Viceroy's court in Mexico," she said. "We of Alta California must seem uncouth to you."

"Not you, *señorita,*" he replied, quickly. "In all Mexico, as far as I have seen, there is none fairer—"

"Ah, *señor!*" she interrupted. "I have been waiting for that. It has puzzled me that you did not make pretty speeches before. All the men I have met, given a chance to whisper away from a *dueña's* ears, at once start protesting their warm devotion."

"Perhaps I do not take such things lightly, *señorita,*" Marcos Zappa replied. "When I say a lady is fair, it is more than a pretty speech. I mean my word. If I did not think so, I'd not speak at all."

Her musical laughter rang out, and there was such happiness in it that the *dueña* back at the table frowned. That laughter did things to Marcos Zappa. He felt his face flushing, and in that instant he knew that of all the women he had met in his life's days so far, this was the one closest to his heart. One he scarcely knew—and the one he had agreed to shame for a price.

"Shall we return to the table, *señor?*" she asked. "My *dueña* is frowning."

He turned back with her.

"Miguel did not come this evening," she said. "I am afraid he may indeed be ill."

"He must be," Marcos Zappa said. "Were I in his place, it would be only a very serious illness that could keep me from your side."

"In his place, *señor?*"

"Pardon me, but I have heard whispers that there may be a wedding some day soon."

"It is true that our fathers wish us to marry," Manuela said. "They desire to

unite the two families. Our estates adjoin. Miguel and I have known each other from childhood."

She said no more, for they reached the table. The *dueña* took her into the house. But Marcos Zappa understood one thing—this was not a love match. It would be a marriage of convenience. And this girl was one who, if love touched her heart, would forget father's wishes and cling to the man she loved.

In the guest chamber a couple of hours later, Marcos Zappa tossed on the wide soft bed. Sleep would not close his eyes. Before him was a constant vision of Manuela de Vasquez. He could see her smile and hear her musical laugh.

He got out of the bed and went to the window, to look down into the moon-drenched garden where the roses already were glistening with dew. He looked across at the other wing of the house, at a window where a candle burned behind the tapestry. He saw a shadow pacing back and forth—the shadow of a slim young girl. And he knew that Manuela de Vasquez also could not sleep for thinking, and possibly dreaming.

"That this should come to me now!" Marcos Zappa muttered.

CHAPTER XIII

MARK YOU HIS PALLOR

IN THE morning, Don Juan de Vasquez was busy with the cares of his estate, and Marcos Zappa suggested that he ride over to see Don Miguel and ascertain whether he really was ill. Don Juan gave him directions, and he set out with Carlos riding the mule behind him.

It was only a short distance to the estate of the Gandaras, which was quite as splendid as that of the Vasquez. Marcos Zappa rode up the tree-bordered lane and dismounted in front of the house, to be greeted at the door by Don Miguel's aged father.

"My son is in the garden, *señor*, and no doubt will be rejoiced to see you," the father said. "He has told me much of you and admires you greatly. You may go to him if you wish."

Marcos Zappa left the house and saw Don Miguel at the far end of the garden, standing with his hands clasped behind his back. He strode forward, and Don Miguel heard his steps and turned.

Marcos Zappa was startled when he saw the other's face. Don Miguel seemed to be in pain. He made a brave fight to regain his composure, and greeted Marcos Zappa with a smile.

"Welcome, *amigo!*" he said. "I was wondering if I would see you."

"You were not at the fiesta yesterday, or you'd have met me there. Nor did you visit last evening at the Vasquez place, where I am a guest. They feared you had been taken ill, and I offered to come and learn."

"It is true that I am not feeling well," Don Miguel said. "But perhaps it will pass."

Marcos Zappa looked at him keenly as they sat on a bench beneath a tree.

"To a man of my experience, *señor*, you appear more troubled than ill," Marcos Zappa said. "Worry seems to be heavy upon you."

"That is true."

"Worry wrecks more men than disease, *amigo*. And few situations are worthy of it."

"But when something touches upon a man's honor—"

"Ha! So that is it?" Marcos Zappa asked. "A question of honor is something which merits grave consideration, naturally. Have you taken counsel in your trouble?"

"It is a thing which cannot be discussed."

"You need some diversion," Marcos Zappa judged. "Perhaps a wild gallop over the hills. Perhaps a visit to the Vasquez, a smile from the *señorita*. That will make a new man of you. Ride back with me for the midday meal."

"But you are to test the merits of the Gandara kitchens, *señor*," Don Miguel said, brightening a little. "I thought you

might come to us today, and I have heard how you love to eat. The landlord of the tavern in Reina de Los Angeles has spread your fame. So we have made preparation."

"I am all attention."

"A roast young peacock, with a stuffing of goose livers saturated with pepper sauce."

"I can taste it already," Marcos Zappa declared.

"Young doves stuffed with spices and encased in thick molasses and baked slowly."

"Don Miguel, you are a man after my own heart. I'll dine with you, then you will ride back to the Vasquez place with me, to show them you are alive and well."

"Alive, at least," Don Miguel said.

"Can you not trust me, *amigo,* with the burden of your trouble? The secret of my friend shall be my secret also—and you once saved my life. Generally, advice is worthless. But sometimes the suggestions of a friend—"

"Perhaps later," Don Miguel interrupted.

THEY dined in the patio, and Marcos Zappa praised the products of the Gandara kitchen. But Don Miguel was moody during the meal, and his father frowned as he watched. Marcos Zappa watched him closely also, and wondered.

"Ride to the Vasquez place with Don Marcos, my son," Miguel's father told him. "Give my respects to Don Juan and Manuela. Perhaps a sight of her will cheer you."

A spasm of pain crossed Don Miguel's face. But he said he would prepare for the ride, and excused himself.

"He is not himself at all, Don Marcos," the father said. "Something has been troubling him sorely these last few days, and he will not give me his confidence. Cheer him, if you can. Give him the advice an older man of wide experience can give. He is my very life."

"With your permission, I'll go to him now," Marcos Zappa suggested.

He rose when Miguel's father nodded, and went slowly up the wide staircase and along a corridor to the champer at the end, where he had been told Miguel would be. He strode over the thick rugs of native weaving, his boots silent.

The door of the chamber stood open, and Marcos Zappa stopped as he came to it, intending to speak before he entered. But what he saw caused him to shout and spring forward.

Don Miguel de Gandara stood before a window looking out over the garden. A heavy pistol, the grip chased with silver, was held in his hand. And as Marcos watched, he started to raise the weapon toward his head.

"*Amigo!*" Marcos Zappa cried.

His wild rush into the room made Don Miguel turn toward him. Then Marcos Zappa had crashed against him, hurling him back against the wall, and had torn the pistol out of his hand.

"Man, are you mad?" he asked.

Miguel de Gandara dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Why did you prevent me?" he asked, sobbing. "For days, I have been nerving myself to the deed. I have known it would mean damnation for my soul. But I could not face—"

"Wait!" Zappa ordered.

He returned to the door swiftly and closed it; then he went back and stood before the shaken man in the chair.

"You are not a coward, Miguel de Gandara," he said. "Yet suicide is cowardly, according to some. Something terrible must have impelled you to the act."

"Disgrace, *señor.*"

"I have heard no rumors of disgrace being connected with your name."

"They were to come later."

"Tell me about it, *amigo.* Sometimes when a man thinks there is no way out, another can show him a hidden door."

"I must have been mad—"

"Tell me! You saved my life. Now I have saved yours. We are quits in that regard—which means considerable to me, though you know it not. Let me be your friend."

"IN AN unguarded hour, *señor,* I went to the pleasure house of Esteban Gonzales," Don Miguel confessed.

"Ah! And you met his daughter, Anita?"

"How did you know?"

"I visited the house and met her. All who go there meet the girl."

"On my second visit, the girl played the coquette with me. She inflamed my blood. She sent me a goblet of rare wine to drink—"

Marcos Zappa suddenly began laughing softly; then he tossed back his shaggy head and bellowed until the echoes rang.

"You find amusement in this recital, *señor?*" Miguel de Gandara asked, angrily.

"Pardon me, *amigo.* I meant no offense. Shall I go on with your story and spare you the trouble? You drank the wine—and scarcely know exactly what you did after that. But there was some sort of scene, was there not? And Esteban Gonzales and possibly a couple of his servants were there, and they accused you of making violent amorous advances toward the *señorita—*"

"The wine must have made me mad. It was not like me. I do not play with women, *señor.* I cannot understand it. The girl's clothes were torn, and they said—"

"Spare yourself the recital, Don Miguel, of what they said. I know of what they accused you," Marcos Zappa told him. "And then they hinted at a great scandal, and deliberately suggested that they might be bought off, Señor Gonzales being at the moment in pressing need of funds."

"How could you know?"

"It is an old trick they play. They tried the game on me, *amigo,* but I happened to detect the odor of the drug in the wine. We had a little scene about it."

"Gonzales demanded a certain large amount of gold, to be paid him by tomorrow. I cannot shame myself before my father by asking him for the amount."

"Cease worrying, *amigo.* A word from me, a threat along a certain line, and Señor Gonzales and his daughter will forget they ever saw you. There will be no scandal."

"But the fact remains, that for a moment I was no better than a beast. It is expected that I marry Señorita Manuela, as perhaps you know. Could I do so with this secret shame burning within me?"

"You are blameless," Marcos Zappa said. "It is nothing but a trick. You did not put a hand on Gonzales' daughter. No doubt you slept a drugged sleep, and awoke to find everything ready for your undoing—the girl with her clothes torn, her shrieks in your ears, her father rushing into the room with his witnesses. And you would have slain yourself! Do you not know that the same bullet would have slain your father also?"

"Dios!" Miguel breathed.

"Leave this entire affair in my hands, and fear nothing. I know how to handle Gonzales. And least of all are you to fear that you are not a worthy man. I wish I were half as worthy. You have writing materials?"

"There on the table."

Marcos Zappa's face was grim when he sat down and reached for the quill. He wrote laboriously in a large scrawl, sanded the writing when he had finished, and leaned back in his chair to peruse it again, nodding his head as if satisfied:

> ***To Señor Gonzales, at his House of Pleasure in Reina de Los Angeles:***
>
> ***In the matter of Don Miguel de Gandara, I have explained your little trick to him, and he will engage to forget the entire affair if you agree to do the same. I trust it is not necessary for me to visit you and convince you that instant agreement would be wise.***
>
> ***Marcos Zappa***

"I'll send this at once by Carlos, my bodyservant," Zappa said, as he folded and sealed the missive. "When Señor Gonzales reads it, your worries will be over and his will begin."

As he descended the stairs with Don Miguel, who once again was light of heart, much to his father's amazement and delight, Marcos Zappa was rejoicing that he no longer was under obligations to this

man he had been hired to slay. They had saved each other's lives, and the scales were balanced.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WILD HOOFS

CARLOS was sent with the missive. He kicked his mule with his heels and disappeared in a cloud of dust around a bend in the road. Marcos Zappa and Don Miguel mounted and rode slowly down the lane.

"I'll show you a new way to the Vasquez place, my friend," Don Miguel offered. "We'll ride over the hill, and from the crest you may see a view of broad country that will delight you. A view of tilled acres and vineyards, groves, flocks and herds, and the mountains in the distance."

Don Miguel led the way along the lip of an arroyo, and presently they began climbing a narrow, rocky path which curved and twisted toward the crest. As they ascended, the view was unfolded; and when they came to the crest Don Miguel stopped. Marcos Zappa drew rein beside him.

"Over there is the Vasquez place," Don Miguel said, "and to your left is Mission San Gabriel. Do you wonder that the Franciscans decided to build a mission there?"

"It is beautiful country," Marcos Zappa agreed.

It was doubly beautiful to him—this peaceful land. After two years of life with the pirates, half the time on the tumbling sea, and the other half in the crew's haven on desolate Baja California, this was a paradise. He began thinking how nice it would be to make a home here for the remainder of his days.

They rode along the crest toward a spot where they could make an easy descent toward the Vasquez estate, Don Miguel pointing out spots of interest in the distance. Marcos Zappa could see the road he had followed from the Vasquez estate to that of the Gandaras, curving along the base of the hill, shrouded by trees in spots.

"A carriage!" he cried, pointing.

Don Miguel turned and looked. "The Vasquez carriage," he said. "The *señorita* and her *dueña* may be driving to our place to make a call on my father."

"It is more likely that the *señorita* is concerned for your health, and cannot await my return with news," Marcos Zappa suggested, smiling.

"Let us ride down and intercept them," Don Miguel said. "I know a safe path."

Don Miguel led the way around a deep gash in the earth, through a field of huge rocks, and then they began to descend toward the winding road.

Marcos Zappa was thinking that possibly he could tell, seeing Don Miguel and Manuel de Vasquez together here in familiar surroundings, what measure of affection they had for each other, and whether the *señorita's* was so deep it could not be shaken by another man. If so, the task Don Pedro Garcia had set him would not be easy.

He gave all his attention to his horse, for the path was perilous. It was Don Miguel's sharp cry that caused him to jerk up his head and look down the hill.

SOMETHING had startled the horses drawing the carriage, and they had bolted. The native driver was standing and sawing on the lines, trying to control them. With eyes wide, ears back, the horses were running along the road, and the carriage was swaying wildly behind them.

Even at that distance, the two riders on the hillside could hear the screams of the *señorita* and her *duena*, the pounding of hoofs and the rumble of the wheels. They could see, too, that the driver would not be able to control the team. And the carriage soon would be nearing a bend in the road where a heap of jagged rocks were beside it, an invitation to tragedy.

"Dios!" Don Miguel shouted.

He spurred his mount, but even so Marcos Zappa was before him. Digging with his silver spurs, Marcos Zappa swung his horse to one side of the narrow path and urged him to cut down the slope.

He rode in peril, for the footing was rough and uncertain. The horse sprang from side to side to dodge obstacles. Don Miguel shouted and began following.

Marcos Zappa had had many wild rides in his life, but never one to equal this for danger. Half a dozen times he felt himself almost leaving the huge saddle. But he urged his mount on wildly.

There was a fairly level stretch where the horse gathered his legs under him and did some commendable running. Then came another rough descent, and the horse scrambled and half fell down it. But they came to the bottom safely, and they charged through dry weeds and brush as high as the horse's belly.

As Don Miguel raced along behind, the carriage passed in a swirl of dust. Marcos Zappa had an instant's view of the frightened driver, the *señorita's* white face and imploring eyes. The *dueña* had fainted and was sprawled against the cushions.

Marcos Zappa raked with his spurs and started pursuit, driving his mount through the dust clouds at the side of the road. He was mounted on far the best horse. He gained on the runaways rapidly. The dust swirled aside; he saw the curve. . .

Now he raced just behind the swaying vehicle. He shouted for the *señorita* not to jump, and even as he did so he realized she probably could not hear him. Again he urged his horse, and drew alongside.

She called to him then, and he heard her. One of the reins broke, and the horses swerved, broke their mad pace. Marcos Zappa was able to pull even with the team.

He put out his hand in an effort to grasp a bridle. He grasped, and the team swerved again in fright. Marcos Zappa felt his horse stagger beneath him, and he was jerked out of the saddle.

HE CLUNG to the bridle. The team had slackened speed, and was plunging wildly. Marcos Zappa got his other hand in a thick mane and held on. His arms felt as if they were being torn out of their sockets.

His body hit the hard ground. He felt a hoof strike him in the side. He was jerked aloft again, saw the head of a frenzied animal above him, the eyes rolling, the mouth dripping foam.

"Hold on!" he heard Don Miguel shouting.

But the team lurched as they came to the bend in the road. Marcos Zappa exerted his remaining strength to turn horses and carriage away from the rocks. He succeeded in that, but they jerked free. He crashed to earth, and once more hoofs struck his body. One wheel of the carriage passed over him. Don Miguel charged by to grasp the reins and bring the team to a stop.

Marcos Zappa tried to stand, but the effort cost him a spasm of agony. He knew that some of his ribs and his left arm were broken. His senses reeled, and he feared unconsciousness was coming to him.

He feared that, for whoever cared for him in his injury might remove the hand from his head, expose his forehead and his shame. Somehow he managed to get to his feet, and he staggered to a huge flat rock beside the road. Seated on the rock, he bit his lower lip until the blood came, fighting to remain conscious.

Dimly, he saw that the carriage had been turned and that the horses had quieted. The *señorita* was bending over the *dueña*. The driver worked swiftly to repair the broken rein. Then the carriage started back toward him.

Don Miguel came riding a short distance ahead of it.

"You are hurt, *amigo!*" he cried. "We will take you to the Vasquez place—it is nearest."

Marcos Zappa tried to speak in a normal voice. "A few ribs, I think, and my left arm. Get Fray José from the mission. Let nobody else touch me. Swear you will do this, my friend."

The carriage came up and stopped. "*Señor*, you saved me!" the *señorita* cried.

"He is hurt. We must get him to your house," Don Miguel told her.

"Put him in the carriage between us."

"Your man can take Don Marcos' horse and ride to the mission for Fray José. Have him come quickly," Don Miguel ordered. "I'll drive the carriage."

And so it was done.

MARCOS ZAPPA could not stand alone, but Don Miguel and the driver got him into the carriage between Manuela and her *dueña*. He sank back against the cushions, still on the verge of unconsciousness. The capable *dueña* began issuing orders.

He heard a clatter of hoofs as the native rode away toward the mission. Don Miguel took the reins, and the carriage started. The horses were behaving themselves now. Their fright was over, and they were exhausted from their wild run.

"Oh, *señor!*" Manuela said.

Her voice had a quality that, for the moment, made him forget his injuries, pushed aside the threatening wave of unconsciousness. In that little exclamation was more, he thought, than mere gratitude and concern; there was tenderness also.

"It is nothing—a few broken bones," Marcos Zappa told her.

"We know what would have happened, *señor,* had the carriage struck the rocks. . . .

"You shall have tender care—"

"Fray José," he muttered.

"The good *fray* will come immediately. He is a good hand with injuries. Rest as easily as you can. We will soon be home."

Marcos Zappa saw only a swirling blackness that was closing in upon him. He narrowed his eyes, but dared not shut them entirely, fearing he could not open them again. He raised his right hand slowly and made sure his head band was in place. It must remain so, and his forehead be kept covered. He did not forget that terrible brand on his forehead. If anyone saw it now, all his plans would be ruined.

His only hope, then, was in the good Fray José who had visited him at the inn.

The carriage stopped, and he saw they had reached the Vasquez house. People came running; there was much shouting. He realized dimly that the *señorita* was crying. They lifted him from the carriage.

"Fray José," he muttered. "Let no one else . . . touch me," I beg of you—"

They were carrying him into the house. Servants were scurrying. Don Juan de Vasquez was issuing quick orders.

"Easy, *amigo.* I am beside you," he heard the voice of Don Miguel saying.

And he knew he was losing the fight. He could not hold on any longer. Black oblivion was slipping down upon him. He closed his eyes, heard their voices growing dimmer. He knew they were carrying him carefully up the stairs to the guest chamber.

His last conscious thought was one of fear—that his head band would be removed, the brand on his forehead exposed, that he would be known for a renegade.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Lacy yelled and crouched. McKay stumbled toward him, arms wide but guarding against that knife

The Thousand-Dollar Ear

The Florida swamp country is no place for the making of gags: especially if the man you're gagging about is in the process of being liquidated. And for this piece of wisdom, Mase McKay nearly pays through the nose

By CHARLES T. JACKSON
Author of "Tiger Hammock," "Palmetto Cat," etc.

TWO gallons of gas and wipe off her chin, were the orders Mase McKay gave to the kid at the filling station which bleached in the Florida summer sun just where the grass road led off the Key Highway westward into the Glades.

The kid was a new helper and went through motions of wiping the windshield but there wasn't any glass. He looked under the wheel and there wasn't any floor; above, he noted, there wasn't any top.

Yet this jaloppy from Jigger Key had come like a bat from a grass fire. And now, when the morning bus passed, Mase McKay grunted disappointedly.

"Did you come out the jungle to meet somebody?" said the kid. "There was a guy got off; he's sittin' in the shade around the shed and ain't nobody got off the Miami bus here for a week."

"Naw," said Mase, "I seen that guy, but I don't want nobody. I come out to figger a deal fer big dough with the bus driver but Jim Spence ain't on this mornin'. Jim was bringin' me a dream book and if his dope was right we was goin' to write to that big Chicago doctor and try to collect one thousand bucks, mebbe, on that old dame's ear which the papers said the hospital would pay somebody."

"What you mean, one grand for an old woman's ear?"

"Naw," said Mase, "I don't want her ear. I wanta sell her one. This lady's a swell that goes head on through a car top and shaves her left ear off clean and the doctors figger they can graft one on her bean good as ever if anybody'll offer 'em an ear to try it."

The kid wiped a swipe of rust off the hurricane-laced hood of the swamp man's car, and grinned. Sure no tip on this job.

Mase flipped him half a dollar. The McKays who ran the Jigger Key store back in the big grass could have sported a swell car but what the Jigger road needed was a bus that could jump ditches, climb cabbage palms, scrape coral, and kill snakes. This 1929 model had been stripped to fighting weight years ago, and many a giant diamondback had pumped poison into her rubber and heard the motor howl as she backed up for more. Boy, Mase McKay's car was a jungle runner.

He lit a cigarette. The filling station man was asleep behind the screen. High white tropic noon, midsummer glare and nothing but miles of sawgrass glimmering away to the dim dark hammock clumps or mangrove islets.

Mase glimpsed the stranger, a townie sure in rumpled linen coat, panama hat, and shoes that you bought from a paper box. He smiled in a tight, alert manner and Mase bawled to the kid for the stranger's benefit. A newspaper will give a guy many a line on big dough.

"You tell Jim Spence if his dam' dream book is workin' to leave word for me. Tell him I got an ear all lined up fer that woman. It'll take a thousand bucks, collect in Chicago, and Jim handles that end. Jim gits ten percent as my agent, and I give ol' One Ear Wiggin ten fer the ear. That's eight hundred fer me, and pretty nice."

The stranger's lips hardened. The kid giggled. "That crazy trapper, Wiggin? The mystery man back in, he only got one ear?"

"Yeh. I'm mebbe the only guy that knows it. Ol' Wig ain't a feller you ask questions. He's got just one ear an' he wears a big gold ring in it under his red long hair. I seen it."

"Gosh," said the kid, "like an old-time pirate!"

"Yeh. An' what the hell good is one ear to a guy? He jest looks lopsided and damn if I see how he steers himself. I *offer* fifty bucks. If he don't want to sell mebbe I have to hogtie him, knock him stiff. You tell Jim I want the dream book dope workin' afore I start."

The kid grinned again. "Hey, it won't fit that woman, will it?"

"That ain't my business. This ear I'm sellin' is full o' red hair and it ain't been washed since the '35 hurricane, but it's up to them doctors to make it fit. Mebbe the ol' lady'll raise hell when she sees it sewed on her. I aim to collect one thousand bucks first."

MASE dragged a bundle from the gas station, which had come down on last night's bus on the Miami-Key West run, and tossed it into his car. The car began to shiver and moan and he hadn't even started it. He was climbing in when the lone strange man put a hand on the wheel.

"So you're one of the McKays from Jigger Key? Can a car get there and is there a hotel? I thought you had to take a boat in."

Mase looked him over sharply. Folks in back didn't care about strangers. Might be Federal men or run-out guys from some chain gang up state, and it was all the same. Strangers nearly always meant trouble.

"Hotel?" Mase grinned. "Don't be comi-

cal. Anyhow, I ain't goin' home to Jigger. I'm headin' in to my shack an' dicker fer a guy's ear. I'm takin' him in a can o' shine an' a snack o' tobacco an' some store grub—an' a lookin' glass so when he wakes up from his liquor he can look at where I peeled the ear off him. I offer fifty first fer good will."

"I heard you ribbin' the kid," the stranger answered smilingly. "Now, McKay, it's funny that I meet you and hear that line. My name's Keller, a lawyer from Chicago, and—"

Mase stepped on the gas and the jungle jumper rattled. "Giddap, you. Now, Mr. Keller, an evenin' bus goes back to Miami. You be on it."

The stranger laughed tightly. "Listen. Suppose I told you something about Wiggin. Mystery man, eh? Reddish hair, and beard. Left ear gone. A flattish ring in his right one—and he's pretty sensitive about that. Maybe a bit eccentric; but twenty years ago about two hundred pounds of the best fighting man that ever came up the Windwards."

Mase looked mask-like at him. The stranger had something.

But—Mase thought—Gov'ment man, lookin' up dope, liquor or alien runnin' . . . he better stay outa the grass . . . he'll never lay eye on that ol' snake-hunter, Wig, through me.

Then young Mase smiled cheerily. "Well, doggone! Yore talkin', stranger. Nobody back in could ever figger One Ear Wiggin. What you call a hermit— wild, scary sort o' guy. Folks think I'm about his only friend, and I don't know nothin'. Back in, you never ask no questions o' no man."

The stranger smiled. Mase sized him up closer. About one hundred and sixty pounds of hard-muscled man. Looked like a gun bulge under his coat. Yeh, the Law was nosin' in—and it's a right lonesome country west'ard towards Shark River and the Ten Thousand Isles.

"McKay," said Keller. "You can do a good turn. No kiddin'. I want to contact this wild man of the deep glades. Believe that."

"Hop in," said Mase grinning again. "This west road goes from nowhere to no place. Now if One Ear figgered anybody wanted to see him he'd travel so deep I couldn't locate him myself. Hop in."

The first mile was dredged dirt from a canal, grass-grown. It jarred all talk back of your teeth. This car rode in a snarl of smoke. An old burned palmetto prairie for an hour with faint wheel marks. Then at the first mangrove fringe Mase stopped.

"Far as we ride. Takes a Seminole dugout from here. You wait till I find my canoe."

He shoved into the shoulder-high palmettoes. The walking was pretty tough back to the highway but a man could make it by dark. Mase had no idea of taking this bird in. Give him the runaround, let him lose himself in the glades, and he'd never bother folks any more. To hell with him, whatever his business.

Mase took his gift bundle for old Wig, the lookin' glass and tobacco and grub, and shoved through to a mud slough beyond the mangroves. His cypress dugout was under its thatch. Keller had followed with his little handbag.

"I wait here, eh? McKay, I wouldn't like it. Lonesome country."

Maze grinned guilelessly. So the stranger wouldn't be fooled so easily. Well, take him in a bit and give him the runaround. Farther in he went the worse time he'd have backtracking out. A Washington man wouldn't see much under the guidance of a McKay. Mase shoved the boat out.

Keller stood looking at the empty sawgrass miles under the pale sky. A single white heron poised over a mud lake, and the murderous mangrove jungle fringed the far shore. A native wouldn't dream of trying to travel that stuff. A mocking sinister land that whispered death to the man who fought its ways. Mase called to his passenger.

"Get in the bow. I don't promise nothin'. Yore on yore own. I don't ask yore business because I wouldn't believe it anyhow."

"Arrange for me to see that swamp hermit, Wiggin, and then ask him."

Mase grunted from the stern with his pushpole to the mud. His buckshot gun was on the middle thwart. Keller squatted in the bow—and faced back. He had no curiosity about the swamp channel.

When Mase could paddle beyond the shoal mud and they entered the great grass billows which hid the horizon, Keller was still silent. When the red sunset leveled to their eyes and the first flight of the mosquitoes blurred the light Keller did not comment.

Jungle-wise, thought McKay. Bet I picked up somethin' I don't want. He'll never see One Ear but mebbe then he'll flash some gove'ment paper on me and try to take me outside fer some border patrol or customs inspector to ask questions. Well, it takes a gun to do it, brother—and afore that I'm gittin' rid o' you. Plenty ways to leave you, an' you won't care for it.

HE paddled across a small salt lake of mirror-clear water to an oak-grown islet. Mase McKay's swamp camp was better than most because his folks ran the Jigger Key store. Plank walls, two screened windows and a tin roof.

The heat inside was deadening; but the place had good bunks, a table, woodstove, and canned goods on the shelves. Mosquito-proof and clean, and in the hunting season livable as could be.

Mase went to the canoe and fetched the rest of his stuff. The stranger stood on the shell-packed dirt in front of the shack and watched. Mase got the curious feeling that he was listening also. A bull 'gator bellowed and a heron called hoarsely, and in the gray-plumed low oaks of the hammock the tree frogs clicked.

"Skeeters are startin' the evenin' rise," said Mase. "Better go in while they make their first rush." Then he eyed the passenger sharply, and waved his hand with a grin.

"Ol' One Ear hangs out over west'ard."

"That takes in a lot of territory." Keller smiled slightly.

"Yeh, wide and deep, and Gulf t'other side. A swamp man who don't want to be seen can always keep goin'. And know all that's behind him. Likely as not Wiggin won't let me have sight o' him for a week—till he's sure I'm actin' on the up."

Keller did not answer. He shoved mosquitos absently from his lips. Mase made coffee, opened a beef can, and dumped bread on the table. Keller came in out of the insect plague and they had supper, talking in cautious but friendly tones. Each man feeling the other out and Mase felt that some queer proposition was coming—and he was agin the gove'ment whatever it was, if it involved people of the swamp.

Then in the level sunset glow and calm he heard a sound. Long before Keller did; but soon he heard Keller move and shifted his eyes across the table. Keller was watching him. Mase swung up to the door.

"Man, that's a plane!"

"Yes," said Keller. "Does the Coast Guard patrol this far in?"

"Not unless they got business. Spottin' something they want, or a lost party. And I heard their motors plenty. This ain't one."

He was outside and Keller followed. That drumming came from the northern dusk, steady, louder now. Then Mase saw it. Westward against the yellow. Then it was low, very low. Behind the oak clump of another hammock. Wiggin's camp was there, facing another tiny shoal lake. But Mase had no idea of telling Keller that. Keller listened acutely to that plane. It must be low in the sunset, indeed. And the motor ceased. There was another sound, a blurry crash; then silence.

"Hell," said Mase," they crashed down!"

"Did they? Mighty easy. Suppose they landed?"

"Never get in the air again from that sawgrass. I've seen oil prospectors and survey men forced to the grass, and they might as well write their bus off unless they pull it to pieces and mud-drag it out before it sinks into the stuff. It ain't much done."

"You think they crashed? They'd need help. Might be hurt."

"I was thinkin'. Funny they're so still. Might be under mud quick as that." Mase watched his passenger. Keller didn't seem excited. Mase continued, "I better pole over that way. You keep coffee hot."

"Right," Keller answered quietly. "Shall I keep a light on?"

"Man, I can fork this jungle with my eyes shut home-bound."

He shoved the light dugout from the shells and stepped in. Keller watched him go in that same tight silence.

Mase paddled swiftly and he was uneasy about all this. Five years he had seen the hermit trapper, One Ear Wiggin, off and on, and no man ever was curious about him. Mase had the gift bundle at his feet, the lookin' glass, the grub and quart of shine and tobacco. He'd leave it at Wig's camp and go on seeking that down plane beyond.

Wig won't be there. Wig won't show hide or hair for a week. Too much excitement fer Wig. He'd let them guys drown rather than be seen. Wary as a swamp cat. What this Keller want of him?

He rounded the east hammock point. Wiggin's shack, under the oaks back of the little cleared beach facing the pond was dark. Mase knew it would be. But this silence seemed strange.

The people in that plane would be talking, discussing their plight, unless they were dead. Mase kept a hundred yards out as he passed Wiggin's Hammock watching the far shore line. He let the dugout drift in the dusk, for some sense of mysterious danger warned him, awoke the swamper's craft to see before he was seen.

Then he saw the plane. A little gray, high-winged seaplane, and from the cockpit a cigarette glowed. It was close to the far point of the hammock, uninjured, the pontoons bobbing gently in the slow tide which broke to star glints past its tail. Mase stopped the canoe drift, hung to the mangrove barrier.

Some one was ashore, softly trying to thread that ghastly root barrier to the ridge on the other end of which was Wiggin's camp. Then he spoke.

"Can't be done. Glenn, we've got to shove your ship along this hellish mangrove to where I can break through it."

"Listen," the man in the cockpit growled, "you got all night. I'll never get up before daylight. This slough's long enough but I need two feet of water and water I can see, to take off. It was damn foolish landing. You didn't need any more investigating."

"There was another camp a mile east, and a canoe."

"Laid up, under a sun shelter. Nobody there. These swampers store their dugouts that way till next trapping season. What you scared of? Getting away tomorrow you might be. Lacy, it's bad."

The man ashore was wading slowly out. When he touched the wingtip the little plane bobbed like a toy. "You're getting paid, ain't you? What you got to holler about?"

"Not this kind of job. You didn't tell me all of it. Nor that we'd land in this jungle. You're sure of the job, ain't you?"

Lacy swung in and cursed the mosquitoes. "I got to be—after I thought of a swamper's camp on the next hammock east. We better be."

Side by side now they talked so low that Mase heard no more.

But he didn't want to see them now.

Back out and get to Wig's place . . . can't make no sense o' this. Another party got business here. Want to talk to Ol' Wig. He'll not stay in miles o' this noise and he won't sneak till the blackbirds and herons are talkin' again and he knows the swamp's empty.

He slipped back along the shadowy shore. The little Aeronca with its forty h.p. motor and shark-slim body was lost to sight. It was the smallest plane Mase had ever seen on his days outside, his glimpses of the aircraft that sped down the Florida shorelines to Key West and Havana and all the south ports. Another puddle-jumper like his Model T.

He landed softly on Wiggin's hand-hacked beach and walked to the thatched shack under the gray-plumed oaks, the

gift bundle in his hands. Old Wig would cuss him out for his kindness sometime, but not now. Mase knew Wig wouldn't be here to talk to strangers.

THEN Mase halted. The rude shack door was open. A swamp man wouldn't leave that way. Mase went carefully past the thatch roof and the spout that fetched rainwater to the barrel, the pelt frames and all the rusty gear that a camp accumulates on line and limb. Mase whispered:

"Wig? You home? You sick?"

He peered in. The mosquito bar was not drawn over the rough bunk. There was a half-eaten meal on the pine table. The place was empty.

Mase went out as softly as he came, watching right and left, the cabbage palm and oak jungle on the low ridge, the impenetrable mangroves locking the fifty-foot beach. He saw Wig's dugout at one end. Then he saw Wig at the other. The moon was drawing above the jungle.

Mase went closer, cat-quiet. Old One Ear was dead. The first moon-ray glinted on his one earring. He was face down, the shocky red gray hair rumpled, clutched in one gnarled hand. Mase bent over.

Blood. On his neck. Shirt bloody down the back. Mebbe a knife. He stood back and thought. Take a good man to knife-sneak Old Wig.

Mase figured:

If he'd been shot I'd heard it. Hear it a mile. Hey, Wig, killed right in yore own camp! Some guy sneaked and still-hunted you—and took a damn good man—Injun good. I never could walk up on you myself. Oh, hell, now I gotta go out an' yawp to the sheriff, an' the Law comes in.

Hey, you don't need no lookin' glass no more. An' I was kiddin' them guys outside about takin' yore last ear. Now I'd have to explain that, my damn fool talk o' knockin' you stiff.

He went to his canoe and shoved off. Ten yards out he saw the gold band gleam in the moon. Hairy, toothy, old swamper, Wig—murdered.

Sheriff's no friend o' mine, he thought. Wig was closer to me than any camp. Never heard of him goin' out nor anyone in to see him. Never got a letter in five years from Jigger postoffice. And he never seemed broke.

He worked on that as he paddled to his camp. Old Wig always had a dollar to send out for grub. Money. Big gold bob in his ear like a old-time pirate . . . say, what'll I tell this guy Keller?

This ain't so good. Keller knows I was toward Wig's camp. Then these flyin' guys who tried to get to his camp, they'll git there tomorrow. I'm the only one in tonight—and I tell the Law he's dead. That damn sheriff he don't like any McKays. We don't take to county politicians.

His own camp was dark and silent as the death shack a mile away. He beached the boat and went softly to the screened door. Keller would be under the netting. The moon came through the small rear window. He saw his guest's handbag on the floor. Empty in the patch of light.

The bunks were empty. Keller had gone. Mase tensed with a sudden certainty. Keller had fooled him. Keller was jungle-wise. Keller had taken everything in stride—heat, insects, bad water, thirst—all the things that drive outsiders to feverish cursing. Keller was something else.

Mase made sure Keller wasn't here. Nor that death hadn't struck him from the dark. Keller—no. Mase slipped in stealthily, peered about the one room, into every shadow, then out the small window to the palmetto jungle under the oaks and cabbage palms. Then he stole out and around the shack watching every shadow again and came about to the shell shore. No sane man would enter these snake-haunted glades at night.

Once off the low hammock ridge where the diamondback slithered under the palmettoes there were the moccasins, and the bottomless mud pits and choking, sinking grass clumps. Mase held his buckshot gun casually in the crook of his elbow and smoked, out in the full moonlight.

If any unseen killer wanted him he

could drop him now. But Mase wouldn't show that he knew death lurked near tonight in the jungle.

He turned idly down to his thatched boat shelter by the mangroves, and then he stopped. His little skiff, the duckboat used in winter, was gone. It had been bottom up and stripped and covered; but the palmettos were thrust aside, and there were keel marks where the boat had taken water. The oars had been stowed in the shack and were untouched.

Keller, Mase thought. Either he grabbed the skiff and tried to trail back to where we left the car or he followed me in. But he couldn't make the car with that rowboat—and he had no oars anyhow. So he trailed me—or maybe got ahead of me—to Wig's camp. I went south of the hammock to spy out that plane. Keller didn't come that way or I'd seen him sure.

Keller—he killed ol' One Ear! Keller ain't what he seemed—an ignorant town man. Lawyer from Chicago! Wouldn't be a Federal agent either, putting a man away with a shot or knife in the back. Ain't sense. No man could stillhunt Ol' Wig in his own camp. Wig was too wary, too suspicious, to get that way. I got to watch my step.

HE LIFTED his canoe bow, shoved it to water, got in soundlessly; stroked out from the jungle-shadowed shore and drifted. The slow tide was setting up. The run of it bore him toward the other shadows of the point where he could dip a paddle, westward, along the slough which widened to the shoal little lake along Wiggin's Hammock.

Mase felt guilty. Somehow he felt that he'd had a hand in the death of Old Wig. Bringing Keller into the back swamp, kidding the gas-station boys about taking his one ear, pretending that he knew the hermit's secret.

Old Wig had lived by winter pelts and summer snakeskins which Mase had sold for him at the McKay store. One Ear had been a wild, harsh sort of neighbor but he had seemed to trust devilin' Mase.

. . . If I'd kept my mouth shut Wig wouldn't attracted any notice outside. Damn Keller—but how did he do it? My duckboat'll be along the shore somewhere.

Mase looked carefully into each little run and slough of the hammock, and sure enough he found the boat shoved as far under the matted roots as could be done. There was a more open place in the gnarled mangrove barrier here. A swamp man might crawl slowly over and through the tough twisted roots above the water and reach the oak ridge.

. . . But not without Wig knowin'. No man can belly-crawl that stuff and make no noise. Wig was killed out in the open so the guy was close, right with him. Keller's hid back on the ridge right now. . . .

The moon brightened the long narrow lake. Hardly more than a shallow pond, ending in sloughs and sawgrass clumps. The pilot of that plane said he could take off from it with an up-tide tomorrow.

Mase didn't want to ask into their business but now he thought it might be best to rouse them out, tell them that the man they wanted to see was dead; that his killer lurked back in that palmetto jungle under the oaks, and that any party landing on Wiggin's Hammock better be careful. Perhaps they knew who Keller was.

The dugout drifted in the streak of shadow cast by the mangroves close along the shore. When it came near the end of the little beach Mase picked up his buckshot gun. He saw the thatch, and tried to see the dead man near the far end of this open shore.

THEN he saw Keller. Keller had come from the ridge behind the camp and stopped by the leanto poles. He bent to peer under the thatch at the rough slab door. Staring into Wiggin's empty shack.

Keller said something. Too softly for Mase to hear. Keller watched long, took a step nearer and halted. He was still so long that Mase fidgeted.

. . . What's he want? Killed Ol' Wig and now come back? To search his camp,

that's it. What ol' One Ear have that anybody wanted?

Mase held his dugout close to the mangrove point. Keller couldn't see him unless he came clear to the water's edge. Keller had gone along the clearing, and now he stopped near the farther jungle edge.

The dead man was sprawled five yards from his feet. Keller seemed to grow rigid staring at old Wiggin. Then he did an odd thing. He ran forward, bent to look closer and knelt by the body. Mase saw the shine of the gold earring before Keller's knee. Keller reached to it and spoke again. Then he was rigid in the moonlight staring at old Wiggin.

Well, dam', Mase thought. What he want now? Kill a man and then come back? Looks as if he's tryin' to identify him. Tryin' to convince himself that he got the right man. Got me guessin'.

Keller turned as if listening. Mase had made no sound from the other jungle point of the clearing. But Mase heard one now. A soft sound, the drip of water perhaps, the scuff of wood on wood or mud.

Mase turned to look up the lake. That gray blue plane was out there drifting. No, not drifting; it was being poled from some man on the left pontoon. Very slowly, clumsily: a hard craft to shove along, but it moved.

He turned to look shoreward. Keller had vanished into the oak scrub back of the camp. It was amazing how stealthy Keller could be. Mase looked again at the dead man and then backed his canoe with noiseless precaution under the overhanging mangrove jungle, and was still.

The plane moved on with maddening slowness just at the edge of the mangrove shore. A huge gray bird intent on prey. So close that when one of the men whispered hoarsely Mase caught the tense words. "I told you—someone was about tonight. Some other than Wig. Careful, now. We can't have this."

"No," said the other, shoving his push-pole softly down. "You were right, Lacy. If it's one of those swamp men this is bad."

"Keller," whispered Lacy. "I keep thinking Keller might have got a guide and come in. The man they call Keller—"

The little plane nosed past Mase McKay's hiding place. He could have reached his pole from the mangrove tangle to the wingtip. Then he saw gleam of metal. The man in the pilot's seat edged about and he had a short rifle.

"Two," he muttered. "Might as well be two as one. They'd never be found if we work fast. Now wait; hold her in."

It wasn't easy to check the drift of the plane without making noise. Mase heard them fumbling, cautioning each other. Then, ashore, at the corner of Old Wig's shack, he saw the man he knew as Keller.

Then, Keller, Mase thought, didn't kill One Ear. They did—somehow they did. Now, Keller—he's next. Keller!

The rifle had come up to Lacy's arm, for the two in the plane saw the man by the shack. The pilot muttered, "Got to get him . . . no matter who, you got to get him, shut his mouth."

MASE saw Keller whirl. Keller either saw or heard the menace out on the water. The gun had settled to Lacy's arm when Mase swung up, sprang from the end of his dugout and came down heavily a yard from the right pontoon. Another lunge and he had it, shoved shoulder against it, and the little plane bobbed slowly with his weight.

The gun exploded and Lacy turned swiftly to find this unseen attack.

Mase was under the tail and the fuselage hid his head. But he saw his own shadow on the sand bottom; and the gunman did also.

One man clambered back from the open top. Mase saw his shadow—the shadow of the gun moving. He crouched and held to the rudder, sank his body till only his face was above.

The water was not two feet deep and he could brace his feet. He could shove and move the tail but he dared not let go.

The gunman crouched as far aft as he could and tried to see the man beneath

the narrow hull. What he saw was wavering water shadows, no clear target—close as he was to it.

The pilot was on his feet shouting hoarsely. There was no need of secrecy now. The attack on the plane had unnerved them for a moment. They had to turn attention from Keller on shore.

But Mase saw Keller. Lacy's shot had missed when Mase swerved the little plane. Keller had come to the water's edge watching the efforts of the two upon it to bring McKay into sight. Then he called quietly:

"That you, swamper? Thanks—and be careful now. Wait."

He was slow and cool, and the two other men seemed to know that. They both turned and Keller's automatic was shining in the moonlight. Lacy gave a frenzied shout, dropped his gun and leaped from the opposite side. He turned in the shallow water to lunge at Mase, and the swamper let go of the plane and rose up.

"I'll stop you first—you!" Lacy yelled. He had a short knife out as he crouched. Mase McKay stumbled to him, arms wide but guarding against that knife. Lacy yelled at Glenn, "Get this ship off the shore. I'll break this rat's hold on it and be with you—"

Mase came in on him, knife or no knife. He had to or perhaps take the thrust in the back. So they were clear of the gyrating plane when they clinched.

The blade struck McKay's upper arm, and he twisted it forward with the blood in the faces of both men. But his right hand crashed to Lacy's chin, and when the man backed Mase followed low, got him by the middle and went over him.

He was on top when they struck sand and the salt water engulfed them. Hard hand to Lacy's throat, Mase nailed him down. Knelt on him, head under water, watching the man writhe and choke.

Lacy's mouth came open and he lashed out spasmodically. Mase thrust his own head up for air and went down again. He watched Lacy's jaws twist, go rigid; held him grimly until his struggles lessened.

Then he rose up and dragged him by the neck to the beach. Keller was there with the gun up, and the pilot, Glenn, was slowly wading to him, hands outstretched.

Mase mumbled, trying to clear the water from his throat. "Hey, what's this goin' on? Who in hell are all you guys? All strangers to me an' your actions are stranger. Damn funny! Who killed Wiggin?"

"Lacy," said Keller. "Glenn brought him over the swamp and Lacy killed Wiggin. I tried to get here first. Didn't know they'd shoot him without first a talk."

"They never landed on Wiggin's Hammock. They came down a half mile south."

KELLER watched Glenn. Glenn watched Lacy who was writhing back to consciousness, sick and trying to crawl on the beach.

"Yes, they came down after they shot him. Wiggin probably came out in the open, thinking that was a Coast Guard plane, or at least no one who could land and try to talk to him. They didn't try—they shot old One Ear, coming close down, so close he tried to run, I think.

"But then Lacy saw your camp over east and figured he had to be sure of the job. So he had Glenn land and they planned to bury Wiggin so he'd not be found by any of you swamp men coming in. They had to cover a killing if you or any man had seen the plane in here.

"And you—or me—they'd have to get us too so that no proof would get out. It's a mighty lonesome country, McKay. Nobody but you might come to Wiggin's camp in a month. Not another soul in ten miles, eh?"

"Sixteen," grunted Mase. "Well, pore ol' One Ear! Can't understand."

"Get something out of Wig's shack and tie Glenn up," said Keller. "Then Lacy, after he unloads the water from his belly. McKay, you were rough on him. I was afraid you'd kill him."

Mase held his bleeding left arm. "Well, he had me dodgin' death some regular, what with a gun, a knife and then clawin'

me mushrat style under water. Yeh, he was a wild man." Mase looked at the little plane, silver-gray and quiet now out in the pond. "Nice little trick, ain't she? Could take off a puddle about as good as my jaloppy."

"Glenn couldn't. It's his bus. Came up from Key West with one passenger and enough gas to make Miami out of here—after the job. Lie down, Glenn. On your face, while a good man works over you with a good rope. Don't talk to me, either you or Lacy. Don't want to hear a word."

Glenn snarled at him, and didn't want to talk sure enough. Nor Lacy when he was able. When they both were trussed and left on the beach Keller motioned Mase back to the dead hermit's camp. Mase stopped and straightened the body so that One Ear's shaggy face was peacefully up to the moon with his gold earring gleaming.

"Doggone," said Mase, "I rather liked the old wildcat. I fetched him in a lookin' glass today and was goin't razz him about trimmin' them red whiskers. He wouldn't take no joke from any livin' man but me."

"Sit down," said Keller. "Make some coffee on Wig's firehole. Then I'll tell you. Mase, you'd lifted his ear off quicker than you would his whiskers. And his long hair—kind of a disguise, he thought."

"You," Mase grunted. "Like I thought. Gove'ment man in here to look up some party that mebbe had done something but now he was livin' peaceful and free like a man should, not harmin' anyone. Hell, I wouldn't helped you or anybody come in on ol' One Ear, or take him out."

"Wait, you got me wrong." Keller half smiled. "I'm not a Federal agent, and One Ear Wiggin wasn't wanted by the law. Believe me now?"

"You know a lot," Mase grunted again, dissatisfied. "I can't believe that Wiggin was shot from the plane and the motor drowned the gun out. They got him the only way they could. But what for? Did you know they would try to reach him? Did they know you would also? What for?"

Keller was listening to the prisoners on the beach. They cursed each other and fought the insects by bobbing their heads on the dirt.

"WELL," Keller said, "the thing will have to come out. Yes, I knew Lacy and he knew me. Glenn had nothing to do with the old days.

"McKay, Wiggin was my half-brother, much older than I. You wondered how I knew so much of jungle travel? I was an engineer and surveyor in Venezuela for years. John Wiggin was a born adventurer all his life. A filibuster, gunrunner, in and out of the obscure little Latin American ports.

"I lost sight of him for years at a time, then his name turned up on some secret expedition. Old Gomez was dictator then, and other native politicos were always plotting against him.

"Well, one day word came to me that John Wiggin was raving in hospital at La Guaira. He and two of his schooner crew had been picked up half-dead from thirst and sun on a reef off Blanquilla. Gomez had them at last. It meant the firing squad when they recovered.

"Wiggin was off his nut but one of the others told me that Lacy, who'd been mate on his *Mystery K*, had led the mutiny that put the skipper and the two others ashore. Well, I came down from the hills and used money and influence to get my brother smuggled out of Venezuela. Had him landed in Panama—then he vanished soon as he could get about.

"Swore he never would quit till he got Lacy. Lacy had marked him by slicing off his ear on shipboard. Took one of his earrings and left him the other to remember by, Lacy said. But Old Wig was never quite right in the head again, I think."

"No," said Mase. "He was queer. I was as near to him as any man, but when I joked him once about his pirate earbob the look he gave me was killer look. Listen, what them guys tryin' to do out there?"

Low curses came from the two bound

men. Keller shrugged. "They're trying to crawl. You tied them right, didn't you, McKay?"

"Wildcat hitch. If they were on their feet they couldn't get off this hammock. They couldn't even break trail to cross it. You might—you fooled me on that, Keller."

Keller smiled slowly.

"Well, that's about all. For six years I never heard of my half-brother, John Wiggin. But Lacy came back.

"I heard in La Guaira that Lacy had a clue that John was in the States, hidden away in a Florida camp. Lacy thought that John still had seventy thousand dollars gold cached on the reefs."

"You mean," Mase said, "Old One Ear had a wad that size—here?"

"No." Keller spoke patiently, "Nor anywhere else. Or after Lacy had marooned him to die John's mind went so that he couldn't remember. But that rat Lacy was loose after doing a stretch on Quarry Rock in Jamaica for a colony stickup.

"Well, when I heard Lacy was after John seeking a line on it, I came to Florida. It seems that the gang did get a contact man in once to John, from the west coast, and John sent word to Lacy that he was hunting me up and he'd give me the only clue to that money. So Lacy resolved to get him first, stop his tongue, and then take a chance of finding the stuff on the Blanquilla reefs himself.

"When he got to Key West he found that getting to John's camp for the murder job was just about impossible for an outside man. So he hired Glenn's plane and shot John from it. I was just a bit too late to warn my old half-brother. He wasn't a bad sort when he was young."

"I never figured him a bad sort any time. Brooded over lost money."

"Who gives a damn? It's gone, and no man knows how. But this job should hang Lacy. Glenn, maybe, can wiggle out of a murder charge."

"I hope not. Well, I got to get out and fetch the Law in. Gosh, how I hate to do it. You'll have to watch these birds alone, Keller, till we get in. Tomorrow afternoon's the best I can do. And—and—bury yore brother—mebbe. Temporarily anyhow. It ain't pleasant, man."

"NO," said Keller moodily and was rising. Then he leaped to the door. A shot broke the silence. A shove and a groan and then another shot.

Mase was quicker out to the beach, shotgun in hand. Keller saw no man. Not at first. Then he saw Mase McKay bending over twisting forms on the shell beach. Two men still bound and writhing feebly. Mase stood up.

"When I was puttin' Lacy down in the water, did you search Glenn?"

"No. I ordered him ashore, then you came with Lacy."

"I went over Lacy for another gun. You didn't frisk Glenn. Yore mistake. Glenn had one. Lacy must have rolled to him and got his tied hands to it. Guess Glenn thought that somehow Lacy would then get you and me.

"But Lacy didn't. He knew he was through, I reckon. He got the back o' Glenn's head in line and let him have it. Then he doubled up so he put a slug under his own chin. Look, they're both still tied.

"It sure is a mess around here. Three dead men to report to the Law, an' I sure hate to call them county birds in. The Glades cover their own troubles all they can in their own way. We better paddle out tonight."

Keller looked at the old man who had big-brothered him when he was a kid. Big John Wiggin who rollicked among the old-time liquor and gunrunning crews of the Gulf and Caribbean with gold bands in his ears as a sort of piratical joke.

"Good old John," he said. "That ear bob was all the fortune he had left."

"Good Ol' One Ear," Mase answered. "An' I was pretendin' that I was man enough to come in here and swipe it off him—his ear included. Man, it couldn't be done!"

By JIM KJELGAARD
Author of "Warden Bait," "Crying Hound," etc.

I must have used about a mile of thongs on the crazy man's arms and legs

North of the Jinx

Trap your fur the hard way, brother, and watch the bogeyman turn a silver fox to gold

I REACHED Metoosin the sixteenth of September with just enough money to buy a skimpy outfit. And I knew that the first thing I had to do was find a good partner.

But most of the men had already pulled for the bush. There was only one tent left along the river where the trappers pitched their summer camps. Two drunken trappers lay in front of it bellowing at the tops of their voices. I leaned against a cabin, wondering which way I'd turn next.

One of the drunken trappers picked himself up, stumbled over everything in sight including his partner, and began to stagger toward the post. I watched him reeling up my side of what passed for Metoosin's only street. Then, just before he got to me, he straightened up, shook the drunken look from his face, and lifting his knees the way a show horse will his front legs, he crossed to the other side.

I looked myself over, more than a little mad. I was a stranger in Metoosin, and deserved at least friendliness. Even a drunk hadn't any call to act that way. Something right around me was a lot different from what it should have been. Then, as I followed the drunk with my eyes, I saw Al Segal for the first time.

He was big—about two hundred pounds —but he was lean with all his weight in shoulders and muscle. His clothes, like my own, were plenty the worse for wear. He was coming toward me with his eyes straight before him, and something about him said he'd be cursed if he'd get out of my way.

But his face was what drew me.

Six years ago the finest man ever born in this world, my brother Tom, had gone into a blizzard in the James Bay country and never come back. I found him, when the snows melted, within a mile of camp —as far as he'd been able to get. It was then I'd left the North. And this fellow was the spitting image of Tom. His black hair fell over his forehead in exactly the same way.

I stared at him. He stopped in front of me.

"See anything funny?" he asked with what I felt was forced humor.

"No," I said. "I was just—"

He stepped closer. His eyes were hungry, the way a bushman's will be when he's spent a season in the bush with nobody to talk to. But if his eyes were hungry, they were defiant too.

He laughed. "A stranger here?" he asked. "I'll explain our city. Over there is the trading post. The next three cabins belong to engineers. That little one is owned by a breed who wanted to try city life, and the one you're leaning against and the next one belong to a mail-runner. He lives in one until it gets dirty and then moves into the other. There. You feel you know your way around now? To top off points of interest, I'm Al Segal."

He didn't look crazy, even if he talked like he was. And he seemed to be a man who could find his way around the bush.

"You signed up for the winter?" I wanted to know.

"Who with?" he laughed. "Brother, my sole earthly wealth consists of two lazy sled hounds and a couple of axes. Some people might hit into the bush with that much, but not me. I prefer to do my dying in comfort."

"I mean it," I insisted. "How about tossing in with me?"

The smile left his face. "I told you my name's Al Segal," he said as though he expected me to say something about it.

"Oh yes," I told him. "I'm Joe Carlton."

"Listen," he said. "Did you ever hear of the Calm River, and how a *bateau* with fifty thousand dollars' worth of placer gold went down there two years ago? And how one man disappeared, and the other was tried for drowning him and taking the gold?"

"I take it you're the one who was lucky," I offered.

"I'm the one, brother, if you'd call it lucky," he said. "Thanks for the offer, but I won't throw in with you. You don't know me. I'm a jinx."

"I've had black cats in front of me and I've even broken mirrors," I told him. "I don't believe in witches and I need a partner. Come on."

I DON'T think he would have gone to the trading post with me if I hadn't kept hold of his arm. The trader was a sour-faced Scot named McDuff. He came out from the back of the post when I rapped on the counter. I was happy as a moose calf. Finding a partner in Metoosin, an experienced one, was plenty of luck.

"We're heading for some trapping ground," I told McDuff. "We need traps and grub for two. We can pay half now, and the rest in fur when spring comes. How about it?"

He looked me over for at least a minute. Then he looked at Al Segal.

"No," he said, hanging on to the word and dragging it out long enough to say twenty words.

"But—" I began.

Al Segal touched my sleeve. The go-to-Hell smile had come back to his face. Then, as though to give me a chance, he wandered out of the post and stood in front of it. I looked after him, and back at McDuff.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred traders up here will stake a trapper. McDuff leaned

over the counter. "Man, are ye daft?" he whispered. "Yon bucko's bad, and bad luck follows him. Nobody will hae aught to do wi' him. He upset his *bateau* and drowned his partner, then tried to tell the police that his partner upset the boat. The reason he was no' hanged was only lack o' proof. They could nae find a corpse."

For a space I stood bewildered.

I had left Maud and the kid back in Sudbury along with most of the money I had. I had told her that I'd be back in the spring with enough money both to fix the kid's leg and to buy the farm we wanted near Windsor. The doc had said that if the kid's leg didn't get fixed by summer, there wouldn't be much use in trying to fix it. I had to get furs, that was all there was to it.

This, I told myself, was all superstition. A man was caught in a web of circumstance, so all other men slighted him because they thought he'd done his partner in, and built about him an old wives' tale of bad luck. It was tommyrot. I had to have a partner, and I wouldn't let myself be taken in by such pipe smoke. There couldn't be any such thing as bad luck following a man.

But at the same time I couldn't rid myself of an uncomfortable feeling that there might be.

I looked outside, to where Al Segal was leaning against the side of the trading post. From that angle he looked exactly like Tom. With sudden decision I tossed my poke down on the table.

"Give me a hundred fox traps and the rest in grub," I told McDuff.

THREE days later found Al and me, in his canoe, going north on a sluggish bush creek. Besides the huskies and the axes he had told me he owned, Al also had the canoe, a sleeping bag, three pairs of snowshoes, and a few pots and pans. He had also, glory of glories, been able to dig up half a dozen cans of tobacco and two pipes. We were doling the smokes out to ourselves at the rate of one half pipe a day.

The day we left, after arguing another couple of hours with Al about the impossibility of anybody being jinxed, I had written a long letter to Maud to reassure her that I could get enough money for the kid's operation and the farm, and to tell her that I wasn't going in alone but with an experienced bush man so there was nothing to worry about. She'd worry anyway, bless her. But maybe I'd get a chance to shoot her another letter some time during the winter.

I didn't know where we were going, but Al thought we'd better head for what he called the Patch. There were quite a few trappers operating out of Metoosin and all the best trapping grounds in close were taken up. The Patch was beyond anything already claimed. Up here one trapper, of course, will respect another's territory.

The dogs ran along the bank beside the canoe, frisking and playing like a couple of pups and wading out into the water to bark at us, as though they were telling us that they knew very well what we were up to. They were a great pair of huskies. One was a silver built like a draft horse, and the other was a black and white only a little smaller.

In spite of our skimpy grub list—we only had about half enough—I was feeling darn well satisfied. I was going north to trapping grounds where I was sure I could get the stake I needed; I would go back to Sudbury with it in the spring and Maud's troubles would be ended. The jinx with which we had been threatened hadn't so much as shown us a bit of his hide in three days, and that was enough time for any bad luck to pounce down.

What more could any man ask?

The creek we were on began to run faster. After a while we were sticking in a paddle and now and then giving the canoe a back sweep instead of paddling.

Al drove her into the bank. I caught a spruce bough and climbed out. The dogs jumped all over me and nipped at my heels when I got on the bank, playing just like any other pair of dogs. I turned around.

Instead of climbing out of the canoe, Al just sat there in the stern looking down the creek like a man who's all bound up in what he sees. I followed his gaze, but couldn't see anything.

It was then, for the first time, that I too felt a chill of fear, a premonition of disaster.

FOR a while I let him look. His face was knit into a frown, as though he was struggling with some mighty question within himself. He looked worried, and it was as though he had been that way for long time. I called:

"Al, which way now?"

He didn't even hear me. I repeated the question. "What's the quickest way around this stuff?"

"It wouldn't break up," he said more to himself than to me. "It wouldn't break up because there ain't many rocks, and the gold was in a chest. It was in an iron chest."

He stirred and jumped, like a man who's been waked up suddenly. "Yes, oh yes," he said. Then he began tossing me the bundles so thick and fast that I had to get him to let up while I carried them up the bank.

We made a pack for each dog, and the rest into one big pack and two small ones. We couldn't take all our gear in one portage anyway, so there was no use in trying to pack too much. Al took the canoe.

After a half-mile portage we came out on another creek, or I suppose it could have been called a river.

It was only about two hundred feet across, but it was certainly going somewhere in a hurry. If it was bad where we stood, it was worse below. We could hear its steady rip, and see where it threw itself between high stone bluffs. It would need a born white-water man to take any kind of a boat down that river.

Al looked across. The skin around his mouth and jaws was tight, as though he was under more than ordinary tension. He was absorbed in the river; he had forgotten me and everything else.

"For two years I've hunted that *bateau,*" he said. "I've poked into every corner and pocket where it might be. If I found it nobody would believe that I wrecked it. But I've quit looking. I've got to find Ike LaVerne first."

I knew then that this must be the Calm River, where Al's bateau had taken Al's honor down with it. Ike LaVerne was probably Al's partner. But how Al hoped to find him was beyond me. Still, I kept my mouth out of his business.

Al Segal's was just another hard luck story with so many others to match it that you couldn't even count them all. Two men find a gold pocket, clean it out, and reap disaster instead of the wealth they've earned.

Al whirled on me suddenly, savagely, as though I could answer what he wanted to know.

"Who could find a boat on this water?" he demanded. "How would you go about looking for it?"

"I don't know," I said. I didn't know. Al sat down on the bank. He went suddenly limp. There was sweat on his forehead.

"Aw," he growled. "Let's get across."

We packed the canoe and pointed it toward the other bank. The dogs sat on the bank and howled when they saw us going; they were afraid to try to swim it. Both of us worked our paddles as hard as we could on the way across, and still landed three hundred yards down from where we had started. We unloaded the canoe, carried it back up the river, and went back to get the dogs.

With all our gear on the other side, I worked as hard as I could getting ready for the next portage.

I didn't look at Al; didn't want to because I thought my eyes would give me away. And I knew he wasn't looking at me for the same reason. But both of us were feeling the same thing.

The jinx, or whatever it was, had come down the second we'd planted our feet on the banks of the Calm River. It seemed to be there waiting.

SEVEN days later we nosed our canoe into the Patch country. It was bush, like all the rest, only here there was a range of low hills rising to the north. They looked good, more than good.

A man in the bush doesn't expect easy living and he's always grateful for small favors. If he can see anything, even a peculiar tree that isn't like all the rest, it comes to mean something during the course of a winter when there's nothing to do but pack and trail, and trail and pack, until it seems the world must be nothing but packing and trailing. A range of hills to look at can be mighty comforting.

The first thing we needed was a cabin.

We built it on the edge of the creek where we landed. Then we took the seine and got us about a thousand pounds of fish out of some of the small lakes close by. They were for the dogs. On a trap line a man has to take as good care of his dogs as he does of himself.

It was after we'd got the fish into a cache that we first knew there was another white man in the Patch. I had gone out for an armful of wood from the pile we had cut and standing against a little spruce that we had left uncut. The second I stooped over to gather up the wood I heard a gun crack. A bullet thudded into the little spruce at the exact place where my head had been.

Al came dashing out of the cabin with my 30-30 in his hands. "Get that man!" he panted. "Get him!"

I snatched up an axe, and we scattered into the bush at a run. Al hollered in about fifteen minutes. I went over.

He had found the place where the gent who had been doing the shooting had been standing in back of another spruce. The exploded cartridge, a .300, lay there. Al put his fingers in his mouth and whistled. The huskies came tearing through the brush.

They took the trail. We followed at a run, being as careful as anybody can be while he's ducking through the brush.

About a mile from camp we came up with the dogs. They were milling around on the bank of a little creek, casting aimlessly for the trail there. Al waded into the creek and picked up a .300 Savage that lay there. It meant only one thing Whoever had fired the shot hadn't any more to fire, and had thrown the rifle away.

"What do you make of it?" Al asked finally.

I shrugged. "Either he's on the dodge or else he's bush mad."

"What are you going to do about it?" he continued.

I had come clear from Sudbury to Metoosin, and from Metoosin to the Patch With Maud and the kid to think of I wasn't leaving because a bullet had hit where I had been.

"I'm going to keep my eyes open," I told him. "I can see as good as he can."

"Okay by me," Al said doggedly.

After that we really buckled down to dig in for the winter, taking turns chopping wood and hunting.

We shot two moose and found two bears wandering around. They're important up here because they provide meat, lard, and warm furs.

The last day out while I was finishing up the wood pile, Al knocked over three deer and a caribou, and we felt that we were pretty well set for the season even though we'd have to live mostly on a meat diet.

Finally we built two light toboggans for the dogs to pull and our preliminary work was finished.

THINGS weren't as they should have been when, with the silver husky hitched to a toboggan, I headed north into the range of hills with fifty traps, a week's supply of grub, and enough gear to put a trap line together It wasn't anything I could see or hear, or put my finger on. It was something hanging in space, but no less real because it didn't have any body or form.

I followed a creek for a ways and then cut east across the bush. I left seven or eight deadfalls behind me, and set my

first steel trap at the end of a fallen log that foxes had been using to cross the creek on.

A little farther on, in a grove of spruce, I saw where a marten had been hunting rabbits. Marten, lynx, fisher, and fox sign was everywhere beyond. It looked like a wonderful fur country.

About noon I shot two martens that the dog chased up a tree and went on, using a deadfall wherever possible and setting a steel trap only where I was pretty sure of a catch. That night we camped about twenty miles from the main cabin.

The next two days were pretty much the same. We made deadfalls and set traps.

I swung north about the middle of the second day out, and west again the next morning. The idea was to set a line—mostly deadfalls because we were short on steel traps—in a circle that I could run in about three days and that would bring me back to the base camp again when it was finished. Of course, it would take longer to set a line than it would just to run it.

It was the middle of the fifth day when I swung back toward camp.

I still had nine steel traps on the toboggan, and could have set them. But I had spent all the past five days, and half the past four nights, wondering where Al was, what he was doing, and cussing myself for letting him go off alone.

So when we came close to camp I cut across the bush toward it.

Smoke was coming out the chimney at the main camp. Al's sled, with the black and white husky still harnessed to it, was in front of the cabin and the door was open. I stood, open-mouthed. I felt all limp inside. Something, I had convinced myself, was going to go wrong and nothing had.

Al was there, the cabin was there, and everything was all right. I saw Al in the door looking at me the same way I was staring at him. Then he let out a yell.

"Hi-yee! Here's our wandering boy! Come in and smack your lip around a couple inches of moose steak!"

Al had found a very good fur country and had set his fifty traps and made twenty-eight deadfalls. He had also located a dozen or more beaver colonies—good news because beaver are easy to trap. At a minimum we thought we'd be able to leave the Patch with two thousand dollars' worth of fur each.

After supper we lay back in our bunks smoking and talking.

It was good to be there, good to be back where I knew everything was safe. My fears of the previous five days seemed silly, like a bad dream that goes away when you wake up in the morning. I felt very close to Al, and told him all about Maud, and the kid, and the farm we were going to buy. He listened while I talked, then he got up and went outside.

I was asleep when he came in.

I've never known a trapper to push things as hard as Al Segal started to right after that. The next morning he was up and had breakfast started before my eyes were fairly open. We varied our meals with moose, caribou, bear, and venison—and not much else. Our civilized grub was parceled out so we could have some every day, but we hankered for more. However we saw no reason for complaining as long as we could take fur—and the jinx didn't strike.

Neither of us mentioned it; neither could forget it.

I bucked a fifty-mile wind, and a fifty° below temperature, as I set out on my rounds again. The first trap held a fox, a nice cross worth fifty or sixty dollars. I baited and set more deadfalls as I went along.

That day I got three more foxes, all red, and two marten. It was a good haul, a darn good haul. The evening of the fourth day I pulled into camp with my line finished and seven foxes, nine marten, and two minks.

Al had pulled in the day before with thirteen foxes and three marten.

AND so the winter wore on. By Christmas we figured we had about thirty-five-hundred dollars' worth of fur in the

base camp and the season was only half gone. Christmas day we took off, the first holiday we'd given ourselves.

Al shot six ptarmigan, and we opened the two cans of peaches we'd brought along and gave up two days' rations of flour and sugar to make a cake. Maybe it wasn't an extra good cake, but it was the best we'd had in months. Al surprised me by digging out a quart of Haig and Haig he'd brought along and kept hidden, and by uncovering two more cans of tobacco.

Of all the Christmas days I'd ever spent, I think that was the best. We were together all day long, smoking and drinking. The ptarmigan were done to a turn by the time we were ready for them. We put them on the table pretending they were turkey. Then we polished off the rest of the bottle and both of us got a little drunk because we hadn't had anything to drink in so long a time. Al gave me a clasp knife and I gave him my belt axe.

But if Christmas was really a day of peace, the first either of us had had since we'd left the Calm River last fall, after Christmas it was back to the grind.

Three days on the trap line, one night at the base camp, and start out again the day after. Each trip added its bit to the fur we had in the cabin. And each day that passed meant one day less until I'd see Maud and the kid again. That, mostly, was what I was living for. That and the fact that I could go back to Sudbury with a third more money than I'd told her I'd bring back.

Finally spring came, or what passes for spring up here. At high noon the water ran from the roof for a few minutes each day, and the days were longer and longer. For the last time Al and I were together at the main cabin. We decided that Al would go south, pick up his traps, and stay there on the beaver colonies he had located. I'd get my traps and join him.

Even the silver husky seemed to understand that something out of the ordinary was in the wind.

He played and cavorted in his harness, nipped at my heels as I walked ahead of him, and jumped sideways at chickadees. I made the rounds of my traps in less than two and a half days, and started back to the cabin to get the fur which I was to freight down to Al's camp. We would strike back to Metoosin from the beaver camp.

The husky raced when we got close to the cabin, and set up a barking and howling to let the other husky know he had come home. But, while we were still three hundred yards away, he stopped and sat back on his haunches so suddenly that the sled ran into him. I ran forward, to stand gaping at the place where the cabin had been. I looked around to see if I was in the wrong place.

But I wasn't. Al's jinx had struck. The cabin, the furs it had held, the kid's operation, and Maud's and my farm, were a heap of ashes. Little wisps of smoke still floated up from them.

THE husky followed me with his tail between his legs as I went up to the ashes. A straight line of tracks led from the bush to the cabin, and back again. Freeing the husky from the sled, rifle in hand, I set out on those that led away.

Night came on. I strung a length of babiche, that I always carried, through the dog's collar and kept on the trail. Whoever was at the end of it was due for a bullet in the belly as soon as I caught up with him.

At first I had hoped that the furs weren't burned, but only stolen. That hope faded as soon as I had had time to think things over.

There was only one man, and he couldn't have carried more than a small part of the furs we had. But, even if they had been stolen, it wouldn't have eased my sentiments toward the man who had stolen them. Those furs meant too much to me. The kid and his crippled leg. My kid—

The wind died down and it got very cold as the night were on. The husky had a rime of frost around his muzzle and my nose was pinching.

It must have been about four o'clock

in the morning when the husky came into a little clearing and stopped. I could see a shanty—a blacker patch in the darkness. I walked up, kicked the door in, and ducked.

Something—I thought it was an axe—went sailing out the door over my head. I jumped into the cabin and emptied the rifle into every part of it. I couldn't see anything to shoot at, the inside of the shanty was as black as the inside of a charred keg. All I could do was hope I would hit somebody.

Then whoever was in the cabin landed on my back and hung there tighter than a leech. Arms, like steel bands, wound themselves around my neck.

If I live another thousand years I'll never forget that night in the shanty with arms choking me. It was just arms. There didn't seem to be any body attached.

At first I just couldn't breathe, then I began to see lights—all colors of lights. The arteries in my throat felt as though they would burst. I knew I was going, could feel it. That fellow was muscled like a gorilla. I know now that I would have died there if it hadn't been for the husky.

I could sense rather than feel that the dog had come into the cabin. I had mushed a good many miles with that sled hound, and I tried to call to him, but the best I could manage was a whisper. The dog went poking around with his muzzle and hit me twice in the cheek. Then he shoved his muzzle over my shoulder for a close up sniff of the other fellow's cheek.

The man screamed, let go of me, and kicked the dog. Then all Hell broke loose. I could kick that husky, and Al could manhandle him if he wanted to, but no strangers had better try it.

On hands and knees I groped around the cabin. My hand closed on the rifle. The husky was snarling, rolling around the floor with the other man. I swung the rifle by the muzzle, and felt it collide with a head. Then, except for the husky's panting, silence stole over the cabin.

Laying down the rifle, I tied the hands of the man I had knocked out. Then I tied his feet. I think I wrapped enough babiche around his hands and feet to hold a dozen ordinary men, but it was a good thing I did. If I hadn't tied him up that way I would have shot him—killed him where he lay.

Until morning I stayed there in the shanty trying to get myself together, trying to think where I could get as much money as had been lost in the furs, and trying not to think of Maud and the kid. It was spring, and I had told them that I'd be back in the spring with money.

I wouldn't be, couldn't possibly be now.

But with morning some of the nightmarish dreams departed. Cold reality took their place. I was dead broke, having less than I had come to Metoosin with in the first place. There wasn't a chance of getting the money I needed. The only thing I could do was go back to Sudbury and get a job if I was lucky. Maybe . . .

I cut the bonds from the guy's legs and made him walk ahead of me when I stared back to the main cabin to get the sled and traps. He was bush mad right enough, plain crazy. But I hardly noticed him except to make sure that he didn't get behind me again. I didn't even know why I wanted him. If I'd thought of it I probably would have let him go.

AL HAD made a siwash camp on the bank of a beaver dam. I drifted into it the day after I left the main cabin. The guy looked once at the twenty-six beaver pelts that Al had hung from trees, and threw himself down against a tree. He lay there staring southward after I had passed a line through the ropes that still bound his hands.

Al came in at sundown with three more pelts. He whooped when he saw me, but quieted down when he noticed our guest. The fellow had crawled around the tree, and lay prone peering around the tree at Al as though he didn't want to be seen. Al came over and sat down beside me. He jerked a hand at the fellow. It seemed funny, then, that his hand should tremble so.

"He off?" Al asked.

"Crazier than a poisoned wolf," I told him. "What are we going to do with him?"

Al shrugged. "Take him back to Metoosin." He sat quietly a minute. Then: "Let's have the bad news."

I told him all about it. How I had came back to the cabin to find it and all the furs burned. He patted the silver husky's ears when I told how I'd followed the tracks, and of the fight in the cabin. After that he sat for a long time staring across the beaver dam, that had a six inch wash of water on it.

"Well," he said finally, "we might as well start."

There wasn't any use in going back to the cabin. The creeks were still frozen and we couldn't float the canoe. We hitched the two huskies to one sled, and loaded everything on it. The crazy man walked dumbly between us, though for some reason he wanted to keep away from Al. But Al was noticing nothing except the trail. I don't think he said twenty words in the nine days it took us to get to the Calm River.

Our bad luck was certainly holding out. The river ice had broken up and the river was in flood. Chunks of ice thirty feet across were rolling and tumbling over one another. We had hoped to reach the river in time to cross on the ice, but now our only chance was to build a raft, and we'd have to find calmer water before we'd dare try a crossing in any raft we could knock together.

Al turned down the river. Silently I followed. In less than twenty days I'd be back in Sudbury—and I'd go back a pauper. I was going to march right on, not even noticing that Al had stopped on the bluffs, when he called to me.

"I think we'd better camp here," he said. "It's early, but it's rough going below and not many camping spots."

I built a fire and broiled some moose steak. Our guest, whom we hadn't tied to anything for the last three or four days because he hadn't seemed to need it, crouched low on the rock—like a trapped fox that sees the trapper coming. I put some meat where he could reach it and went over to sit beside Al.

Below us the river boiled against the bluff, leaping up there and casting driftwood into a hole it had made for itself in the bluff. There had been a ledge of rock over the hole, but in the spring thaws it had broken off at the top of the bluff and fallen into the river. It lay on the down river side of the hole, helping to dam the water there.

The water in the hole was still, the only calm place I had seen in the Calm River. I don't know why I looked around, it didn't do any good. The crazy man had run to the edge of the bluff, about fifteen feet from where we were sitting.

Al gasped, and rose to his feet. The crazy man shrieked once, shook his fist at us, and threw himself headlong from the bluff. Before I could stop him, Al had gone after him.

I saw the crazy man once, saw his head bob, and then two big cakes of ice came together over the place where he had been and I knew that nobody would ever see him again.

I ran back to the sled, and got a hundred feet of rope. I hadn't seen Al after he jumped. Unless I was awfully lucky I never would see him again. No man could swim long in that water.

For a moment I stood on the face of the bluff looking for him. Then I looked into the hole.

Al was standing there in water only up to his knees. He put his hands to his mouth and yelled above the roar of the water.

"Throw a rope down."

The rope hissed over the cliff. Al grabbed the end and dove. He came up again a minute later. The rope stretched taut between us. Catching hold with his hands and feet, Al started up the face of the bluff.

I threw more wood on the fire. It was still below freezing, even if it was spring. Al wrung his wet clothes out with his hands.

"I'm sorry for him," he said. "But maybe it's the best thing that could have happened to him."

"Maybe it is," I agreed, still not knowing what he was talking about.

"He sank the *bateau*," Al went on. "He knew this river like the palm of his hand. I was thrown up on the bank a mile down. Trying to tell the true story of what happened damned me. They all thought I sank the boat, and tried to lay it to him so I'd have a clean getaway with the gold. But I didn't have the gold."

"You mean—" I gasped.

"When he took a shot at you I thought so," Al continued. "I was going after him, but right after that you told me about your wife and kid. Remember? It had seemed to me that the most important thing in the world was to find either the *bateau* or Ike, so I could clear my name. But after I walked alone that night I decided I'd dig in. You were the first human being who'd had a decent word for me in two years. I figured we'd get enough fur to give your kid an operation and your wife a farm if it killed me. I didn't think he'd come back again."

"He burned the cabin thinking he'd get rid of you," I said.

"That's it," Al agreed. "I knew the *bateau* must be some place in this stretch of river, but I couldn't find it. I figured it must be in some kind of hole that Ike knew about; such holes usually have a lot of suction. For two years I haunted this part of the river every day, knowing that if I couldn't find it I would at least keep him from getting it.

"He didn't dare show himself to anybody else, and went off his bat from living alone. I knew him and knew what had happened when you brought him to the beaver camp. I didn't let on because I didn't want to raise any false hopes in you. But I thought he might betray himself some way if we brought him back here.

"When I saw that hole, that I couldn't find before because of the rock over it, I thought I knew where the *bateau* was. When he jumped off I was sure of it. Right now the other end of that rope's hung onto fifty thousand dollars' worth of gold."

I gasped.

"That's about sixteen thousand for each of us and sixteen thousand for Ike's mother down in Toronto," Al finished. "But if you don't mind we'll leave ours together. Your kid can have the best doctor in the world. You and me can buy the best ranch in Canada, and stock it with thoroughbred horses and cattle. I sure learned something this winter."

He lapsed into silence. But he didn't need to say any more. I had always known what he had learned. Of all the wealth the North has to offer, the most desirable is a good partner.

We peered into that dark quarry, and forty feet below we saw his hat floating

The Stars Spell Death

By JONATHAN STAGGE

THE attempt to abduct Dr. Hugh Westlake (who is telling the story) is the first development in a fantastic mystery—presided over by a horoscope. It is a horoscope cast by the Great Maxinus, and it prophesies that Robin Barker, a cousin of Westlake's and the son of a celebrated chemist, will almost certainly die within a few days of his twenty-first birthday. And it predicts that Robin's nearest male relative—Hugh Westlake—will also die.

The story Sydney Train relates seems to lend credence to this astrological hocus-pocus. Sydney Train claims to be the fiancée of Robin Barker; she tells Dr. Westlake that Robin, a brilliant chemist like his father, is now continually in the company of certain mysterious foreigners. One of these, a man with a purple birthmark on his face, has been heard to mention Westlake ominously.

But Sydney Train is a mystery herself: she disappears, stealing the horoscope; and when Robin Barker arrives at Dr. Westlake's house in Kenmore, he insists that he has never heard of a Sydney Train.

ON THE advice of his old friend, Inspector Cobb, Westlake has invited Robin and his lovely blond Austrian stepmother, Greta Barker, to spend Robin's birthday at Kenmore. These two, whom the doctor has not seen in years, seem to be friendly and charming people; and Westlake's small daughter, Dawn, take to them at once. At length Robin decides that Sydney Train must be Annabel Scruggs, a wealthy,

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stage-struck girl who has apparently fallen in love with him. Her father is president of the chemical company that Robin worked for; Robin quit because old Scruggs tried to force him into the munitions research department.

The Scruggs angle is further complicated by the sudden appearance in Kenmore of a couple named Ralston. The man is one of Scruggs' chemists, and they are seeking, his strong-willed wife says, to win young Barker back to the company. But Robin refuses to see them. Hugh Westlake is considerably disturbed about the several strangers who have unaccountably appeared in Kenmore. There is, for example, the genial yet somehow mysterious Dr. Heller; he has taken a house near Westlake's, to care for his son Brian who was badly crippled and apparently blinded in a plane crash.

JUST as Dr. Westlake's worry has begun to lessen, three baffling incidents occur. One night the doctor sees a face peering through the living-room window—a face branded with a purple birthmark. Then Sydney Train (Annabel Scruggs) calls on long distance to announce that she will arrive in Kenmore for Robin's birthday, bringing the horoscope. Finally—and most ominous of all—Robin Barker receives a phone call to the effect that Westlake's car has broken down and the doctor needs assistance. The call is a fake, but when Hugh Westlake learns about it, Robin has disappeared. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

SUMMONED BY A STAR

GRETA'S words dropped flat and lifeless through the dusk of the summerhouse. There was something inevitable about them, almost as if I had heard them before and the previous weeks had gradually been building us up to face this climax.

For this was the climax, I knew. All my instincts had warned me of danger. Sydney Train had never ceased to urge caution. Even the stars in their courses had prophesied that something terrible would happen to Robin.

And now it had happened. There was something foredoomed and terrifying about that woman's telephone call which had lured my cousin so innocently on a mission which had never existed.

For a moment both Greta and I seemed numbed into a desperate inactivity. I heard the thin branches of the jasmine vine scraping against the window frame—the only sound in that charged silence.

At last I said, "I'd better check up, make sure Robin's car has really gone. It—it may all be a mistake. If he isn't there, I'll call Cobb immediately."

"Cobb?" echoed Greta.

"The police. There may still be time. They may still be able to trace him."

"Yes, yes."

Greta, withdrawn behind some obscuring veil of reserve, seemed to pick up and echo my urgency mechanically. As if in a dream, she followed as I moved to the garage across the now darkened lawn.

Robin's car had gone, of course. The garage doors were swung open, showing that Dawn had been there. The dove-gray sedan gleamed with opulent newness in the shadows—an ironic reminder of how peaceful and pleasant things had seemed so short a time before.

We hurried into the house.

Greta had shaken off her mood of stunned apathy. She paused in front of me, her lovely face suddenly alive again.

"Poor Hugh," she whispered. "Everything was so simple and harmless for you before we came into your life."

Her eyes, blue and unfathomable, showed a spontaneous, almost tender sympathy. "It's worse for you than for us. Robin and I, we're used to uncertainty—even to danger. It's pitiful that this should have to happen to you."

Her hand slipped into mine. Impulsively she leaned forward and kissed me.

The touch of her lips on mine was warm and sweet, more like a kiss one imagines than an actual physical contact.

"Do all you can, Hugh. I'll go to Dawn and stay with her. At least we can keep her out of this."

She slipped away.

THE memory of that unexpected kiss brought me steadiness and some sort of self-assurance. I snatched up the tele-

phone and rang Cobb at Headquarters. When I heard his voice, I poured out a swift, staccato account of what had happened.

"I never left the house this afternoon, Cobb. But this woman pretended my car was broken down at her place. It was obviously a trap to get Robin. And it was a woman calling, just the way it was when I—"

"I know," cut in the inspector grimly. "No need to convince me we've got to take action now. What make's your cousin's car?"

"A Montague. Green. Convertible coupe."

"And the license number?"

"I—that is, I don't know. But it's an Illinois license. It should be easy to trace."

"What was he wearing?"

I thought. "A gray tweed suit, brown shoes and—" I glanced over my shoulder at the coat and hat rack behind me. "Yes, and a dark brown pork-pie hat. He always wears it and it's not here."

"Okay. I'll get my men out right away. And I'll contact the State Police. We'll do everything we can, Westlake." Cobb paused. Then he added, "As a checkup, you better call your neighbors, Heller and the Ralstons. There's just a chance he's gone to them. If you hear anything, phone through here. I'll be with you in Kenmore or I'll call you as soon as we get on to anything."

"All right."

"Everything straight?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Okay. And don't worry." The inspector's voice, normally so reassuring, somehow lacked its customery ability to convince me that everything was under control. "They haven't much of a head start on us, Westlake. Maybe things will be all right."

He rang off.

For a moment I stood there staring in indecision at the telephone. Then, with feverish fingers, I leafed through the phone book and found the number of the Talbot house where the Ralstons were staying.

I dialed the number. For a long time I listened to the steady, rhythmic drone of the calling bell. No one came to answer it.

The Ralstons, apparently, were not at home.

Despairing of any results, I called the Hellers. Dr. Heller himself answered the phone. He listened in silence and then said gravely:

"No. I haven't seen your young cousin at all this afternoon. Is anything the matter?"

"It's—it's just that he's wanted and we don't know where he is."

"Well, if he comes here, I'll certainly tell him you want him." Dr. Heller paused. "I'm—I'm afraid I'm a little worried myself. My son has just come out of the narcosis. He does not seem so well. He complains of his eyes, says the pain is increasing. I think perhaps I should take him back to the hospital. I'm calling Dr. Smith about it. I—" He broke off as if forcing himself to show polite interest in my request. "But of course, if there is anything I can do to help you, please let me know."

I thanked him, rang off and stood there in the hall, fighting against my mounting anxiety.

I HAD known really from the start that Robin would not be with any of my neighbors. I had realized there could be only one sinister explanation for that fabricated telephone call.

And yet there is something in one that clings to straws, however fragile, something that crashes all the more violently when the straws are proven to be straws after all.

Having no plan, I moved into the living-room. Greta and Dawn were sitting at a bridge table under the soft rays of a standard lamp, poring over the jagged pieces of my daughter's jig-saw puzzle.

As soon as she saw me, Dawn, in high delight, hurled herself at me and started shouting enthusiastically about the dove-gray sedan.

"I knew it wasn't just a patient, Daddy.

I felt it from the start in my bones. It's the most beautiful thing I ever saw." After a moment's sober reflection, she added: "I rather think this is the happiest day of my life."

"I'm glad someone feels that way," I said bleakly.

My daughter looked faintly suspicious but, with an awed aside to the effect that the dove-gray sedan probably possessed floating-force engine mountings, she returned to the puzzle.

I think I have never admired anyone as much as I admired Greta in those moments. Perfectly serene throughout my daughter's whirlwind welcome of me, she had been fingering the pieces of the puzzle in her beautiful hands, trying a piece here, another piece there. There was absolutely no trace of the anxiety pent up inside her.

As I entered, her eyes faintly questioning, had met mine. But when I shook my head, her face did not change its expression.

Now, as I started fidgeting around the room, she said:

"Come over and help with the puzzle, Hugh. Dawn's doing the most spectacular work on a cow."

"It isn't a cow," said my daughter with some indignation. "It's a windmill."

I did sit down at the table and made a pretense of interest in the intricate pattern of pasture and stream and—yes, a windmill. At first the whole thing struck me as a rather hideous farce, having to sit there with Greta playing a child's game while Robin was in terrible danger somewhere out there in the dusk of Kenmore.

But gradually, due largely to the presence of Greta, a false sense of security lulled some of my anxiety. I found myself genuinely absorbed in the problem of pushing pieces of sunset sky together.

And yet, all the time, behind the surface of my consciousness, I was taut, waiting either for the telephone to ring or for the drone of a car up the drive.

There would have to be news from somewhere—soon.

I'd completed a very tricky piece of cloud when I actually heard the automobile coming up the drive. I started and was about to dash out of the room when Greta's light hand on my arm restrained me.

She said with idle interest, "Sounds like a caller, Hugh. You better go and see who it is."

As I went out of the room, Dawn did not even look up from the fascination of her windmill.

I closed the living-room door behind me. I heard the car outside grind to a halt. Almost immediately there was an insistent shrill from the buzzer.

I went to the door, swung it open.

There, standing on the threshold, a suitcase gripped in one hand, stood Sydney Train.

CHAPTER XXII

WHITE STAR, DARK STAR

IT WAS absurd, but in my panic for Robin, I had forgotten all about Sydney Train's telegram. Seeing that small girl standing there, her dark head hatless, the same boyish black slicker swung over her shoulders like a guardsman's cloak, I had the weird impression that we were starting all over again at the beginning.

Sydney Train stepped into the hall. Her oval face with its dark, smoky eyes, was pale and very taut. She was exactly as I had remembered her.

"Hello, Dr. Westlake," she said. "Where's Robin?"

The abruptness of that question caught me unprepared. "He's—he's not here."

"What do you mean? He isn't—?"

Sydney Train broke off as the living-room door burst open and Dawn dashed toward her. Behind, pausing on the threshold, stood Greta.

My daughter sprang at Sydney Train with enthusiasm and started a long, exclamatory greeting. But the girl seemed hardly to notice her. She was staring over Dawn's head at the blond, slender figure of Greta Barker.

"So you're here!" she breathed. "You're here, too."

I always remember that moment with exaggerated vividness as if it had been some scene thrown in close-up on a screen —those two beautiful women gazing at each other over my daughter's head: Sydney Train, aggressive and dominating for all her dark fragility, and Greta perfectly poised with her sophisticated eyes and her mouth curved in a smile which seemed to have in it somewhere a faint mockery.

"Yes, I'm here, Annabel," said Greta. "Or do I have to call you Sydney Train these days?"

Sydney's gaze did not flinch. "Call me anything you like. It doesn't particularly matter, does it?"

As the quickest means of getting rid of Dawn, I took Sydney Train's suitcase from her and thrust it into my daughter's hands.

"Run upstairs with this, brat. And tidy up your room. Miss Train will need it."

Dawn promptly disappeared upstairs.

AS IF FOLLOWING some unspoken stage direction, the other three of us moved silently into the living-room. I shut the door. Greta sat down on the arm of the sofa. Sydney Train, still with the black slicker thrown over her shoulders, stood squarely in the center of the room. Her steady gaze fixed Greta and me in turn.

"What do you mean Robin isn't here?" Her words had the curt challenge of an accusation. "Where is he?"

I glanced at Greta. "We don't know."

"You don't know! You mean you've let him go out alone today of all days? You must have been mad!"

Swiftly, almost ashamedly, I told her as much—or rather as little—as we knew of the mysterious telephone call which had lured Robin out of the house.

She listened in complete silence, standing very straight and stiff with her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

At length her voice, cold and pinched, whispered: "So they *have* got him!"

She turned to Greta, her face hard, strangely hostile.

"You were here in this house. And you let it happen."

"How could we help it, my dear?" Greta shook her head slowly. "We were out in the garden when the call came. We never knew. Of course we'd have done anything—"

"But you!" Sydney spun fiercely to me. "I'd told you what to expect. Time and time again I warned you to take care of him. Oh, I was a fool. I should have known. I should have been here myself."

She swung away from us both, moving blindly to the window. There was dead silence in the room as the two of us watched her small, tense back, etched against the near-darkness of the garden outside.

I knew then that, whatever Robin might feel about her, there was not the shadow of a doubt that Sydney Train herself was desperately in love with him.

Her voice sounded again in a forlorn half whisper. "Tell me—what shall we do?"

"We've done all we can," I said quietly. "The police are out looking for him, trying to trace his car."

"But what shall *we* do?" she cried, stamping on the carpet with her heel. "We can't stay here. I can't stay here in this room, waiting, not doing anything, thinking. . ."

"Cobb should be here soon. Perhaps he'll have some news."

"News?" she laughed. "You call it news? It wasn't news for Maxinus, was it? He read all this in the stars twenty-one years ago, before I was born, before—"

She broke off with a little cry. Her hand beckoned me urgently. "Dr. Westlake, quick. Someone's out there in the garden, moving in the bushes."

I SPRANG to her side. Greta joined us. Sydney was pointing across the lawn at a low-growing clump of English boxwood.

"See? There—it's a man, a tall man."

And I could make out a vague figure. For one instant he was silhouetted against the lighter shadows of the willows.

It was a silhouette I would have known

anywhere—the lean body, the rangy shoulders, the pronounced aquiline nose of the solitary fisherman.

Dan Leaf, the man who had disappeared as mysteriously as he had come, was out there prowling around the garden.

I left the window and made a dash for the front door. I heard rapid footsteps behind me and glanced around to see Sydney Train following.

Swinging open the front door, I hurtled out onto the path. Sydney was close behind. I started across the lawn only to stop dead as a car loomed around a bend in the drive and drew up almost at my side.

The door was pushed open and Inspector Cobb got out.

Without waiting for him to speak, I grabbed his arm and pulled him forward.

"Dan Leaf!" I exclaimed. "That man who's been hanging around the house, fishing—we've just seen him over there in the bushes. We—"

"Hold on, Westlake." Cobb's hand had slipped up to my sleeve and was restraining me. "I wouldn't worry about that guy."

"But—"

"I just sent him here myself." There was a faint smile on the inspector's mouth. But he was not looking at me. His eyes, slightly narrowed, were fixed on the small, intent form of Sydney Train at my side.

"I should have explained Dan Leaf before," he said. "He's one of my men. I put him onto watching your house last week to make sure everything was all right. I didn't tell you because I figured you might kick."

I stared. "And you mean, all the time . . .?"

"All the time. I should have warned him you were a fisherman and wouldn't be fooled by that lake bass gag. When I realized he was only worrying you and doing no good, I took him off. But I sent him back this afternoon as soon as I got the word on young Barker from you."

He turned away and called, "Dan" loudly toward the bushes beyond. In a few seconds, the tall, lanky figure of the fisherman loped toward us. There was a rather rueful smile on his lips as he came up to me.

"Guess I wasn't a very convincing angler," he said. "Fishing's not my line. Got pretty sick of it."

I was assimilating this sudden change of identity, when I felt Sydney Train's hand grip my sleeve. She was gazing fixedly at Cobb and she said:

"Is this the policeman?"

I said yes.

"Then tell us." Sydney's voice was sharp, almost commanding. "You've been looking for Robin. Have you found him?"

The light had almost gone now. As the four of us stood there on the shadowy lawn, I could just see the line of Cobb's jaw go very square and grim.

"I was bringing the news," he said cautiously. "One of my men just reported he found Robin Barker's car. He found it stranded on—Mill Lane."

I jumped at that.

Mill Lane! Robin's car had been found there on that same winding, desolate track where I, so many weeks ago, had stumbled upon the travestied wreck of my own car—and myself.

It was Sydney who spoke first, voicing my thoughts. "And Robin—Robin wasn't there in the car?"

Once again there seemed an infinite pause before the inspector said, "N-no. The car was there. It was perfectly all right. It hadn't been smashed. But there was no sign of Robin Barker."

CHAPTER XXIII

STAR'S SECRET COURSE

THE four of us went into the house, Sydney Train, Cobb, Dan Leaf, the man I had always thought of as the solitary angler, and I. Greta Barker had come into the hall. She stood by the door, her hair gleaming gold in the light which fanned out from the living-room.

Her gaze moved from me to Cobb and settled with faint curiosity on Dan Leaf.

"Well?" she asked softly. "Any news?"

I told her what Cobb had just told us of the discovery of Robin's car abandoned in Mill Lane.

"Abandoned! But what—what can have happened to Robin?"

"They probably stopped him there and took him away in another car." The inspector spoke uncertainly. "I've sent out his description to all the county police in the state and the troopers, too. Maybe they'll pick them up before they have a chance to get far."

"How do you know they want to get far?" Sydney Train's voice still had that icy, numb quality. "Maybe they just took him off somewhere into the woods. Maybe they have him here in the neighborhood close." I saw that her nails were digging deep into the palms of her hands. "Maybe at this very moment they're—killing him. We've got to do something . . . now!"

"I'm afraid there's not much we can do right away," put in Cobb. "I'm going to Mill Lane to look at the car myself. Perhaps we can find tracks or—"

"Tracks!" echoed Sydney scornfully. "What good would it do you to find tracks? You couldn't follow them. Not when it's dark, not—" She broke off. With a certain desperate hopefulness, she said: "Perhaps if—if they didn't take him in a car, if they did go off into the woods with him, we *could* follow the tracks. We could take out bloodhounds."

Cobb shook his head. "We don't have any bloodhounds—not for miles around, so far as I know. By the time we'd located any, the trail would be cold."

As he spoke, there flashed into my mind a vivid memory of the Hellers' long library, of Brian lying on his stretcher and his two Dobermans jumping up to lick his hand.

That did it.

"Wait a minute," I exclaimed. "Brian Heller said the other day that his Dobermans were the best hunting dogs he'd ever known. Trail anything from a skunk to a man, he said. I know they'd lend them to us and—"

"Yes," broke in Sydney Train eagerly. "Get them, Dr. Westlake. It's better than nothing, far better. At least we'll be trying to find him."

I looked questioningly at Cobb. Until then I had always thought of him as a tower of strength, but this time I could tell from his face that he was as perplexed and helpless as I. At that moment he seemed what I suppose most people would think he actually was, just a small-time country policeman whose job was largely coping with petty larceny and whose capabilities and authority were pitifully inadequate when pitted against something as intricate and far-reaching as this.

He said, "I guess Miss Train has an idea there. Of course, if they did take him off in a car, dogs won't help. But there's no harm in trying."

WHILE they all stood around me in overwrought silence, I picked up the telephone and dialed the Hellers. Once again it was Dr. Heller himself who answered. I told him shakily that Robin had not come back, that we had found his car abandoned, that we were afraid something had happened to him. I asked if the Doberman pinschers really were trained to follow a scent.

Dr. Heller clucked sympathetically. "This is terrible, terrible. Just hold the wire a moment and I will ask Brian about the dogs."

I held the phone, waiting, staring blankly at the others.

After a while he was back. "Yes," he said, "Brian is sure the dogs would be able to follow so recent a scent. He suggests that you bring some garment of your cousin's over immediately. He—he himself will make the dogs understand what they are meant to do."

"Okay," I said. "We'll be right over. Thanks."

I told the others.

Cobb said, staring at his hands, "Maybe Mrs. Barker could get us some of his clothes."

Greta went upstairs and came down

again with one of Robin's black shoes and a crumpled blue shirt.

They looked forlorn and desolate, like clothes left behind by someone who had just died.

The inspector wrapped them in a newspaper and gave them to Dan Leaf to carry. "Okay. We'll be moving," he said. "Dan and I. You'd better come too, Westlake."

Sydney Train threw back her dark hair. "And what about me?"

"I think it's better—" began the inspector.

"Of course I'm coming." The girl looked stubbornly at me. "Make him see I've got to go, too."

"Yes," put in Greta quietly. "Let her go with you, Inspector. I'll stay and take care of Dawn."

Cobb seemed rather reluctant, but he said, "All right."

We all streamed out into the spring darkness. Cobb and Leaf and I piled into the inspector's car. Sydney got into hers. As Cobb swung off down the drive, I saw the powerful limousine nose forward and follow.

We drove fast.

At the Hellers we found the front door open and Dr. Heller hovering in the hall. Beneath the snow-white hair, his pink, unlined face was very solemn.

"Brian has the dogs with him in the library. He says it is best for him to show them the—the clothes himself. Poor boy, he is suffering terribly with his eyes, the most agonizing pain. Dr. Smith says I should take him back to the hospital in New York tomorrow unless there is some alleviation tonight. But Brian insisted on doing this himself."

He shook his head as if he knew he should be taking our problem more seriously than his own and yet had difficulty in doing so. "I'm indeed sorry to hear about young Barker. I only hope—"

His voice trailed off as he led us through the living-room into the library. Brian was lying in his accustomed place by the fire. Only one reading lamp was alight, throwing a vague, soft beam across the red and gray carpet. The two Doberman pinschers squatted on their haunches at each side of the hearth.

BRIAN stirred slightly as we entered. He tried to raise himself up on one elbow and then dropped back on the stretcher. The part of his face visible between the eyeshade and the bandages was white and drawn.

"Sorry to be such a crock," he said with a rather tragic attempt at a laugh. "Pain pretty bad tonight. I—have you got the clothes there?"

Dan Leaf crossed to the bed, unwrapped the shoe and the shirt and handed them to Brian.

"Here, Lordship; here, Lady." Brian gave a little whistle and the two Dobermans jumped to his side. He held out the clothes. They pressed at them with their damp snouts, their ears pricked up, their tails waving tentatively. "Fetch him," whispered Brian. "Good Lordship, good Lady, go with these people and fetch him; bring him back; fetch him."

Lady gave a little yelp and pranced excitedly. Lordship, more businesslike, stiffened, his tail erect, and nuzzled Brian's hand.

"They'll be all right," said Brian. "Take them to wherever you're going. Let them have the clothes again. They'll pick up the scent if it's there."

As if that slight effort had exhausted him, he sank back again against the pillows, his head half turned to the wall to escape the soft beam of light from the lamp.

The dogs seemed impatient to be gone. Dan Leaf attached two leashes, which had been lying on a table, to their collars.

"Okay," said Cobb. "Then we'll be moving."

We trooped in silence out of the room.

As I crossed the threshold, I glanced back over my shoulder. Dr. Heller was standing at his son's side, his hand moving anxiously over the boy's forehead.

We, I reflected, were not the only people who had our troubles.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHILE THE STARS WATCH

I WAS not particularly sanguine about the Doberman pinschers. In spite of Sydney Train's conviction, if Robin had been taken somewhere against his will, it seemed far more probable that he would have been taken in a car. And then, even if the dogs were successful in following a trail, I had very little hope of finding Robin—alive.

I had already been given a taste of just how ruthless the people we were up against could be. If the issues at stake were really as vast as they appeared to be, a human life here or there could mean next to nothing to the man with the purple birthmark and his associates.

But at least we were doing something, something that relieved the gnawing anxiety of idleness.

I took charge of the great beasts myself, holding them by their leashes in the back of the car while Cobb and Dan Leaf sat in front.

The Dobermans seemed nervous and excited, as though they knew something was expected of them and were eager not to be proved inadequate.

Now and again I turned to make sure Sydney Train was following us. Above the glaring eyes of the headlights, I could make out the small face, pale and purposeful. Never once was she less than thirty yards in our rear, and I had the impression that it was torture to her to hold back that high-powered car from overtaking us.

Cobb did not speak until we had swung off the main road onto the rough dirt surface of Mill Lane.

"Should be a couple of hundred yards further on," he grunted. "A piece along from the place where you found your own corpse."

We saw the car almost at once—a coupe with Illinois plates and undoubtedly Robin's. It was drawn up at the side of the lane, about a foot from the straggling bushes which separated the road from the dark mass of the woods. There seemed nothing to indicate that Robin might have stopped hastily or in a panic.

But the sight of it brought back some of the horror of that other time I had stumbled upon a car in Mill Lane. Only this time there was no wreck. And no body—yet.

We parked some yards away. Cobb and Leaf got out. I followed with the dogs. Leaf took the leash from me and held out Robin's shoe and shirt once again to the Dobermans. They sniffed at them absently and strained forward toward the deserted car, whining softly.

When they reached it, they jumped up, placing their front paws on the window ledge. Lordship peered eagerly inside as if he expected to see the owner at the wheel.

Sydney Train had come up to us now. She looked small and forlorn with her hands thrust into the pockets of her black slicker. But she glanced up eagerly as, flashlight in hand, Cobb came up to us from further down the road.

"If another car was here, there's no sign of it. Barker's tracks are very plain. But they're the only ones."

Sydney said sharply, "Then I am right! They didn't take him away. They—"

"Wouldn't count on it," grunted the inspector. "They might easily have parked down there on the main road and have come the rest of the way on foot."

Dan Leaf, holding the double lead professionally loose, was allowing the Dobermans to sniff at will around Robin's car. For several long minutes it looked as though they would never leave it. In the light from my torch I could see the deep lines of worry around Cobb's mouth.

Sydney Train had slipped away, heading further up the lane in the opposite direction from the main road. Suddenly her voice sounded tense, urgent:

"Quick. Come over here. There's—there's been a fight or something."

COBB and I hurried toward the bright circle of her flashlight. She was bending forward, peering down at the loose

surface of the lane. As we joined her and our three torches played downward, I saw what she meant.

The earth at the side of the track was scuffed up and the grass beneath the bushes was trampled down as if by heavy feet. Some of the bushes themselves were split and broken, showing a distinct gap where somebody had either been pushed or fallen through.

Gesturing curtly for us to stand back, Cobb squatted on his haunches and made a minute investigation of the ground.

"Yeah," he admitted at length. "Looks like there was some sort of a struggle." He pointed at a long, deeper indentation in the soft clay. "And I'd say someone got knocked down—there."

"They must have been waiting for him," whispered Sydney. "They made him stop the car. They . . ." She turned to me, her mouth curved in a pale smile. "At least Robin didn't give in without a fight."

But her smile went as Cobb picked up a fairish sized stone and held it toward me. Both of us saw a dark stain gleaming against its gray surface.

"Blood," said the inspector quietly. "And fairly recent, wouldn't you say, Westlake?"

I nodded.

Cobb called to Leaf and he brought the dogs over. They seemed reluctant at first to leave the car, but once they reached the place where we were standing they started ranging back and forth eagerly over the mangled ground.

Then, without warning, Lady bounded toward the gap in the bushes, tugging Lordship after her. Between them they practically dragged Leaf through the thicket of boughs and twigs.

"They've picked up the scent all right," called Leaf.

Sydney took my hand and pulled me forward. "He got away," she breathed fervently. "I know it. He fought them and he got away."

Some of her optimism, tenuous though it was, infected me too. I was unconscious of pricks and scratches as we pushed our way through the tangled undergrowth, skirting the thick boles of the trees, stumbling over snake-like roots. Almost I had identified myself with Robin. I felt as if I had shaken off my pursuers and was making a bolt for freedom. My blood tingled with the exciting, half panicky thrill of the hunted.

Ahead of us Cobb had stopped dead, his flashlight focussed on the thorny spray of bramble.

"Said your cousin was wearing a gray tweed suit, didn't you, Westlake?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then he certainly came by here." The inspector indicated some shreds of gray material adhering to the sharp thorns. "We're on the track all right."

CHAPTER XXV

BAY TO THE STARS

WE MOVED on as swiftly as we could, forcing a path like explorers in a primeval jungle. In front I could make out the forms of the dogs, dark, moving ink smudges against the shadows of the undergrowth. Every now and then their deep baying cut the blanket silence of the woods.

Against all reason, there was something exhilarating about the clear, ringing sound of their voices, the mysterious darkness of trees and the sweet smell of invisible pines.

It had been this way in the old days when Colonel Wallace had taken out his coon-dogs and the entire neighborhood had tracked across the Ploversville Hills on a coon-hunt.

Sydney Train's hand, warm and tense, was still in mine. Ahead, tall and heron-like, as he had seemed when he stood on the banks of the Kenmore Creek, strode Dan Leaf with Cobb at his heels, playing his flashlight downward on the weeds and scrub at the base of the looming trees.

We made our way forward behind the dogs. At length we came out into a little clearing where a suggestion of a track

wound its way through the high pines.

"Hold it," shouted Cobb suddenly. "Footprints."

Leaf pulled the Dobermans to a halt.

From his raincoat pocket, the inspector pulled the black shoe of Robin's which we had taken over to the Hellers for the dogs. Kneeling on the soft ground, he held the shoe against one of the prints.

It fitted perfectly.

"It's Robin's track all right," he grunted.

His flashlight, playing forward, revealed other prints. They were less distinct and the heel mark was almost invisible. But they seemed broader around the toe and there were loose cakes of earth where the soles had pressed.

Sydney Train asked sharply, "Are they someone else's? Has someone else come this way too?"

"No, they're the same tracks. They're Robin's." The inspector's voice was guarded. "It's just that he started running here, running, I guess, to get through the clearing quickly."

"Then they haven't caught up with him." Sydney Train spun round to me, gripping my arms excitedly. "He shook them off. He escaped." She glanced down at the footprints and gave a little laugh that was almost gay. "I never knew Robin had such big feet. I'll—I'll kid him about it when we find him."

There was something heroic about her cheerfulness in face of such odds. And yet there did seem to be a chance that she could be right. For the first time since Dawn had broken the news of Robin's departure to me in the summerhouse, I felt stirrings of hope that my cousin might still be safe.

But, as we stood there, gazing down at those indentations in the ground, I had a vivid mental picture of Robin as he must have been, dashing across this clearing.

I saw him, scratched, disheveled, out of breath, running to shake off unknown pursuers, running blindly through unfamiliar places, fearful of the open country, his ears straining all the time for the crackle of footsteps or the whistle of a bullet that might mean swift, inevitable death.

Somehow that picture seemed symbolic of Robin himself, the boy who had been star-crossed from his cradle, who, during the past weeks, had been running futilely to escape a destiny which had been mapped out for him years before in the mysterious pattern of the Zodiac.

According to the stars, Robin was doomed to die a violent death. Did that mean anything?

If it did, I too, according to Maxinus, was predestined to murder.

The thought made me shiver, as Sydney Train slipped her hand into mine and we all started forward again.

WE CROSSED the clearing and reached grass where footsteps were no longer visible. But the scent, apparently, was still good, for the dogs pressed eagerly ahead. Once they surprised a skunk which darted, a streamlined shadow in black and white, across the beam of our lights. For a while the musky odor seemed to throw the dogs off and they turned liquid eyes to us, mutely asking for the help and inspiration we could not give.

Then Lordship's ears pricked up and they were off again.

The woods were behind us now and we were skirting an adjoining field, hugging the hedge close like trespassers or lovers. Somewhere, not far off, a rooster crowed unseasonably and gave me my bearings. We were east of Abe Balch's farmhouse, going in the direction of the Ploversville Road.

Suddenly it came to me that we were heading straight for the old Talbot house where the Ralstons were staying.

And, just as I realized it, a swerve around the side of the woods showed the house itself, rearing high on the hill beyond us, its roof a black, solitary silhouette against the starlit sky, its windows ablaze with light like square portholes on some bizarre, land-bound liner.

"A house!" cried Sydney excitedly. "He

would have gone there, of course. He'll be there. We'll find him."

I said drily, "If he's there, he'll be in good company. Your friends the Ralstons live there."

"The Ralstons!" Sydney stopped, staring at me blankly. "You mean Charlie and Mildred Ralston from Chicago?"

I told her quickly what I knew of the Ralstons and their object in coming to Kenmore. Although I personally felt certain doubt about any security Robin might receive at the Ralston house, Sydney seemed even more excited.

Her hand still in mine, she tugged me forward and together we started plunging down the dark, irregular slope, not waiting for the dogs.

Cobb's voice called after us, "Kenmore Creek's down there, you know. If he headed to the Talbot house, he'll have crossed it and we'll probably lose the scent."

But he had underestimated the capabilities of the Doberman pinschers. When, a few seconds after Sydney and I, they reached the low banks of the creek, they led us unerringly to a shallow ford where, without the least hesitation, they picked their nimble way over the improvised stepping stones which lay at irregular intervals in the shallow water.

We slithered and stumbled after them. Both my shoes were full of water when we reached the opposite bank.

For a moment, the dogs paused there, sniffing uncertainly. Then, as if urged by a simultaneous impulse, they yelped, tugged at the leash and started swiftly up the hill toward the Ralstons' house.

The scent must have been strong, for they doubled their speed and almost galloped up that steep incline.

THE four of us ran madly in pursuit. Sydney Train's excitement had even infected Cobb by then. In those quick, breathless moments, it seemed as if the hunt must be drawing to an end. By some miracle Robin had shaken off his pursuers; he had reached sanctuary.

The house loomed above us. It seemed like one of those dream goals which recede as swiftly as you progress toward them.

But the dogs kept relentlessly on, whining and barking. We were near enough to the house now to have roused the caretaker's dog. Its furious yapping sounded as we reached the crest of the hill and turned into the Ralstons' yard.

"I told you so!" cried Sydney triumphantly. "I told you he came here."

Ignoring the house dog's protest, Lordship and Lady pressed on. They pressed around some outbuildings with Dan Leaf and Cobb chasing after them.

But Sydney Train had started off in the other direction. She shouted over her shoulder.

"The front door, Dr. Westlake. Come on."

It was a rather delirious moment. I could see the small, vague outline of Sydney Train running ahead of me. I followed. A turn in the wall brought us face to face with the long front of the house in the middle of which, its porch light burning cheerfully, stood the front door.

Sydney reached it first. She ran up the steps to it, her slicker swirling behind her like black, shiny wings.

In the illumination from the porch light I could see her face in the clearest detail. Her eyes were shining; her lips were parted in a smile of radiant anticipation. There wasn't the slightest trace of doubt in her expression.

It was as if she knew, as certainly as though she had seen him, that Robin would be safe inside that house.

She banged the brass knocker violently. I joined her, but she did not seem even conscious of my existence. There was a breathless, suspended quality about her like a bride waiting to face her groom at the altar.

Footsteps sounded inside the house. The door was swung open. Standing on the threshold, the light striking on her chestnut hair, was Mrs. Ralston.

She looked at me and then stared at Sydney with wide, astonished eyes.

"Why, Annabel, what are you—?"

Sydney Train seized the other girl's hands. "Mildred," she whispered. "He's here, isn't he? He's here with you?"

I waited, with an awful keyed-up expectancy, watching Mildred Ralston's face.

It retained its expression of blank bewilderment.

"Who's here? What do you mean? What are you doing here?"

"Robin!" The word came from Sydney as if it were wrenched from her heart. "He's—he's lost. We've been tracking him across country. We've come so far. We've tried so hard. He is here. He must be here."

Mildred Ralston did not answer for a moment. As I looked at her, I felt my heart sink.

Then, very slowly, her words came.

"No. I'm sorry. Robin Barker isn't here. I haven't seen him at all. I don't have the slightest idea where he is."

CHAPTER XXVI

HERE A STAR PLUNGED

IT WAS a moment of tragic anti-climax. For a while Sydney did not seem to be able to take in exactly what Mrs. Ralston had said. She made a little uncompleted gesture with her hand and then let her arms fall limply at her sides.

Charlie Ralston had appeared now and was hovering behind his wife, his plump face gazing at us suspiciously.

While Sydney stood in complete, stony silence, I explained to them exactly what had occurred. Back of my mind, I had the crazy impression that maybe they were lying, that for some reason of their own, they were deliberately holding Robin there in the house, keeping him from us.

But their faces expressed genuine anixety and perplexity.

On a sudden impulse, Mildred Ralston crossed to Sydney and laid her hand on the girl's arm. "My dear, this is terrible for you. I'm so—so sorry."

Sydney looked up, her face white as paper. She said dully, "It's all right. Just—just the disappointment. I know we'll find him. I know it."

As she spoke, the broad figure of Cobb appeared around the house. He hurried up to us, glancing curiously at the two Ralstons.

"False alarm," he said. "He came up here all right, but he didn't go to the house. He just skirted the barn. The dogs have picked up the scent again heading back to the woods."

It was as if those words had released something that had been holding us all in check. Sydney Train started forward, running around the house back toward the place where we had left the dogs. Cobb and I followed. As we sprinted ahead, I glanced over my shoulder to see Mildred and Charlie Ralston close behind.

Hatless and coatless, they had joined the hunt.

We could hear the dogs yelping. We could locate them too from the flickering beam of Dan Leaf's torch higher up the hill behind the house.

In a few minutes we joined Leaf and the Dobermans and were once again plunging into the woods. For a while we followed a queer, devious trail through the trees; then the dogs started downward again and west along the slope.

They were headed in the general direction of my house, which meant we would be obliged to cross the creek again.

"Queer sort of route he took," said Cobb, as we trudged through a plowed field.

"He was probably lost, poor devil," I said, "and he didn't dare ask his way at the Ralstons'. Guess he didn't know who his enemies were."

Charlie and Mildred Ralston jogged by us, catching up with Sydney Train. Leaf and the dogs had turned left and were making straight for the banks of the creek.

After a moment's silence, the inspector added, "It still looks to me as if they hadn't caught up with him. No sign that more than one person came this way."

The dogs had reached the creek now. While Leaf, the Ralstons and Sydney stood around them, they sniffed excitedly up and down. At length they stopped by some stones, staring fixedly across the water at the other bank.

And this time it was a real crossing with only a few scattered rocks to help us over the swiftly running stream.

LEAF had dropped the leash and was letting the Dobermans find their own way across. He followed, jumping agilely from rock to rock. Charlie Ralston had picked up his wife and was stumbling and splashing forward in the water.

As Sydney started over, I did as Ralston had done and lifted her up in my arms. She was light as a child and her hand, clutching for support to my shoulder, was icy cold.

When I set her down on the far bank, she did not look at me. She merely breathed an almost inaudible "Thank you."

There was something infinitely pathetic about the change in her from cheerful optimism to this dull, numbed silence.

The dogs picked up the scent at once, and we made off into the woods again in the direction of my house. I don't know why that should have revived my flagging hopes. But it did. And I had visions of our finding Robin safe in front of the fire at home when we returned.

I said as much to Sydney. But she did not reply.

And, a few seconds after I had spoken, the dogs wheeled sharply right toward a narrow, hedged-in track.

I heard a muttered exclamation from Cobb.

And, immediately, I knew the reason for it. That small, tortuous pathway was a cul-de-sac, leading to what was possibly the one sinister spot in the neighborhood.

The trail of Robin Barker was making directly for the rocks above Quarry Pool —that supposedly bottomless pond which had fascinated and horrified me as a child and which was a constant source of horrified fascination to Dawn.

It was one of those rare phenomena to be found occasionally in otherwise uneventful countrysides. Generations ago, our forefathers had quarried stone there, but the rocky stratum had been shallow and the floor of the quarry had collapsed leaving a deep hole in the earth's surface.

Gradually, through the years, the rain water had filled it in. And now, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence to keep sightseers and straying cattle from falling down its sheer, crumbling walls, it was a useless and dangerous expanse of water—water which was far too deep and cold even for use as a swimming pool.

And it was to the Quarry Pool that Robin's tracks were taking us, along the narrow path where probably Dawn had brought him and Greta on the day of their arrival.

Cobb had gone ahead of the dogs now and was examining the path carefully in the light of his torch.

He held up his hand for us to stop.

We looked down. Once again we had come upon footprints—those same, broad-toed footprints which were so unmistakably Robin's.

We eased slowly forward, the dogs nuzzling each individual track.

Then Cobb stopped again.

I saw the reason at once. There was no need to be a trained detective to recognize immediately how the character of those footprints had changed.

TILL then they had been flat, shoe-shaped indentations in the soft earth. But now they were half-formed, with round cakes of soil broken from the surface.

The prints told their story here even more plainly than they had in the wood clearing.

At this point Robin had suddenly started to run forward along that narrow path which led to one place and one place only —the crest of the high cliffs which dropped straight down into the Quarry Pool.

What, I asked myself desperately, could he have seen or heard, here on this edged-in, imprisoning pathway, to make him

run forward toward what he must have known was a hopeless dead-end?

The dogs had started running now, as though they, too, were anxious to answer the question that was in everyone's mind. We ran after them.

I remember someone ahead—I think it was Charlie Ralston—calling out as he reached the barbed-wire fence which brought the path to a stop and screened the precarious edge of the cliffs that dropped away to the pool.

In the obscurity, I was conscious of him, holding something white and red and waving it at Cobb like a flag.

"Look! It was caught in the barbed wire. A handkerchief."

Then I heard the word "Blood."

I remember seeing Sydney Train by my side, her face deathly pale. I thought she was going to faint and put my arm around her shoulders.

But she brushed me away and, moving to Cobb, took the handkerchief from him.

Her voice low and steel-hard, she said: "Yes, it is Robin's handkerchief. There are the initials, R. B. I think it is one I gave him for Christmas."

All our flashlights had been concentrated on the near side of the barbed-wire fence. But at that moment, the beam from Dan Leaf's torch swerved sideways and revealed the short strip of rough grass that stretched to the sheer drop down to the pool.

The dogs, straining madly at the leash, had gone under the barbed-wire fence and were forcing Dan Leaf to follow through the wire to the very brink of the cliffs.

Lordship and Lady were peering down into what seemed bottomless darkness.

Then, suddenly, Lady set up a dismal howl. It was eerie and foreboding as the voice of Death.

Then I heard Leaf whistle and saw Cobb vault the wire fence to join him. Instinctively I scrambled after him.

They were both on their knees and I could see, in the light from their torches, what it was they were looking at.

As in Mill Lane, the turf at the edge of the cliffs was trampled down, scuffed here and there as by the club of some clumsy golfer—or, as if some desperate struggle had taken place.

Nor was that all. The blades of grass gleamed a dull purple in the torchlight. Cobb's fingers, as he touched them, were red and sticky.

Cobb looked up at me, his face drawn and white.

"I guess we've reached the end of the trail, Westlake. Keep the others back."

BUT it was too late to keep them back. Mrs. Ralston had already slipped through the barbed-wire fence. She had snatched her husband's flashlight and sent its beam downward through the darkness, revealing the dully gleaming water of the pool some thirty or forty feet below.

After that, a barrage of torches seemed to be throwing their fans of light downward until the whole expanse of that deep, circular pool was revealed.

It was Mildred Ralston who finally broke the silence. She cried sharply, "Look! Look down there!"

She pointed downward with an urgent hand. But there was no need. I had already seen what she had seen.

In the center of that sluggish expanse of water, a black smudge against the opalescent darkness of the pool, there drifted a hat.

A man's pork-pie hat like the one Robin Barker had been wearing when he left the house that afternoon.

Her voice rising in a crescendo of horror, Mildred Ralston screamed:

"Don't you see? It's a hat. His hat. They pushed him over. He's down there——drowned."

Then, faint and remote as an echo, I heard another voice. I knew it came from Sydney Train.

"We should have known, shouldn't we? It was all in the stars. They knew. Twenty-one years ago they knew Robin Barker was going to be—murdered."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

They all stopped talking around the little Crossroads store when Dinah appeared

Never Had No Luck

Add up all the bad breaks you've ever had, divide by one, and the result is zero. Always provided that your divisor has thistle-blue eyes and a very, very firm will

By JOHN RANDOLPH PHILLIPS
Author of "The Horse Trader," "No Stop At Juno," etc.

A FEW of the faithful still came of a Saturday afternoon to the Crossroads. The new hard-surface highway, all glittery with its promise of wonders over the next hill and the next, ran past the Crossroads and carried most folks with it to the towns.

But still, a certain few parked their asthmatic cars in the pleasant shade of Branch Tenbow's white oak and parked themselves on the porch of Branch Tenbow's store.

There on any given Saturday you'd likely find old man Sawmill Garvey, the Wester brothers, Luke Kenny, and certain others. You'd hear talk of crops, of fights, of deaths and births and marriages. Now and then young Jim Bede would be there, complaining about his luck.

Jim wasn't a member of long standing. For one thing, he was years and years younger than the others; for another, until this summer he, too, had taken the road to the towns. That was before Dinah Patrick kicked him and she'd be sitting up in the car beside him, sweet as honey and pretty as a rose, and she'd wave her hand at the old fellows and the old fel-

lows' blood pressure would rise like five hundred.

This Saturday was hot. In the distance the heat danced and shimmered over the fields. Folks coming in off the dirt side roads were covered with dust when they arrived. Jim Bede was one of these.

He parked his car, entered Tenbow's store, and drank four bottles of strawberry pop before his gigantic thirst was quenched. Then he found a vacant chair on the porch, between Sawmill Garvey and Luke Kenny, and dropped into it.

A good-looking boy, Jim Bede. Tall and lanky without being angular. Brown eyes and brown hair that always looked as if a woman had just run her hands through it. High forehead and good, strong face. Only the mouth seemed out of place; the mouth tucked down at the corners a fraction too much.

"How's it going, Jim?" Sawmill Garvey asked politely.

"It ain't going good a-tall," Jim responded lugubriously. "Blades of my corn curled tighter'n Branch Tenbow's fingers 'round a ten-dollar bill. It ain't rained on my place since men wore long pants. Now the other day a good rain come right down Flatiron Creek. But did it reach over my way? No! My luck's not that good."

"It ain't right," commented old man Sawmill Garvey, "for a young man to bellyache so. It's all right for an old man, but a fellow like you, Jim—"

"I reckon you think it's all hot air about my hard luck."

A new voice entered the conversation, the voice of Ranse Perry. He was not a Saturday regular at the Crossroads; had just stopped by for want of something better to do on an idle afternoon.

Perry owned the farm next to Jim Bede's and neither he nor Jim had lost any love for the other. A young man himself, only a few years older than Jim Bede, he nevertheless delighted in baiting Jim.

He said: "I reckon you've had more bad breaks, Jim, than any man in Buckingham."

"Buckingham, hell! You show me another man in the whole country that—"

He stopped to fix Ranse Perry with a vengeful eye. He knew that Ranse was just leading him on and he knew he ought to hold his tongue. But his tongue had a habit of getting the jump on him. "You think it wasn't hard luck the time that fellow from Richmond—"

"I don't believe you ever told me that one, Jim," Ranse interrupted.

Jim forgot his rancor at Ranse Perry. All he could remember was that fatal day seven years before. His voice dropped a note; the corners of his mouth tucked down.

"I reckon you recollect when I used to pitch ball. I wasn't but nineteen, but I was fast and I had me a curve that was like a black snake licking his tongue. Playing here at the Crossroads, and we had a good team for a little old country place.

"Good enough for them Richmond Colts to hear about it. Good enough for them to send a fellow up here to watch me pitch against the Court House boys. But I was working by the day then for old Andy Gooch and he wouldn't let me off that afternoon to pitch.

"Oh, I wrote to the Richmond fellow, but he never answered it. Some of them said that he said he wasn't inter'sted in a guy that didn't have guts enough to come in and pitch, anyway, job or no job. They never sent no more scouts up this way."

"Tough," said Ranse Perry feelingly, and spread his slender, bony hands in a gesture of false sympathy. "You got in a crap game once, too, didn't you, Jim?"

"Yeh, fool that I was. Just had sold my tobacco. Had four hundred dollars on me up in Lynchburg and this fellow come by and struck up a conversation. Wound up with me shooting craps with him and a coupla others in a hotel room. They picked them up four hundred dollars like a chicken picking up corn."

HE MANAGED a shame-faced laugh and stretched his long body and gazed with sad, disillusioned eyes about him. "But one of the worst pieces of luck

ever come my way was when that rich fellow from over in Albemarle wanted to see my dogs run.

"In them days I foxhunted a lot and I had me the sweetest little pack ever nipped at a fox's hindparts. You remember old Rattler, Mr. Garvey. He was my strike dog and there never was a better. The rest of the pack would swim the James River to get to him when he opened up on a track.

"Why he took that day to run a rabbit—him that never even sniffed at a rabbit before—I don't know, but he done so. The rest of the pack went to him like a shot and lit out after him bellering like Billy-be-damned. The rich fellow turned up his sassy nose and said he wasn't inter'sted in no rabbit hounds."

"But he bought another pack," Ranse Perry prompted.

"Yeh, he give three hundred dollars for Howdy Gannt's dogs that couldn't stay in hearing of my pack."

"Tough," Ranse Perry repeated. "You lost out on a mighty good job one time, too, didn't you?"

"You bet I did. Old man Sol Arnold. Had more money than Parker had oats. Got Amos French to drive his car for him 'way out West on a trip. He was so tickled with the way Amos done—and Amos couldn't teach me driving a car—that he give him a regular job in the city. Give him a hundred-dollar present to boot. But it was me he wanted in the first place."

"How come that, Jim?"

"Well, old man Sol stayed at his country place that year and I drove his car for him sometimes. One day I'd fixed it in my mind to go fishing down on Flatiron. Just had got my poles and bait and taken to the path when I seen old Sol come into the yard. Figured he wanted me to drive him over to the Court House.

"I run down the path out of sight. But I reckon he figured I must of gone fishing, 'cause he followed me down to the creek, calling my name every step of the way. I hid in them iv'ry bushes above the deep hole. He like to of hollered his old head off, but I never answered. Didn't want him breaking up my fishing that day.

"You see, I didn't know what he wanted. Never did know till I heard him and Amos French had gone out West and it was me he wanted in the first place."

There was a sudden silence then, a little eddy of silence that curled around Dinah Patrick as she got out of her father's car and came toward the store.

You stopped talking when Dinah appeared on the scene. It was something automatic. You saw the old man and the old lady crawling out after her. No, you didn't really see them; you just sensed them. You were too busy watching Dinah and hoping she'd smile at you.

When she did, you saw the thistle blue of the eyes and the sweet curve of her lips that were the color of ripe cherries.

JIM BEDE sprang to his feet, hat in hand, and waited with a quiet, pathetic eagerness. Dinah spoke cheerily to the other men and shook hands with old man Garvey. It seemed she wouldn't speak to Jim at all; then she appeared to remember him and said, "'Lo, Jim."

But Jim Bede might have been a jarhead mule or a potlicker hound for all the feeling she put into her voice.

He heard the whisper of her dress as she followed her mother and father into Branch Tenbow's store. The other men glanced significantly at each other and on Ranse Perry's face at least there was a sly, sort of slimy look. Jim dropped back into his chair.

He recalled in every forlorn detail that night last summer. Oh, it was a wonderful night, sort of blue-black, with the stars having sense enough to mark time while a big old yellow moon took care of the world.

He finished dressing for the dance and drew the pint out of the kitchen safe. It was good liquor from the ABC store and he felt so fine that he wanted to feel a little finer. But he put the bottle back unopened, because Dinah wouldn't like it if he had a drink before taking her to the dance.

Oh, his other bad luck hadn't been a circumstance. This was the time fate really tried itself. This was when fate kicked him down and held him down.

Dinah wore a blue dress that matched her eyes. After a while he found nerve enough to try driving with one hand. It worked. Her left hand nestled in his right like a little white kitten. First it trembled, quivered, as a bird does when you catch it. Lord, that was a feeling! To know that she was a little afraid of him yet trusted him!

He began to tell her how it seemed that luck had finally moved over on his side of the fence, how his crops were growing like the devil beating tanbark, how this fall he'd have money in the bank.

He threw out little hints. Mentioned improvements he intended for the house. Said there was no reason under the sun there couldn't be some flowers in his front yard. And Dinah said, no, there wasn't a reason under the sun.

Then they were at the dance and he'd danced only once with Dinah when Burk Ames got into an argument with that Fluvanna fellow. Burk was tight. Jim told Dinah he guessed he'd better get him out of there and take him home before there was trouble. He felt like a million when her eyes admitted that she hated to lose him for a minute.

"I'll be back before a cat can wink her eye," Jim told Dinah.

But he hadn't reckoned on Burk Ames. It took him half an hour to get Burk into the car. Then they drove down the road and Burk wanted to go back and have it out with the Fluvanna man. When Jim wouldn't oblige him, he snatched the keys out of the switch and hurled them away.

It took Jim fifty minutes to find them. By now his patience was drawing thin, but Burk Ames was a friend of his and you had to humor a drunk.

"Wait till tomorrow," he pleaded. "Then if you still feel the same way, I'll go with you to see this fellow."

"Want to go now."

"Well, you ain't going now."

"Who says I ain't?"

Gosh, he struggled with Burk that night. Literally struggled. That was when the cork came out of Burk's bottle and the whisky spewed over Jim's coat and brand-new shirt setting up a stink you could smell clear to Bremo. But finally he conquered. Finally he got Burk Ames home, uncorked him, and poured him into bed.

Returning to the dance, three hours exactly to the minute after he'd left it, he found that Dinah had got somebody to take her home. And Sam Giffen, that oily little snake of a man, laughed at Jim. It made Jim Bede boiling mad and he lit out for Dinah's house. A light burned in the parlor. She'd known, then, that he'd come.

He walked into the parlor and there she sat, still in her dancing finery, a slender, humiliated little figure whose eyes nevertheless blazed furiously. It gave him the shivers, the freezing way she said, "You better have a good reason, Jim Bede!"

"I sure have. Lord, the time I had with Burk! But I couldn't leave him, honey. I couldn't let him go back and— Gosh, there'd have been real trouble if—"

But she was on her feet and suddenly sniffing, and her eyes flew wide. "Jim Bede, you went out and got drunk with him. Your eyes are shining like two moons and I can smell the liquor clear over here."

He shouted that his eyes glittered because he'd been mad about her leaving the dance and that the smell came from the liquor spilled on him. Maybe she was too mad to understand; maybe she heard and thought he was a liar. Anyway, she went bouncing up the stairs and out of his life.

Driving home with nothing but his heartbreak for company, he realized that luck had played with him for years just to set him up for this final and complete licking. He felt like crying, but grown men didn't cry. He felt like getting the pint out of the kitchen safe and draining the last drop, but he didn't do that, either.

DINAH PATRICK came out of the store. Jim Bede rose to his feet. He knew he was making a target of himself

for those other men to snipe at for many a day to come, but he didn't care. He had the handy courage of a pessimist who knows he'll be licked but takes the plunge anyway. Then, too, he was desperate.

"Dinah"—he didn't whisper it, either, but said it loud enough for all to hear—"Dinah, will you let me take you home?"

She clipped off her words like a woman snipping unwanted flowers with a pair of scissors: "Thanks, Jim, but I wouldn't put you to that trouble. I'll ride home with mom and pop."

Jim spoke clearly and with a bitter gravity: "You know it wouldn't be any trouble."

Dinah was gone in the car with her mom and pop. They turned into a side road and kicked up a whirling spasm of dust. Some of the dust seemed to float all the way back to Tenbow's store and get into Jim Bede's eyes. He groped for his chair, but he didn't sit down. Instead he snapped himself erect.

"What'd you say?"

Ranse Perry wasn't one to back down. "I said she was a fancy little piece of goods and I didn't blame you for trying, but seemed to me you'd get it through your head you couldn't do any good there."

Old man Sawmill Garvey had Jim around the waist and Luke Kenny was clamped to his right arm. The Wester brothers held Rance Perry. And Branch Tenbow ran out of the store with an ax-helve in his hand shouting there'd be no trouble at his place.

"You get in your car, Ranse, and get on home. Jim Bede, you wait here till he's gone."

"Turn us loose," Jim said. "Turn me loose, old man!"

Garvey said to Ranse Perry, "Maybe this'll teach you to keep your rotten mouth shut. Go on. Do like Tenbow says."

Jim Bede shouted after him, "We'll meet some time, Perry, when we ain't got so much company. Remember that, Perry. You'll settle for this next time I—"

"Shut your fool mouth," said Sawmill Garvey.

He sat on the store porch in utter silence for a while. Around him he heard the soft movement of jaws caressing plug tobacco and the liquid sound of ejections.

Forlorn, he lingered there, not yet trusting himself to leave. Inwardly reviling himself a little. Once more Rance Perry had got him steamed up and talking about his troubles. Hell, folks didn't care about another man's bad breaks. He knew he'd had them; but still, folks didn't care.

But Perry had never gone as far as he had today. Next time he saw Perry—

"You cooled off now, Jim?"

"No, I ain't cooled off, Tenbow."

"Well, it's high time you did. Get in your old car and move on home. And the next time you come here—"

"Go to hell," Jim told him, and slid off the porch.

But he still didn't trust himself to go home, with Ranse Perry's place just over the line fence. He drove a while out the Court House road, and he parked long enough to get his feelings into something resembling order. Then he turned the car and headed home.

The sun was going down, red and fiery. He came first to Perry's place and he put on speed and went in a hurry till the line fence was passed. At a bend he met that dark and oily little man, Sam Giffen, walking along the road.

But he didn't stop to pass the time of day. Somehow Giffen always made him think of a snake. It occurred to him, however, that for once he and slimy little Giffen had something in common. Both of them had had trouble with Ranse Perry.

JIM BEDE drove into his yard and slid out of the car. In the distance his withered corn begged limply for rain. Jim glanced at the cloudless sky and drew his lips tightly together.

Did no good at all to cuss your luck, but it was sure a relief sometimes. Get busy about the chores now. Cook your supper and eat it. Read the paper till you get drowsy and fall into the bed.

Arriving at the barn, he found that

the hogs had located another weak spot in the fence. He went after them, chased them back into the hog lot, and mended the fence. The chicken yard disclosed the information that hawks had appropriated a couple of his fryers.

"Durn the dratted luck," said Jim Bede.

"Gone to talking to yourself?" a voice inquired.

Looking up, Jim saw Sam Giffen leaning against the fence. To see Giffen leaning there nonchalantly fed more fuel to his general dissatisfaction with life.

"What you want?" he demanded.

"Why, not a thing, Jim, not a thing. Can't I stop by to pass the time of day?"

"I ain't in the humor for passing the time of day. You and me never did gee horses and it's too late to try now."

"You're still riled about the trouble with Perry."

"Who told you that?"

"Oh, I was up at the Crossroads and Tenbow, he told me."

"It any of your business?"

"Not a bit, Jim, not a bit." Giffen moved away, shrugging his thin, angular shoulders.

Jim guessed that maybe he shouldn't have been so rough with Giffen. But he hated a thief and Giffen was a thief. Hadn't Ranse Perry caught him stealing shotes and had him sent to jail for a spell?

Night fell before he could finish the chores and he went to the house for his flashlight. But of course, his luck being what it was, he couldn't find it. Seemed he could remember leaving it on the railing of the back porch, but it wasn't there now. He found a lantern and lit it and attended to the remainder of the chores.

Then, with those duties finished, he stood a long minute in the back yard gazing across the dark fields. Some of his resentment against the order of things drifted out of him. He drew a long breath and tasted the fresh, sweet air, cool now after the day's insufferable heat.

Nice little place the old man had left him here. Mighty nice little place. With just an even break he could do wonders here. If—well, if things hadn't turned out as they had with Dinah last summer, the whole outlook would be different.

Somehow she was a symbol to him. He'd thought of her as his luck. With Dinah by his side, Lord, what couldn't a man do!

HE WAS asleep and yet he wasn't asleep. Anyway, he knew that something was wrong. He sprang out of bed. Something wrong down at the barn. Maybe a horse had the colic. No. He saw what it was now. Saw the angry glare against the sky.

Diving into his clothes, he thought: let it burn. Let his whole blamed place burn. But he couldn't make it stick. When a neighbor was in trouble, you forgot your feuds.

The barn was gone when Jim arrived breathless. Ranse Perry's fine new barn. The flames still chewed away at some of the stouter timbers, but the damage was past recall. Jim caught the sickening smell of roasting horseflesh.

He pushed through the crowd and wondered why folks fell back so suddenly for him. Ranse Perry stood with the deputy sheriff. Jim halted before them.

"Forget about this afternoon, Ranse. God, I'm sorry this had to happen to you! Is there anything I can—"

Ranse Perry gave the effect of shooting bullets between his teeth instead of words: "So you're sorry! So you want to forget this afternoon!" And then: "This belong to you, Bede?"

Afterward he figured that he must have acted as dumb as ever they come. He said, "Yeh. Sure. That's my flashlight. Thanks, Ranse. Where'd you find it?"

"I thought so. It's got your initials, J.L.B., scratched on it. We found it laying down there where the fire was started."

Later he could remember yelling that it he fired a man's barn he certainly wouldn't be dumb enough to leave his flashlight lying around for evidence.

It didn't work. The deputy's fingers bit into his arm. He tried foolishly to wrench free and old Luke Kenny seized his

other arm. There was something pretty awful in Kenny's eyes.

And it was in old Sawmill Garvey's eyes, too. At the store they'd been for him against Ranse Perry. Now they'd crossed to the other side of the fence. Their eyes were bleak and bitter. Old Garvey summed up the general feeling.

"I knowed you hated him, Jim, but, before God, I never thought you was low enough to do this."

The deputy's voice took up the slack left after Sawmill Garvey's indictment. "Setting fire to a man's buildings. They call it arson and it's pretty damn serious. Let's we go, Jim."

IT WAS sunlight and Sunday, and outside folks were going to church. He saw a girl in a blue dress and a bright new hat. He saw a young fellow sidle up to her and take her arm as he used to take Dinah's. Then they passed out of his sight.

"Young lady to see you," said the jailer.

Dinah didn't cringe like a visitor come to see a criminal. She put her two feet down solidly and she held her head high. He reckoned that only Dinah and queens walked that way. Or maybe only Dinah.

It seemed strange to him that even more important than her coming to see him was the fact that he wanted her to believe in him. He'd come instantly to his feet; now, erect but trembling, he cried, "You don't think I did it, Dinah?"

"No. But—tell me."

"I never did it. I may be a fool most of the time—but I wouldn't sneak around in the dark and set fire to a man's buildings. I had trouble with him, yeh, but—"

"I—know about the trouble. It was something—something he said about—me." She didn't wilt, she didn't cry. She just came to him and put both hands upon his shoulders. "Thank you, Jim Bede. I—I've wanted to make up for a long time, but I—"

"You were just a little too proud," he said for her. "I—well, I understand."

"I never did quit loving you, Jim." Her voice rose frantically at last.

"But, oh, Jim, they're going to send you to prison. Not a soul but me believes you didn't do it, after what happened at the store. I know! I've talked with folks. My own pop, Mr. Garvey and Mr. Kenny. And others. They—they say you haven't got a chance, Jim."

"Giffen did it," Jim said. "Paying Ranse Perry back for sending him to jail that time. Giffen heard about our trouble at the store. He come by my place, seen my flashlight, and swiped it.

"I told that to the sheriff. He didn't believe me, but he did ask questions of Giffen. And that polecat stood up on his two legs and swore he'd not been near my place all day. He sure played me for a sucker. It's just my luck to be innocent and not be able to prove it."

"You—you think, too, they're going to—"

"Yeh. I'm going to prison for—for arson. I think it so strong that if I could get out of this jail Buckingham never would see me again."

"Could you—get away?"

"I could make one hell of a try."

He felt her heart beating against his chest. He felt his arms encircling her as if they intended never to let her go. He heard the jailer's step.

SHE was gone now and the sunlight had gone with her. He sat on the bunk and wondered if the bars at the State penitentiary were any stronger than the ones in this county jail. Some men, he guessed, were born unlucky.

The jailer brought him something to eat. But Jim only pecked at it. Food! The thought of it made him sick. The sleepy-eyed jailer took the dishes away, his shuffling steps more like muffled echoes than current sounds. Jim lay on the bunk and watched the afternoon die.

In no time at all, it seemed, shadows came creeping out of the flat, hot land around him. The jailer brought his supper and he managed to make way with part of it. Darkness had fallen by the time he finished the meal. The jailer yawned.

rubbed his drowsy eyes, muttered, "Good night," and left Jim Bede alone.

Jim lay in darkness, staring at a thin moon. His old dollar watch ticked the minutes away. How many it disposed of, he didn't know; knew only that suddenly cautious footsteps whispered outside the cell and a key turned in the lock. Cat-footed, he slid to the door and into Dinah Patrick's arms.

"He was asleep with his head on his arms and the keys lying on the table. Quick! Quick, Jim!"

She locked the door and Jim Bede held her to him for one brief moment; then he was out of the jail and running lightly across a dark vacant lot. Back there Dinah would be softly replacing the keys and tip-toeing past the sleeping jailer.

She had her father's car and she'd get home with no one being the wiser. She was safe and now it was up to him to make himself safe. He gained the edge of the woodland, found an old sawmill road, and trotted down it.

With luck his escape would go undiscovered till morning. By then he would have put many miles between himself and Buckingham. Thank the Lord, his car tank was full. He'd go home across country, get into the car, and light out for freedom. He'd hide the car in the deep woods near the railroad, where days might pass before it was found, and then he'd hop a westbound freight.

A lump rose in his throat as he jogged through the silent gloom of the woods. It was the only way. It meant leaving Dinah and it meant a future filled with fear and foreboding. But still, it was the only way.

On and on he trotted through the woods. Then with a dismayed suddenness he halted and swore with all the outraged feeling he could muster. Wasn't it just his confounded luck that now, when every minute counted, he'd had to get off the course?

He'd intended cutting straight across Ranse Perry's place. But he'd overshot the mark and was now west of his own farm as well as Perry's. Well, a direct line was what he wanted, and a direct line would lead him through Giffen's.

He whirled abruptly and stepped up his pace from a trot to a genuine run.

Skirting Giffen's ramshackle outbuildings, he cut a straight line across the weedy yard. To his surprise a light still burned in Giffen's kitchen. Why he did it, he was never able to explain even to himself, but he halted and stood gazing at Giffen yonder in the kitchen.

The breath sucked and gurgled in his throat. He crept closer, so close that he was able to catch every deft movement of Giffen's hands as he oiled and polished a saddle by the flickering glow of a kerosene lamp.

Then he whirled once more, hit first a lope then a gallop, and raced for his own place. The old car groaned and complained, but he only trod harder on the accelerator.

When he burst into the sheriff's home at the Court House he looked more or less like a wild man, and the sheriff was not to be blamed for his momentary show of fright.

"H-how'd you get out of jail, Jim Bede?"

"How I got out is my own business. I'm out. Sure, I was aiming to skip the country, but something changed my mind."

"I'm taking you straight back to—"

"You ain't taking me anywhere, old man. I'm taking you."

It was only a few minutes later that he was saying to Giffen, "All right, where'd you hide it when you heard us come in the yard? I'm talking about Ranse Perry's saddle."

They found the saddle stowed away in the bottom of the cupboard, and Jim Bede explained a little wearily for the befuddled sheriff's benefit:

"Giffen's a thief at heart all the time. Him having the saddle proves he was in Perry's barn, don't it? He steals my flashlight to leave as evidence against me. When he's ready to start his fire he gets to thinking what a shame it's going to be for Ranse Perry's fine saddle to burn up.

"Course he can't never show the saddle around here, or folks would recognize it, but maybe he can sneak it out some time and sell it some place away from here. He's a born thief and he just can't resist stealing that saddle before he starts his fire. Good grief, Sheriff, it couldn't be no plainer than that!"

MR. AND Mrs. James Bede were homeward bound after the wedding. The old car had a happy if raucous song in its cylinders. The bride beamed. The groom grinned. And then, accompanied by much bumping, rattling, and swerving, a tire went flat.

Jim Bede, having reluctantly crawled out, stood in the roadway and dismally surveyed the damage.

"Wouldn't it," he appealed to the new Mrs. Bede, "be just my luck to have a flat right now?"

His wife stirred and a peculiar gleam flashed in her eyes. But still, he wasn't prepared for the outburst that followed on the heels of his querulous complaint.

In the interval that he stood listening to her he realized that he was no longer Jim Bede, bachelor-at-large. In short he came to understand that a change had entered his life.

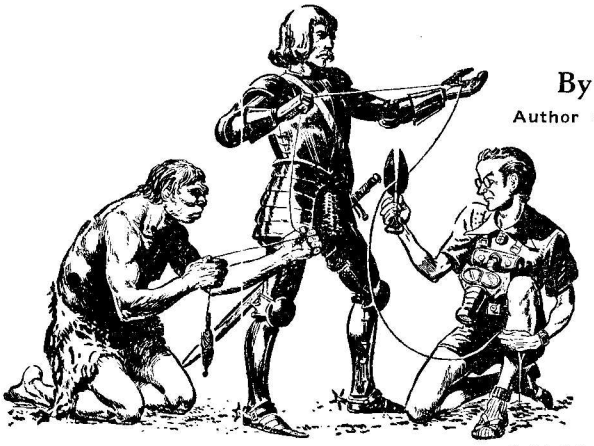
The bride said, "You make me sick, Jim Bede! Your luck! You're the luckiest man alive. I guess it was bad luck made the jailer go to sleep and let me steal the keys. And bad luck that got you lost in the woods so you had to go through Giffen's place. And some more bad luck that you happened to pass his house just when he was polishing that saddle. And maybe it's bad luck that you've got me for your wife!"

"Honey," he said miserably.

"Jim Bede, if ever I hear you bellyache again about your luck I'm going home and not come back. Do you understand, Jim?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered promptly.

The Higher They Fly



An Argosy Oddity

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "The Kiss of the Cobra," "Savage Quest," etc.

ABOVE the entrance, a long strip of white canvas blazoned forth its greeting in huge red-and-blue letters:

WELCOME TO THE
BRUNO-BABCOCK CIRCUS
GREATEST SHOW
ON EARTH!

It was a hot night, sultry with gathering storm; but every face in the drifting, slow-footed crowd seemed to be molded in lines of laughing good humor. Only the perspiring faces of barkers and pitchmen looked worn and weary, fighting the noisy bedlam of the midway with their tireless spiels.

Cheek by jowl the booths of the B. & B. midway flaunted their gaudy posters: *Nada the Snake-girl—The Rubber-man—Astro the Star-reader — Hoop-la — The Wheel of Fortune*—and then *Stoney's Shooting Gallery.*

Here little "Professor" Kranzell stood at the long wooden counter, leveled a nickel-plated pistol and blazed away at the parade of white porcelain ducks running past in endless procession.

"No, no, Professor," Stoney said, shaking his head. "That's not the way to hold a gun. Not so stiff—and keep your elbow bent."

"It jerks when it goes off," Kranzell said.

"Jerks? Why, that's only a .22, Professor. What'd you do if it was a real man-size gun—a .45, say? It'd kick you head over heels."

"I'll try again," Kranzell answered, staring earnestly at the moving targets.

Stoney's good-natured grin revealed a gold tooth. "What's the big idea, Professor—gettin' yourself set to bump somebody off?"

Kranzell looked startled, and his lips moved in a nervous smile. "I guess I'd have to do better than this, Stoney."

"I'll say! You been blazin' away now for a week, and ain't hit nothin' yet. I guess a gun ain't your kind of weapon, Professor. . . . Pretty near time for your show, ain't it?"

Kranzell nodded regretfully and put down the pistol. The hour he hated was at hand—the hour to put on his scarlet hussar's jacket and moth-eaten kepi and bully sounds that were supposed to resemble music from the motley circus crew who doubled in brass.

"And they call it a band!" he muttered. "The Bruno-Babcock Band! Rousties and shills! God in Heaven, some day I'll throw away my baton and lead them with a bull-whip!"

Twice a day it was his duty to mount the empty beer-case which served as podium and wave his black stick over the blaring farce—sickened to his very soul, for Kranzell was a musician, a real musi-

cian who had once had symphony ambitions.

"The dead dream!" he thought bitterly, and his thin, dark face grew harder as he glanced down at the empty sleeve, with the cuff sewn inside his coat pocket.

To only one person in the whole Bruno-Babcock outfit had he confided the full tragedy of that empty sleeve: to Mimi, of the Flying Cantalvos. And now Mimi was lying alone in a far-away hospital, with a broken back, and Kranzell wandered the garish midway like a lost soul.

There were four in the Cantalvo act: Ricardo, Luis, Jorge and Mimi. Professor Kranzell loved Mimi—Mimi who was Ricardo's wife. He worshiped her, silently, humbly, asking nothing of life but the benediction of her presence.

As he walked toward the unlighted entrance to the main tent, Mimi's face smiled at him from a poster of the Flying Cantalvos—a gay and tender smile that somehow managed to pierce the crude coloring.

"Please, God, let her live!" Kranzell breathed, as if the gaudy three-sheet were a shrine. "Send her back—alive and well! She is all I have left!"

INSIDE the big tent, final preparations were under way for the evening show. A clean-up squad was smoothing over the ring and the circular track. Spotlights swung jerkily here and there over the banked tiers of empty wooden seats. The steam calliope played fitfully in trial runs; a lion roared sullenly from the brown shadows.

"Hi-yah, Professor!" A tall girl, full-figured, moved past him toward the ring, a Spanish-striped robe over spangled tights—Gerta Brocken, who had taken Mimi's place. She had a bold eye and a wide, hard smile.

"Hello, Gerta," Kranzell replied, and watched her cross the ring to the blond Hercules who was busy testing the struts and guy-wires of a high trapeze—Ricardo Cantalvo, whose death-defying triple somersault was the smash finale of the famous act.

Ricardo smiled and said something to Gerta as she approached; and Kranzell heard her loud, brassy laugh as he moved on toward the dressing room. Larry Starke, the animal trainer, was already there, handsome in his white doeskin uniform with the gold braid and double row of medals. Pawnshop medals.

"Heard the news, Professor?" Larry's usually laughing face was grave. "Mimi died this afternoon. Poor little Mimi! God rest her soul for a sweet kid."

Kranzell swallowed once, convulsively, and slumped down in a folding chair. He fumbled out a cigarette and lit it—quite skilfully, for a one-armed man.

"Keep it under your hat, though, Professor. Foghorn Wallace opened the telegram when it came. He's not gonna give it to Ricardo till after the show. When a guy's swingin' out on one of those triple somersaults, he's gotta keep his mind on his work."

"Yes," Kranzell said mechanically. His voice sounded strange and far away to his own ears.

"It was lucky that Gerta Brocken turned up at Ogdensburg," Larry went on. "She's not in Mimi's class but maybe Ricardo'll keep her in the act. They seem to get on together fine."

"Yes," Kranzell said again.

"Well, that's the breaks, Professor. Ricardo's as careful a guy as I've ever seen. Every show he's out there beforehand, testing everything—still it didn't save Mimi. I hear he lost his first wife the same way. You'd think a guy would've cut out that part of his routine, wouldn't you?"

"His first wife?" Kranzell echoed.

"Yeah." Larry shrugged. "I guess Ricardo's got no nerves. But some day he'll take his fall, like the rest of 'em. We're all crazy in this business. Other people manage to get their bread and butter without riskin' their necks twice a day for it. You're the only smart one, Professor—worst that can happen to you is a charley-horse from wavin' that little black stick!"

Larry slipped his gun into the patent leather holster and pulled a black bottle

from his trunk. "I need a bracer tonight. My cats are actin' mean. Storm in the air always makes 'em jittery. If my foot slips, they'll have *me* jumpin' through the hoops!"

Kranzell sat staring at the brown canvas wall after Larry went out, oblivious to time until he heard Foghorn Wallace's bellowing call from the barker's stand: "The big show, ladeez and gents! This way to the big show! Hurry—hurry—hurreeeee!"

THE little man picked up his baton and went out to face the noisy arena. Music and lights; laughter and applause. Spangles, bunting and tinsel. Acrobats and jugglers—the King of the Slack-wire—the Queen of Equestriennes. Peanuts, lemonade and popcorn. Clowns and monkeys and elephants. But no Mimi. . . .

Kranzell stared out bitterly at the sea of faces. What did they care if the girl in tights were Gerta or Mimi—so long as the big show went on?

They could not see beneath the surface: the raw wood under the gay bunting, the hobnailed shoes and greasy pants below the braided velvet jackets of his hacksaw musicians. Who cared that his own soul hungered for Tchaikovsky and Ravel while he dragged these fumbling tune-butchers through *Hail! Hail!* and *The Skaters' Waltz?*

. . . "Ready with Number 16!" Kranzell calls to his men; and *Tiger Rag* greets Larry Starke for his exit from the wild animals' lair. Larry, smiling and bowing and waving his hand, striding across the ring like a conquering hero until he is in the shadow of the aisle, where his shoulders droop and he wipes the perspiration from his forehead.

More applause now, rippling out in a rising tide for the Flying Cantalvos. Automatically Kranzell changes the tempo and tones down the brasses. The Cantalvos work together briskly, smooth and efficient as machines. Luis and Jorge and Ricardo.

Now Ricardo is taking Gerta through a bite-spin. Hanging by her teeth, Gerta whirls in mid-air, weaving an intricate pattern with lacy wings while colored spotlights strike steely gleams from her spangles and sequins.

There is a sudden tense silence in the crowd, for many present have read how Mimi Cantalvo fell and broke her back when one of those steel links parted.

Kranzell remembers, too. He remembers how Mimi's face was white that night as she stood beside Ricardo on the high platform. She had looked over toward him once—her hand lifting in an odd gesture, as if she knew something was about to happen.

And Kranzell had known something, too, but its grim significance came to him only after Mimi lay on the ground below, a twisted, broken body.

He remembered one night when Ricardo had phoned long-distance, phoning someone he called Gerta—and Ricardo's guarded words: "Don't ask any more questions now. Just wait, and do as I say. Pick up the circus at Ogdensburg, but don't let on that you know me. You'll know why —later."

Ricardo Cantalvo was a murderer—a cunning, cold-blooded killer! No one else knew—no one else suspected. It was a secret shared only by this big blond giant with eyes like hard blue porcelain, and the thin little Professor with the empty sleeve.

NOW the music ends in a crashing chord, and the ringmaster stands forth in silk hat, tails, and varnished boots.

"Ladeeez an' gentlemen: tonight, for your entertainment and pleasure, the world-renowned Ricardo Cantalvo will risk life and limb in his death-defying triple somersault on the high trapeze! The most difficult—the most daring and sensational acrobatic feat of all time! If he misses—he dies! Ladeez an' gentlemen: Ricardo Cantalvo!"

The spotlight shifts to Ricardo, bowing to right and left at the applause. Kranzell's men strike up a quick-step; the safety net is dismantled and taken away. Luis and Jorge are ready and waiting on their platforms, hanging head downward.

Ricardo carefully wipes his hands on a silk handkerchief and tosses it to the smiling Gerta. He catches a flying ring and swarms upward with the ease of a monkey. For a moment he stands erect on his high perch, looking down at the little man with one arm—a little man he could break across his knee like a stick of kindling.

And Kranzell stares up at him, holding the baton as if it were a sword. He makes an odd gesture with that little black stick and smiles, and suddenly Ricardo's face is white—as white as Mimi's on that fateful night.

"Ready!" Kranzell points his baton at the drummer and nods. A brisk ruffle on the snare-drum, a ruffle and roll, picking up speed, growing louder as Ricardo swings in a widening arc from Luis' hands.

The drummer keeps his eyes glued on Kranzell—Kranzell watches Ricardo, guiding the rolling rhythm of the drum with his little black stick. Louder and louder the beat of the drum, higher and higher the arc of the swinging man.

Does it occur to Ricardo that his life is in the hand of that little man—that his life depends on the rolling rhythm paced by the little black stick? . . .

DOWN swoops the baton. The drummer drops the snare and comes in with booming crashes on the foot-bass: *roomp! roomp! roomp!* Ricardo is flying through the air, turning over and over—once—twice—three times—

The cymbals meet with a shivering crash—a split second ahead of the gasping hiss of breath caught by a thousand throats, and the long, concerted groan wrung unconsciously from the spectators of an unforeseen tragedy. Kranzell has heard that sound before—when Mimi fell—

Ricardo is falling! He has missed Jorge's frantic clutch by an inch. For a moment he seems to hang suspended in mid-air, defying the pull of gravity; then he falls—down—down—down—

A woman's shrill scream goes up like a rocket, touching off another—a dozen—a hundred. The drummer leaps to his feet, white-faced, staring with bulging eyes. "My God! Was it our fault, Professor? Were we off with the timing?"

His voice chokes off, and he is silent; but in the tent the turmoil becomes more terrible.

Professor Kranzell is standing there, the only calm man in all that frenzied bedlam. Little Kranzell, five feet one, with his empty sleeve and his empty heart.

"Sit down!" Kranzell calmly commands the frightened drummer. "Our timing was perfect!" He raps sharply with his black baton. "Music, boys! We've got to quiet this crowd! Play Number seven—and play it *Loud!*"

Unfair and Warmer

IT'S GETTING to the point where there's nothing about us they can't measure. Those scientists, of course: they're at it again.

This time they're fiddling around with the human emotions, and doing it by temperature.

And finger temperatures, at that. The American Psychological Association, in convention assembled, was told recently how a couple of New York doctors had probed the feelings of their psychiatric patients by going at their hands with a thermometer.

Are you tense, anxious, fighting battles with yourself? Your fingers get cold, may drop twenty-three degrees Fahrenheit in one hour. Angry, afraid, depressed, tickled pink about something? Look for a drop of only about seven degrees.

In love, thinking of marriage? Ah—then the fingers turn warmer.

—*Robin Townley*

Touchdown Broadway

The Typhoon was going places, and he was making football history

By JUDSON P. PHILIPS

JERRY LANNING'S pro football club is heading for the rocks simply because it has no box-office appeal. Unless the Americans start pulling crowds, Jerry will have to turn the team over to Alfred Saxe, Broadway gangster, who holds a heavy mortgage. Moreover, Lanning's financial collapse will make it impossible for him to marry the lovely Valerie Jones.

Duke Maguire, ex-sports writer, ex-alcoholic (who is telling the story) convinces Lanning that what his team needs is a big name, an All American celebrity. So Duke, Jerry and Val Jones search out Roy Rivers, the greatest halfback in the country; and Rivers, a strange tight-lipped boy, agrees to sign—for $17,432.67! But the celebrated Texas Typhoon, turns out to be a colossal fizzle in his first game. Only a few people, like Duke Maguire, realize that Rivers himself is not to blame; that his team-mates are deliberately making him look bad.

Jerry prepares to admit defeat.

IN A bar Duke Maguire happens to overhear Alfred Saxe and Abe Feldman, Jerry Lanning's publicity man, drinking to their mutual success. Then Duke gets the whole picture: Feldman is doublecrossing Lanning, undermining the team, so that Saxe can get control. Later, confronted by Maguire, Szymanski, the Americans' captain, admits that the players are sore because Rivers is drawing such a huge salary. He admits, too, that Abe Feldman stirred them up to give Rivers the works. . . .

The first installment of this three-point serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for November 4

CHAPTER X

BOURBON FOR BABY

WHEN I left the Edgemont I had all I needed to expose the whole setup to Jerry. He'd know what he wanted to do about Feldman. He'd be sore, but maybe at the same time he'd feel better knowing just what he was up against and being able to throw his weight around a little.

I took a taxi to the apartment and went whooping in as though I had just brought the good news from Ghent to Aix. Some of my exuberance departed when I saw Jerry. He was sitting in his big chair by the empty fireplace. There was a bottle of bourbon at his elbow and I could tell he'd been hitting it hard and in straight, undiluted slugs. I looked around for Val, but she wasn't there.

"Cheer up," I said. "Maybe we still got a chance. I've got some news for you."

He looked at me, and I saw that cold, angry glitter in his eyes. "I ought to take you down in the alley," he said, kind of slow, "and give you the going over of a lifetime. I ought to kick you out of here and all the way downstairs. I ought to have left you lying there in the sawdust when the Zipper was clipping you. I ought—"

"Whoa!" I said. I guess I sounded as astonished as I felt. "What the hell's eating you, Jerry?"

"It would seem," he said bitterly, "that the consensus of opinion around here is that I don't know how to handle my own affairs."

I stared at him, and then I said slowly: "Are you going to dish this out in puzzle form or will you start at the beginning and tell me what's wrong?"

He threw the stub of his cigarette into the fireplace with an almost savage gesture. "Perhaps," he said, "my mind is failing me. Perhaps I am mistaken in believing that you and I talked over the possibility of going to Rivers and asking him to break his contract. Perhaps I am just dreaming when I think that I said I didn't want any part of that. Perhaps I was drunk and just imagined I'd told you that having made a bargain I intended to stick to it."

"Oh!" I said. There wasn't much else to say, and I guess I sounded pretty sickly.

"Oh!" he said, mimicking my voice. "Maybe I'm not dimwitted. Maybe that really happened!"

"It happened," I said.

"Then perhaps you will explain to me, my fine feathered friend, just what the hell you thought you were doing when you persuaded Val to go with you to see Rivers to do just exactly what I told you I didn't want you to do?"

I dropped into the chair across from him and lit a cigarette of my own. This would take some fast and pretty talking. "I thought we were doing you a favor," I said. "You weren't going back on any bargain. We simply pointed out to Rivers how he could be a good guy. He wouldn't or couldn't see it our way."

"That's just fine," Jerry said. "That's just dandy." He was pretty drunk, talking loud.

"Well, what harm is there in it?"

He gave me a look that must have been reserved for his worst enemy. "I'll tell you what harm there is in it, wise guy! Val's walked out on me. That's what harm there is in it."

I stared at him blankly. "Val's done *what?*"

"Walked out on me! *Walked out on me!*" he shouted. "Don't you understand English?"

"You're tight," I said.

"Sure I'm tight. What would I do, bolster myself up with a glass of milk after the swellest girl in the world gives me the gate?"

I shook my head. "I guess you're nuts," I said. "You go to bed and have a good sleep. You'll feel better in the morning and everything will make sense then."

That wasn't the right tone to take, I realized at once.

"Oh, sure, everything will make sense,"

he snapped. "Maybe you think I'm just talking for my health now. I tell you Val's gone!"

I began to get the idea that he meant it. "What did she say?" I asked. I was sort of gaping at him.

"She came back here," Jerry said, "and told me of the brilliant brain-wave you and she had had. She told me how you and she had practically begged Rivers to do me a favor. I don't want any favors from him! Do you get that, Duke? Not from him—not from anyone."

"Okay," I said, "you don't have to have any favors. You didn't get any, anyhow. So what?"

He waited a minute, as if he didn't want to say it.

"So I told Val it was none of her damn business and she walked out on me!" His voice sounded hollow.

"SHE'LL come back," I said. But I was beginning to feel a little sore. That kind of stiff-necked pride is a pain. Val and I had only tried to help.

"Not Val," he said. "When she walks out she walks out." His eyes were dull, and it wasn't just from drinking.

"She loves you," I said. "She'll come back."

He laughed, and it wasn't pleasant to hear. "I've kept her waiting a year until I made good—till I could marry her in style. Now I'm finished and she's walked out." He poured himself a stiff shot of whisky and tossed it off at a gulp.

I leaned forward and tapped his knee with my finger. "You don't know Val if you think she'd give you the air. She's just gone away until you start to make sense. She'll be back. Meanwhile you better pull yourself together. I've got news for you that may make a difference."

"News?"

"Yeah," I said. "I found out just why that outfit of yours turned against Rivers and gave him the business. I figured all along someone had touched 'em off. Well, now I know who it was."

Jerry passed a hand over his eyes. "You mean someone deliberately put them up to it?"

"That's what I mean," I said. He was dying down now; he could listen.

He drew a deep breath. "Who?" he asked.

"Your little pal and fellow worker, Sam Feldman," I said.

He looked at me for a second and then laughed. "You're crazy."

"Sure, I'm crazy," I said. "But I saw him having a drink with Saxe and Collins—drinking to their success. So I hot-footed it around to the Egdemont and had a chat with Szymanski. He let the cat out of the bag. Feldman's responsible. Feldman isn't working for you, Jerry; he's working for Saxe. He's put the double X on you."

"Feldman!" Jerry said. "Why I'll break his slimy little neck." He got unsteadily to his feet. He was ready to go to town, providing he could keep upright.

"You won't do anything about it tonight," I said. This time *I'm* the doctor. You're going to bed and sleep and stop worrying. Val'll be back, and in the morning we'll dope out the fanciest way to rub Feldman's nose in it. Right now you're not in shape to think straight about anything."

He looked at me uncertainly for a minute and then he smiled a wry little smile. "This is a laugh," he said, "you taking care of me."

"I'll take time off with my prayers to have the laugh," I said. "Meanwhile you got to snap out of it and be ready to go to the wars tomorrow."

He was pretty docile then, and I got him to bed without any trouble. I hung around a while until I heard him breathing deep and even; then I ducked out.

I went straight to Val's apartment to tell her what I'd learned and find out what had really happened between her and Jerry. But she wasn't there.

"She came in about an hour ago," the doorman told me, "and then went out again, carrying a suitcase. She said she didn't know when she'd be back."

I felt suddenly cold inside me. Maybe she really had walked out. I didn't like to think that. I just didn't like to think it.

CHAPTER XI

TROUBLE IS WHAT I SELL

NOT finding Val and with that sinking feeling in my stomach, I guess I didn't use my head. The one thing I wanted at that minute was action and, without either Jerry or Val to discuss things with, I went off half-cocked.

In a cigar store I looked up San Feldman's address in the telephone book. He lived in a hotel near Times Square where he had his own private telephone because publicity was his business and he was supposed to be on tap if anyone wanted him. Well, I wanted him

I taxied to the hotel, got his room number from the bell captain, acting as though Feldman was expecting me, and went upstairs without announcing myself. Feldman opened the door to me as if he was waiting for someone. His face clouded over when he saw me. I couldn't tell from his beady black eyes whether he was just sore or whether he was a bit afraid.

"Hello, rat," I said.

"I'm sorry, Maguire. I can't see you now," he said. He started to close the door but I had my foot stuck in it. "Get out," he said, "or I'll send for the house detective."

"You and I are going to have a friendly chat," I said.

"I tell you I can't see you now," he said, a little shrilly. He was made of heroic stuff, all right.

I moved across the room and sat down so that I was between him and the telephone. He went over to the bureau, took a cigarette from a half-empty pack, and put it in his mouth. He left it there while he spoke.

"All right, we'll talk," he said. "Only I'll do the talking. I don't like you, Maguire. I'm getting sick of your wisecracks and your meddling. Lay off. If you don't, you'll regret it."

I grinned at him. "That would sound like a conundrum if you'd said it a couple of hours ago. I mean I would have been bewildered, you threatening me, worm! But after finding out who your friends are I suppose I ought to take it seriously."

"My friends?"

"Saxe and Zipper," I said.

The cigarette stood out from his mouth straight and stiff for a minute. Then it slowly sagged. "I know Saxe and his bodyguard," he said. "Everybody along Broadway knows them. But they're not precisely friends."

I was still grinning. "Here's to crime," I said. "May it remain as hotsy-totsy as it has been up to now!"

His beady eyes never left my face, but I thought he was doing some fast thinking. "So you were in the same bar with us."

"I got out as quickly as I could," I said, "because the air was heavy with the odor of skunk."

He lit a match and held it to his cigarette. The outlines of his face had grown hard. "Well, what about it?"

"Nothing—only I've got a new theme song for you," I said.

"A theme song?" The guy was quite cool now.

"Yeah. It's *Get Out of Town*. Heard it?"

"Yes," he said. "I've heard it."

"If I were you I'd start packing," I said, "because when Jerry Lanning gets untracked I doubt if even your own relatives will be able to identify the body."

"Does Jerry know?" he asked. He asked it casually, pleasantly for him and I was puzzled. He wasn't trying to bluff and he didn't act scared.

"Yes, he knows," I said. "And Jerry's peculiar. He doesn't like being given the works by a guy he's trusted. The more he thinks about it the less he's going to like it."

FELDMAN glanced at the clock on the bureau and then at the door. He smiled. "Maybe we better have a drink and talk this over," he said.

"Maybe not," I said. "I'm particular about my drinking companions."

Feldman shrugged. "Naturally you're sore and so is Jerry," he said. "Well, you can't blame me. In this day and age you got to play your cards the way the money lies." He looked at the clock again. "But I don't see what Jerry can do. I haven't broken any law. I haven't absconded with any funds. There isn't anything he can pin on me."

It was my turn to shrug.

"Except a couple of sharp rights to the jaw," I said.

I began to feel uncomfortable. There was something wrong. Feldman was too self-confident, too sure of himself. I'd expected him to sweat blood when he was faced with things. Instead he was taking it in his stride. It wasn't in character. Then I saw him glance at the clock once more.

"You better change your mind about the drink," he said.

I stood up. "I'm getting out," I said. He frowned. "I just wanted to tip you off to the fact that they'll be selling your remains for dog meat once Jerry gets hold of you."

"Stick around," he said. "Maybe we can make sense out of this for everyone."

I still couldn't figure what he was trying to get at.

"So long, punk,' I said. "You're just lucky that I happen to think Jerry ought to have the first crack at you."

I left him and went out to the elevator. When it got to the main floor the operator slid the gate open and I stepped out—right into the middle of Saxe and Zipper Collins. The three of us just stared at each other.

Came the dawn. The reason Feldman had been so cocky was because he'd known these two were on their way.

"Well, well, well," said the Zipper, showing his teeth. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Fancy," I said. I was suddenly rather glad I was in the lobby of the hotel instead of the corridor upstairs.

"Been to see Feldman?" Saxe asked, suavely.

"Feldman and I are like that!" I told him, crossing my fingers.

"I hope you haven't been making any trouble for yourself," the Zipper drawled. He was still working that nice smile of his.

"Trouble," I said, "I'm in training for trouble, pal. Because some day you and I are going to have it."

"I'm beginning to think there isn't any doubt of that," said the Zipper.

I nodded to him pleasantly. "You know where to find me when you get the itch."

"Oh yes, I know where to find you all right," the Zipper said. "Come on, boss." And he and Saxe went past me into the elevator.

THOUGH I'd hoped for fireworks the next morning I didn't get 'em. When Jerry called Val's apartment and found she'd really gone away he had about as much fight left in him as a damp dishrag. I'd expected him to go gunning for Feldman, but he just sat in the swivel chair behind his desk in the office and stared out the window. He looked like a guy with a bad case of shellshock. He didn't seem to have any interest, even in business.

So there we were.

I wasn't surprised when Feldman didn't show up. I didn't say anything to Jerry, but I jumped at the chance to take over the publicity job myself. Between us, Miss Miller and I got the releases ready for the papers and drew up the advertising copy.

With things different, Sunday's game would have been a natural from a publicity angle. The Badgers with George Murphy and his pals were playing a return engagement. Having lost the last two games, the Americans, instead of being a cinch for a playoff berth, had their backs to the wall. They had to take the Badgers if they were to remain contenders.

But it was pretty hard to think up inspiring copy when you knew in your heart that the boys were going to have the pants licked off them. I tried to keep mad. I

tried to think how we had to win just to keep Saxe and Co. on the anxious seat. It didn't work.

All I could think of was that Val had walked out on us—really walked out, without leaving word of any kind, without telling us where she was going. She was Jerry's girl, but I felt just as bad as if she'd been mine. I was hurt because she'd gone. I had a feeling that she'd given us the works. She should have known how Jerry felt. What if he had flown off the handle? Now was the time he needed her.

I thought surely there'd be some news from her the next day. Jerry and I didn't talk about it, but I knew from the way he made a dive for the mail Wednesday morning that he'd expected the same thing. There wasn't a peep, and that just about finished him. Whenever I asked him about some detail of the business end—how many tickets he wanted saved for himself and that sort of thing—he acted nuts.

"The hell with it," he'd say, waving me away. "Use your own judgment." Or something like that.

One day was like the next. There wasn't much activity along the ticket front. The excitement over Rivers was dead, and there wasn't any way it could be revived. Rivers had flopped and the fans didn't give a damn about him anymore.

The sports writers had given up on the Americans again—all but Jim Travers. I'd taken time off Tuesday to give him the lowdown. He was the only writer who'd tumbled to what was really going on out there on the field. I thought he ought to have the satisfaction of knowing he was right. He was burned up, but there wasn't anything he could do. However, he kept plugging the Americans, playing up Jerry and his fight for success. It was the one bright spot in a very dark outlook.

Friday night Jerry and I left for the apartment together. There was no dinner waiting for us the way there'd always been. Jerry started to fumble around with a can of salmon and managed to cut his finger with the opener. He let out a string of cuss words that would have curled your hair, and then we went out and ate hamburgers at a corner beanery.

When we got back to the apartment there was a telegram stuck under the door. Jerry made a grab for it, his face pathetically hopeful. Then he passed it to me.

"For you, Duke," he said, keeping his face turned away.

I was puzzled. I didn't know who could be wanting me. I ripped the envelope open. Then I let out a yell that must have scared everybody on the block.

"Jerry! Get a load of this. She's okay, guy. She's okay!"

He took the wire and his hands shook as he read the message.

MEET ME GRAND CENTRAL SATURDAY ELEVEN A.M. HOLD EVERYTHING. HAVE DOPE ON RIVERS. I THINK WE'RE IN. LOVE TO YOU TWO MUGS.

VAL.

The telegram had been sent from South Shrewsbury, Vermont.

Jerry looked at me and suddenly there were tears in his tired eyes. "She didn't quit on us after all, Duke," he said, unsteadily. "She didn't quit on us!"

"Who the hell ever thought she did?" I shouted.

Then we both started to laugh like a couple of maniacs.

CHAPTER XII

PERSONAL HISTORY OF A HALFBACK

JERRY went a touch coy on me the next morning. I was sure he'd be the one who went to the train to meet Val, but he wouldn't have it that way. I could see a big load was off his mind, but he was stubborn as a mule about this point.

"She sent the wire to you, Duke. She wants you," he said.

"Fooey," I said. "She wants you more than anything in the world, but she's got a little pride herself. After all you did accuse her of meddling, and she hasn't stopped apparently. You're the one that's gotto tell her she's the nuts."

Jerry looked like a shy kid of four. "You can tell her how I feel," he said. "But she

sent for you, so you're the one that's going."

Which is how I happened to be meeting another guy's girl that Saturday morning. I got to the Grand Central about a half hour ahead of time and hung around the bulletin board waiting for the dope on the train from Vermont. It came out that the train was about forty minutes late, which didn't do my disposition any good.

But they finally posted the track number on the board and I hurried over and got as close to the gate as I could. Presently I saw Val coming along the platform with the gay swinging walk. Something went tight in my throat. Her head was up and her eyes were very bright when she spotted me. I saw her looking past me and around me.

I grabbed both her hands. "The big dope wouldn't come," I said. "He figured you'd have wired him if you'd wanted him. But he's acting like a human being for the first time in a week."

"He's such a big fool," she said, laughing a little.

"Well, you had us both dizzy," I told her. "It did look like you'd walked out on us."

She was still laughing. "Well, Duke, Jerry had given me particular hell for interfering, and since I had no intention whatever of stopping I thought I'd better not say anything about it or he might try to stop me."

"That's enough of that," I said. "Let's grab a taxi and get back to Jerry at the office."

She put her hand quickly on my arm, and she wasn't smiling now.

"Wait a minute, Duke. There's something we have to do first. I told you I had the dope on Rivers, and I have. We've got to use it. We've got to get it in the papers before tomorrow's game. That's why I wired you. We've got to get to your newspaper friends quickly."

I frowned. "It's too late for the afternoon papers unless it's a big enough story for them to extra in their late editions."

"It's big enough," Val said. "And if all tomorrow morning's papers have it, we'll have the Stadium jammed. How about your friend Mr. Travers? He's been on our side from the start. Can we get hold of him?"

"We can try," I said.

We found a cab and I directed the driver to the offices of the *Globe*. Once we were under way I asked Val for the story.

"It's too long to tell twice," she said. "But I've got a hunch it's going to turn everybody's sympathy to Rivers—maybe work a miracle."

"Baby, I'd follow you into the Black Hole of Calcutta," I said. "You run this show any way you like."

WE GOT a break. I was afraid Jim might not be at the office with a Saturday afternoon coming up. I was afraid he might be covering one of the big out-of-town college games. But it turned out he was doing the Fordham-Pittsburgh game right here in New York and he was still at his desk.

"A story," I told him, as we crowded into his little office. "This is Miss Valerie Jones who's going to be Mrs. Jerry Lanning if someone doesn't snatch her away while Jerry's waiting to be a millionaire."

Travers was cordial. "You and Jerry have had a tough break," he said to Val. "I wish there was something I could do, but there isn't. Duke's substantiated my suspicions about the going over Rivers has taken from the team, but nobody else is interested in knowing."

"You can print the story I've got," Val said. "In the first place, Rivers is not the boy's name. His real name is Roy Barclay." Val said that as if it ought to mean something to Jim and me, but we both must have looked blank.

"Did you ever hear of Clarence Barclay?" she asked.

Jim frowned. I guess he and I were thinking of figures in the sport world where Clarence Barclay meant exactly nothing.

"Nubesco, Inc.," Val said.

"Good God Almighty!" Jim Travers exploded.

There was still no bell ringing in my ears. But Jim started to talk excitedly. "Nubesco, you dope!" he said to me. "One of the biggest financial scandals in the last twenty years. Made the McKesson, Robbins thing look like kindergarten stuff, because the big shots got away with it—absconded with millions. Clarence Barclay was the fall guy. Don't you remember?"

I shook my head. I still didn't have it.

"Must have been while I was out like a light somewhere," I said.

"It's simple enough," Val said. "Clarence Barclay was the head bookkeeper. He was arrested because there wasn't anyone else the authorities could put their hands on. Barclay refused to testify against his bosses. Claimed he never knew there was anything crooked. But there was an item on the books he couldn't explain—a missing sum of money. He couldn't replace it and so they clapped him in jail. Everybody knew he was innocent; that he was taking the rap for a bunch of pirates. But that was that. Roy Barclay, or Rivers, is his son."

"Well, I'm damned," I said. But still I didn't see this front-page story.

"You haven't heard anything yet," said Val, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Do you know how much money was missing from Barclay's accounts?"

"No, teacher, I don't."

"Exactly seventeen thousand four hundred and thirty-two dollars and sixty-seven cents," Val said.

I guess I wasn't quick enough. She grabbed my arm and shook it.

"Rivers' salary, Duke! The exact amount of his salary. Don't you get it? The kid's demands were made so that he could clear his father. That's the reason there isn't any of it left! That's the reason he refused to let Jerry off the hook! That's the reason the people in South Shrewsbury were so peculiar when we first went there. They were trying to protect the Barclay family from snoopers."

She swung around on Travers. "Haven't you got a story there, Mr. Travers? Boy, fighting to get his father out of jail, given the business by teammates who misunderstand his motives? Isn't that enough of a tearjerker to get the fans of this city back of him solidly?"

"Oh, boy, is it!" Jim said, reaching for the telephone.

Val stood up. She looked suddenly tired. "He's a pretty grand kid," she said. "He's shouldered this whole thing by himself. No wonder he was queer and distant. No wonder he seemed hardboiled. Well, maybe he'll get the break he deserves now, and incidentally Jerry may get one along with him. Now take me to that big lug of mine, Duke."

We started moving fast, and Travers waved goodbye.

TRAVERS did a great job on that story. Late that afternoon there were front-page spreads in all the papers. The newsboys were hollering River's name up and down Broadway at the top of their lungs. It was the greatest piece of unpaid publicity for an athlete I ever saw.

FOOTBALL STAR WORKS TO CLEAR FATHER.

It was Horatio Alger all over again in high gear. The Nubesco scandal was revived. They had two-column pictures of Rivers. They had the real dope on his salary—how he was actually getting nothing personally for his services—how every cent from the Americans had gone to refund the amount his father was accused of taking. Boy, it was the nuts!

Miss Miller was going crazy at the office. There was a sudden demand for tickets. The tabloids wanted a chance to photograph Rivers before Sunday's game. A big syndicate called up, acting as if they were out of their minds. They hadn't been able to locate Rivers. They wanted exclusive rights to his life story. They wanted Jerry to sew the kid up for them. They offered Jerry a slice if he could get the kid's name on the dotted line.

Along about eight o'clock Jerry and Val and I left the office and went back to the apartment. Jerry had insisted on taking us all out on a spree, but Val had tossed her weight around in the direction of a quiet supper at home. It really suited us fine. We were worn out.

The scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and coffee tasted like a banquet. We were riding the crest of the wave. The whole setup was in the bag. We didn't have to worry about public support of the Americans now. We knew the fans all over the circuit would turn out to give this spunky kid a great hand. The public is like that. When a guy does something that's pretty tough, and does it quietly and without a lot of whoopla, they love him for it.

It was right in the middle of a mutual congratulation society meeting that Roy Rivers barged in. One look at his face and I felt little cold chills start to play hopscotch up and down my spine. He was pale as a ghost, and his eyes were blazing.

"You rats! You dirty rats!" he said in a voice that was shaking with anger.

"Hey, hold everything, fella," Jerry said, gently. "You've got nothing to be worked up about. Why, you're a public hero, kid. Not only that, I'm going to draw up a new contract with you so that you will get something out of all this for yourself."

"Wouldn't you like to sell my mother and sister down the river?" the boy snapped. "You might be able to make a little extra money out of that!"

"Take it easy," I said. "This is going to work out fine for you."

But there was no calming this guy.

"Oh, sure," he cried, bitterly, "it's going to work out swell. Why the hell do you suppose I took another name? Why did I refuse to explain? Just to get you to pry into my private affairs and spread them all over the map?"

"Wait," Jerry said. "I don't think you understand—"

"Sure I understand. You didn't give a damn about my privacy. You didn't give a damn if a whole rotten mess that I've tried to keep buried is unearthed just to make a holiday for you."

I glanced at Val. She was sitting slumped in her chair. She looked as if someone had slapped her in the face.

"Why, we figured the whole thing would be a break for you," I said. "Instead of having everybody down on you, they'd all be pulling for you. We didn't blame you for keeping the story quiet. That was swell on your part. But when we found out about it—"

"You turned me into a sideshow freak—me and my family!" Rivers cut in, harshly. "We've spent two years trying to fade out of the public eye, trying to avoid notoriety—and in one day you give us the business. Well, at least you're not going to collect on it! I'm quitting, do you understand? I'm through, done! You can find someone else to be your boxoffice stooge. You can find someone who *likes* to have his dirty linen washed in public."

I've never seen anything like it.

Jerry and Val seemed completely stunned. I know this angle hadn't occurred to them any more than it had to me. When you're in the entertainment business you think of any kind of publicity as a break for everyone concerned. The private slant on it had just never entered our heads. But I figured it was time to get a little tough with this kid.

"You can't quit," I said.

He stared at me, his mouth drawn down.

"Oh, can't I? Well, you'll see. When that mob of ghouls turn out to give me the once-over tomorrow I won't be there."

I hated to do it, but I had to.

"Then I suppose you're prepared to refund the money Jerry paid you for playing?" I said.

He stared at me, silent.

"Jerry can't fire you," I said. "That was part of the deal. But you can't quit either. If you do, you're liable for the full amount that's been paid you. If you don't come across, you'll find yourself in jail."

"Duke!" It was an involuntary protest from Val. I didn't look at her.

Rivers was breathing hard. His tongue came out to moisten dry lips. "So that's the way you're going to play," he said at last.

"Now wait," Jerry said, "I—"

"That's the way," I interrupted in a hurry. "Nobody wanted to do you any harm, Rivers. Actually we meant to give you a boost in a tough spot. You don't see it like that. Well, you can step out—the minute you refund to Jerry exactly seventeen thousand, four hundred and thirty-two dollars and sixty-seven cents. That's a simple matter of a legal contract. It always work both ways, you know."

He drew another deep breath, and then without a word he turned and slammed out of the apartment.

"Wait!" Jerry called after him. But Rivers was gone. Jerry turned on me. "You hadn't any right to say that, Duke. You know damned well I wouldn't hold him to that kind of contract."

"Take it easy," I said. "Maybe this will cool him down. Then someone can go talk to him."

Val was staring at the door. "I suddenly feel like an awful heel," she said, unhappily.

CHAPTER XIII

LINE-BUCK THROUGH BROADWAY

JERRY and Val and I were like three horses all pulling at the same load in different directions. Jerry went on repeating flatly that he wouldn't hold the kid to any contract. We'd been blind to what this exposé would mean to Rivers, and the least we could do was to let him fade quietly out if that's what he wanted. Val kept trying to figure some way to undo the harm she'd done. I was the only one still wondering how to put all the pieces together again and make them work.

I guess none of us slept any too well that night. Sunday morning even more papers carried the story. There'd been no way to stop it. It was news and it was out of our hands.

We had a late breakfast, and about noon we headed for the Stadium. By one o'clock the fans had started to come in. I've had enough experience with crowds to know by the steady click of the turnstiles that the Americans were going to play to the biggest audience they'd ever had. And I don't think there was one of that mob that hadn't come for the express purpose of encouraging Roy Rivers.

About quarter past one I went down to the Americans' dressing room. Reporters were ganged outside the door, apparently having been barred by Ducky Porter, and Nick Niles was standing guard.

"No interviews till after the game," he kept saying. But when he saw me he opened the door and let me slip through.

Inside the dressing room was comparatively quiet. The boys were getting into their uniforms. I took a look around for Rivers, but I didn't see him. I went on into Ducky's office. Ducky was walking up and down like a caged lion, mopping the beads of sweat from his bald head. When he saw me he grabbed my arm.

"Where is he?" His voice was hoarse.

"Where's who?"

"Rivers, you sap! He hasn't turned up. We're due to take the field in twenty minutes. I've kept the reporters out, but they'll get wise pretty soon. The kid hasn't turned up."

"God!" I said.

Ducky had a grip on my shoulder that hurt even then.

"That crowd out there has come to see Rivers," he said. "If he doesn't show Jerry'll have to refund about sixty grand in ticket money. Duke, I'm going crazy. I'll be in a strait-jacket before this mess gets ironed out."

I was thinking fast. I had to admit the kid had fooled me. I thought, with the jam he was in, he'd have realized he had to play out the string. I figured he'd be sore as a boil, but I figured he'd be here.

"Listen," I said to Ducky. "There's just one chance in a million I can find him and talk sense to him. If he's at his hotel I'll get him here."

Ducky shook his head. "I've called the hotel. His room doesn't answer."

"That doesn't prove a thing. If he's sulking in his tent he *wouldn't* answer. I'll get down there."

"You couldn't get him back here in time to start if you were to fly," Ducky moaned.

"Okay, keep your shirt on," I said. "Get another one of the boys in that Number 11 jersey. Have him wear a headguard so that ash-blond hair won't be missed. You've told the reporters no interviews. Have the team run right out onto the field. They'll be expecting you to rush Rivers past them. Once you're on the field the fans will only go by the numbers on the players. That 11 will get you by. I'll have Rivers here in an hour if it's humanly possible."

Ducky nodded wearily. "It's our only chance. Go ahead, Duke—and for God's sake, hurry."

HURRY! The quickest way downtown was by subway express. When I had fought through the crowd that was pouring into the Stadium to the downtown platform, I thought a train never would come. It takes about fifteen minutes to get downtown, but it seemed like hours.

By the time I got out and up onto the street, just a block from the Edgemont, I knew that Ducky and the boys must have just about taken the field for their workout. There'd be another fifteen minutes before the start of the game. With luck I'd have Rivers there by the middle of the first quarter.

Afterward I heard from Val how bewildered she and Jerry were when the team took the field. The big number 11 was out there and they knew it wasn't Rivers. But the fans were satisfied. They roared and yelled and finally Chuck Chadwick, a substitute back who was wearing the number, had to wave and acknowledge the cheers.

Well, I ran the block to the Edgemont and made straight for the elevator. There was no use sending up my name. If Rivers was acting stubborn he wouldn't see me. I was taken to his floor and I went right to the door of his room and banged on it.

"Hey, Rivers!" I shouted.

There was a moment's delay and then the door was opened—by Zipper Collins.

When the Zipper saw me his lips parted in that dog-tooth smile. "Well, well, well," he said, softly. Maybe he thought I was going to back away, because he reached out, clamped on to the front of my coat, and pulled me into the room. "Look who's here," he said.

Al Saxe was sitting comfortably in the room's one chair. He held an expensive-looking cigar between his pudgy fingers and the ash from it had dribbled down onto his fat belly. Rivers was sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked white and strained. I tried to read something in his eyes, but they were blank.

"I'm glad you've come," said Al Saxe. "I've been anxious to express my indignation to someone responsible for the outrage that has been perpetrated against this young man."

I was about to say something when I realized there was another voice in the room, the voice of a radio announcer, turned low.

"I've never heard anything like it," the voice said. "The ovation Rivers has received is beyond anything in my experience in the world of sport. Just a moment ago Ducky Porter announced that he was starting his second team, and the crowd booed him good-naturedly. They want to see Rivers in action, but they're willing to wait, if impatiently."

"An outrage," said Al Saxe, "not only against this boy, but against the public. I have just telephoned the press box to have them check after the first quarter. The public is going to be pretty sore at Jerry Lanning when they learn he's pulled a hoax on them. They're going to be pretty damn sore."

He was looking as complacent as a fat snake.

"All right, you mugs, what's the gag?" I said, speaking for the first time.

Al Saxe raised his eyebrows. "Gag?

There is no gag, Maguire. It is simply that I stand for honesty in the world of sport. I was indignant when I learned that this poor boy's private life had been utilized to make box-office for Jerry. That was very bad of Jerry.

"I don't propose to see a fine, upstanding young fellow like Rivers here played for a sucker. I am providing him with the money to pay off his contract. So he doesn't have to play. He rates help, and I'm providing it."

I swung around and stared at Rivers. There wasn't much I could say. "You've accepted?" I asked. "You've accepted help from these heels?"

Rivers was looking at Collins. He shrugged. "Why not?" he said. Then he turned his pale eyes full on me for an instant before looking back at the Zipper. "Why not?" he repeated.

Then I saw that the Zipper's coat was open and his shoulder holster quite casually exposed to view. I felt my pulse begin to work overtime.

"I THINK the sporting public is going to thank me," Al Saxe went on in his purring voice. "We're revealing a hoax of monumental proportions, and we're making a stand against the invasion of privacy. Very American of us, don't you think, Maguire?"

"It sounds exactly like you," I said. "I came here to try to get Rivers to come to the Stadium with me. I guess I'm wasting my time. I'll be shoving off." I had ideas about house detectives and cops. This was a holdup, or I was losing my mind.

"Stick around," said the Zipper. He was standing between me and the door. His hand was caressing the butt of his gun. "Stick around, pal. We're going to listen to the fun over the radio."

I took another look at Rivers. His face was expressionless. "All right," I said. "I'll stick around."

"I thought you would." The Zipper grinned. Oh, he was happy as a child with a pet.

"I don't suppose there's any law against my having a drink of water," I said. "I worked up a thirst getting down here."

"If your system will stand water there's no law against it," the Zipper said.

I went into the bathroom and turned on the cold water faucet and let it run. Unless I was nuts this was nothing short of kidnapping. Rivers had been held against his will. It was so fantastic that even if it could be explained afterward it wouldn't do any good. Once the fraud at the Stadium was discovered explanations wouldn't sound good.

I filled a glass with water and walked out into the other room, carrying it in my right hand. I took one more look at Rivers. His cold gray eyes were fixed searchingly on me. I drew a deep breath. Maybe I was crazy, but I could only die once.

I was standing right in front of the Zipper. I lifted the glass of water. "Well, here's how," I said.

Then I let him have it, right smack in the face.

I've read a lot of fiction in my time. Writers always use similes like "quick as a striking cobra" or "like a flash of lightning" or "with the speed of light." Wrap all those up together and you still won't get an idea of how quick Roy Rivers was. The Zipper gasped as the cold water struck him, and then he gasped again. Because almost simultaneously Rivers hit him with a flying tackle that smashed him against the wall and I swear shook the steel girders that held up the hotel.

I spun around to face Saxe who had heaved himself up out of his chair. I gave it to him—the toe of my shoe right in the middle of his fat belly. He folded up like a punctured balloon.

I turned back to the other two. Rivers' right fist was working like a club against the Zipper's face. The Zipper was still and white where he wasn't splattered with red. Presently Rivers stood up. He had the Zipper's gun in his hand.

"Let's go," he said. That's all he said, but I knew he wasn't through doing things.

We went out and Rivers locked the

door on the two unconscious mobsters. "Nice work," he said to me. Somehow that meant a good deal to me.

In the lobby he cornered the house detective. "There are two guys in my room who tried to kidnap me," he said. "Here's the key and here's the gun belonging to on of them. Arrest 'em. I'll prefer charges later."

"You better stick around," the astonished detective said.

"I've got to go places," Rivers said. And he started a broken field run through the lobby that had me wheezing to keep up with him.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTERNOON OF AN ALL AMERICAN

WE HARDLY spoke on the way to the Stadium. In fact we had only one exchange. Rivers said to me, "Are those the guys who have been bucking Jerry Lanning?"

"Yeah," I said.

Rivers' lips tightened. He didn't say any more.

We got to the Stadium and Rivers made a bee-line for the dressing room. I cut through to one of the entrances to the field. As I came out into the open I heard that huge crowd chanting: "We want Rivers! We want Rivers!"

I took a gander at the score board. There was five minutes of the first quarter left, and the score was 10-0 in favor of the Badgers. The Americans must have folded.

I ran along the bench to where Ducky was sitting, huddled in his overcoat, looking pinched and gray.

"He's here!" I said.

For a minute he stared at me, not believing. Then finally he whispered, "Thank God! Someone tipped the press. They've been bombarding me with questions. If he hadn't got here by the end of the quarter—"

"Well, he's here, I said."

"Parker!" Ducky barked. "In there for Emms. Tell the gang Rivers has turned up."

"And tell 'em it wasn't his fault he was late," I said. "Al Saxe and Company had him cooped up."

Then I made tracks for the stands and Jerry's box. Jerry and Val were sitting there like a couple of marble statues. Jerry gave me one agonizing look. "We're done," he said. "In a few minutes this crowd is going to know Rivers isn't here. Then there's going to be a riot."

"Take it easy, keed," I said. "Your Uncle Dudley has just arrived with the serum from Nome."

THERE was a riot at the Stadium that afternoon, but not the kind Jerry had resigned himself to.

When I finally sat down in the box, the Badgers were on their way to another score. They had just planted the ball on our twenty yard line with a first down coming up, and now the Americans had called time, and Parker was telling the boys the news. When the whistle sounded the Americans came back into their defensive alignment with a new zip.

I saw big Szymanski tear along the line, vigorously slapping the boys on their behinds. George Murphy took the ball for the Badgers and started off the right side. It was Kowalik, moving like a projectile from a big gun, who smashed through and tossed Mr. Murphy for a six yard loss.

There was a vague cheer from the crowd, that turned suddenly into a roar. A guy was running onto the field from the sidelines. He was carrying his headguard in his hands and his hair was as yellow as the big number 11 on his back.

Pat Snead came out of the game and Rivers took over at left half. Murphy tried another jab off tackle and the whole American line rose up like a wave and hurled him back. Then Murphy faded for a pass and heaved it out to Rivers' side. It traveled like a bullet, straight for Chapman, the end. Rivers seemed to go up a stepladder to knock it down. A final pass was thrown and Matuzak beat that one.

Then the A's huddled. I learned later that that gang were all talking to Rivers . . . telling him they were with him . . . urging him to go to town.

Rivers went.

On the first play he dropped back to his own goal-line in kick formation. The logical play was a punt out of danger. Bad Bill Harris passed the ball back from center straight and true to the Texas Typhoon. Rivers took a step forward, swung his right foot—but he didn't kick.

He tucked the ball under his arm and cut to the right. Ganzmueller flattened the charging Chapman with a block that ought to have left him floating ribs for life. The Typhoon swept up the sidelines. Parker was ahead of him, clearing one tackler out of his path. Then he was on his own with Murphy and Corcoran of the Badgers converging. Corcoran dove, and the Typhoon spun like a top out of that tackle. He couldn't quite regain his stride before Murphy nailed him, but he carried the ball out to our forty yard line.

Back into the huddle they went and then out again. Matuzak had the ball and started Ducky's beautiful abracadabra. There were no more fumbles this afternoon. Rivers fitted in with the Three Jugglers like an oiled machine. Yard after yard they ripped off, with Rivers doing most of the carrying.

The quarter ended with us on the Badgers' fifteen, but the rest didn't take any of the kick out of that savage drive. There were holes for the Typhoon today. Big Szymanski was a terror up forward. Three plays after the second quarter opened the Typhoon swept across the goal-line and scored standing up. No one laid a finger on him. Szymanski and Zuber had seen to that.

Players have had field days in the past. Red Grange had several in his prime. Marty Brill had one against Penn in his senior year. Brickley, Mahan, Albie Booth, Air-mail Morton, and a hundred others I could name have gone to town in a big way. But I never saw anything quite like the Typhoon that afternoon. It wasn't only that he himself was performing a miracle. It was the whole team.

Every time you looked out there—and you had to keep looking—that purple-jerseyed figure with the gold eleven on his back was driving, twisting, fighting his way forward, with blockers in front of him. And the crowd took him to their hearts with hysterical enthusiasm.

Between the halves Jerry was swamped in his box. People who had avoided him were eager to tell him how smart he was. The Americans had cracked the shell of public resistance. Rivers had supplied them with the glamor that meant box-office.

In the second half he left his mark indelibly in the records of professional football. The Badgers were in the throes of a rout, and Rivers and the rest of the gang never let up. They kept the heat on mercilessly. Rivers ran and passed and kicked like a man who had a personal grudge against every Badger player who took the field.

Two minutes before the end of the game Ducky yanked him out and a special escort of police went with the kid to the dressing room or he might have been mobbed.

THAT'S about all there is to tell about that wild afternoon. Jerry and Val and I finally got to the dressing room after it was over. The boys in there were celebrating. The place was swarming with reporters and nobody seemed to care. But Rivers was missing. Everyone was shouting for him—but he was missing.

I made a dive for Ducky's office. What the hell, I thought. I burst in in spite of Nick Niles' protests. There was Rivers, standing by the window, with Ducky's arm around his shoulder. And the great Texas Typhoon was bawling like a kid.

"I never knew what it was to have so many friends!" he said in a shaken voice. "My God, how they were pulling for me. The team, the crowd. I thought after they heard the truth . . . after they knew . . . I'd tried so hard to keep it quiet—"

"You're just a big sucker," I said, huskily. "I told you they'd all be for you. But

you might tell Val you're not sore at her. She still feels pretty cut up."

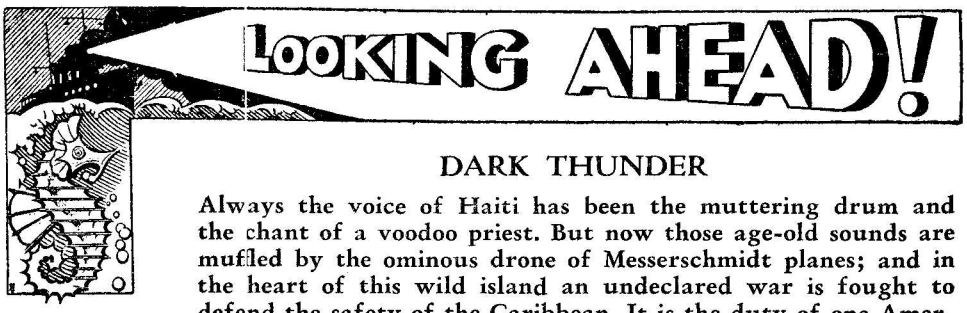
"Where is she?" the Typhoon asked.

•

Naturally everything was hotsy and likewise totsy after that. Jerry paid off his note to Al Saxe, but Al won't have much use for the dough because he and the Zipper are spending a nice long vacation in Sing Sing. We never saw or heard of Feldman again. I guess he took that song to heart and got out of town. I have his job officially now.

It isn't much of a job, which is how I got the chance to get this down on paper. The Texas Typhoon is so hot he doesn't need a publicity man. He gets it free from the sports writers. But I'm going to be busy handling the ticket end for the play-offs, because Jerry and Val have ducked out of town too—on a quick honeymoon.

THE END



DARK THUNDER

Always the voice of Haiti has been the muttering drum and the chant of a voodoo priest. But now those age-old sounds are muffled by the ominous drone of Messerschmidt planes; and in the heart of this wild island an undeclared war is fought to defend the safety of the Caribbean. It is the duty of one American to wager his wits and his two hands against the secret legions of the Third Reich. Beginning a pertinent and powerful new novel of international intrigue by

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It was a tough night, filled with prairie wind and driving snow; the road to Hell Town was even tougher. But four men had to make that trip by stage—a preacher, an outlaw, a bridegroom, and an undertaker—and for three of them sudden death was waiting at journey's end. A compelling novelet of the untamed West, by

C. K. SHAW

STAR BRIGHT

No use seeking for gold at the other end of a rainbow when you can find it at this end of a comet's flight. But when gold-bricks turn out to be only skin deep, when goldfish are born without life, when your family sends out a call for the silly-wagon—then you may wish you had never looked at all. A delightfully human novelet about unhuman goings-on, by

JACK WILLIAMSON

COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—NOVEMBER 25

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

IN THIS country most of us feel a half-realized dread—the awareness of war. But we can't feel the full measure of that fear; we are not living under the complete and terrible suspense that has caught the people of Europe.

So the curt, matter-of-fact statement of the young Englishman whose letter is published below might appear to be a rather casual dismissal of the Second World War. Of course it is not that; it is simply the way people talk about a war when they are very close to it. Still we cannot help being impressed by the fact that our correspondent can discuss ARGOSY as if there were nothing larger around to disturb him. That, we like to think, is a tribute to ARGOSY, as well as to

NEIL C. GOUNLAY

As an English reader I would like to express my opinion of ARGOSY. As you know England is now at war, and ARGOSY is one of my main relaxations from war-time worry. I am a schoolboy, and I often get a good few American magazines; mainly fantasy mags.

From reading these I have become a great reader of science-fiction, and it was because of this I started to get ARGOSY.

You see, I had just read Edgar Rice Burroughs' Martian novels in book form. I found out once when I was glancing at a few old numbers of ARGOSY that Edgar Rice Burroughs novels were published serially in it, so I ordered ARGOSY from the news-agent. I am, as yet, a new reader for I have only had ARGOSY from the beginning of Vol. 292.

However, I have picked up a few odd copies before that.

I am now waiting eagerly for another Burroughs' yarn, whether about Mars, Venus, or "Tarzan of the Apes," I don't care. But hurry up and get Edgar Rice Burroughs to write another novel for ARGOSY.

Since I have got ARGOSY I have found it getting better and better each week, but being a fantasy fan I deplore the scarcity of science-fiction yarns.

Since I have got the magazine I can only recollect one fantasy story, and that was not very good. It was Jack Mann's novel, "The Ninth Life."

I have said, since I got ARGOSY, that is, since I have purchased it regularly. In the odd issues I had before that I found Jack Williamson's "Non-stop to Mars" and Paul Ernst's "The Man Next Door." These two novelettes were very good and I would like to see more stories by these authors.

If you want to make ARGOSY better than it is, you should try to publish at least one fantasy story per issue.

Here are the best stories I have read so far in ARGOSY.

1.	"Lost Harbors"	100%
2.	"Non-Stop to Mars"	100%
3.	"The Man Next Door"	100%
4.	"River Rogues"	100%
5.	"Men With No Master"	100%
6.	"Mother Damnation"	90%
7.	"Hurricane Range"	80%

And 8th with 75% I place that ghost story about the railway. I forget its name.

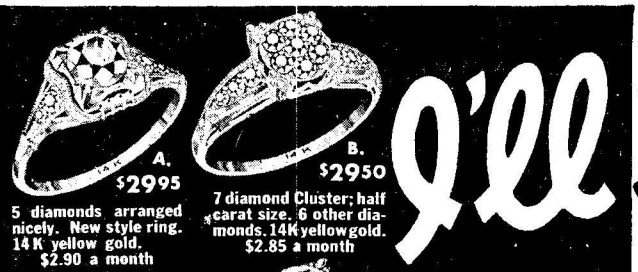
I think that "The Ringer," however, was lousy.

So I close hoping you will quickly get another Burroughs novel.

Northumberland, England

IT'S pleasant to welcome a new reader. But we can't agree with Mr. Gounlay that ARGOSY has been barren of fantastic fiction. By the time this issue reaches him he will have read several splendid examples of his favorite sort of story. Stay with us, Mr. G.; we're not going to slight the World of Day After Tomorrow.

I'll trust you



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Just a few words about the suggestions that I show here. Take ring (A), for instance. Imagine — only $29.50 for this pretty ring. And the Cluster Ring (B)—it looks like a half carat solitaire when worn on your finger. It's a beauty—I'm sure you would like it. The Bridal Ensemble (C) is really two rings for the ordinary price of one. If it's an Engagement Ring you want, I recommend (D)—it's a perfect diamond—I'll give you an Affidavit sworn to by a diamond expert before a Notary Public. Initial Ring (E) would delight any man. It's extra heavy and beautifully designed. My watch suggestions I am proud of. Bulova Watches are fine timekeepers and great values. The Kent Watches I show are priced exceptionally low and are the latest styles. My great feature is the Silverplate Set with Tablecloth and Napkins. I expect this to be one of my popular sellers — because of it's exceptionally low price.

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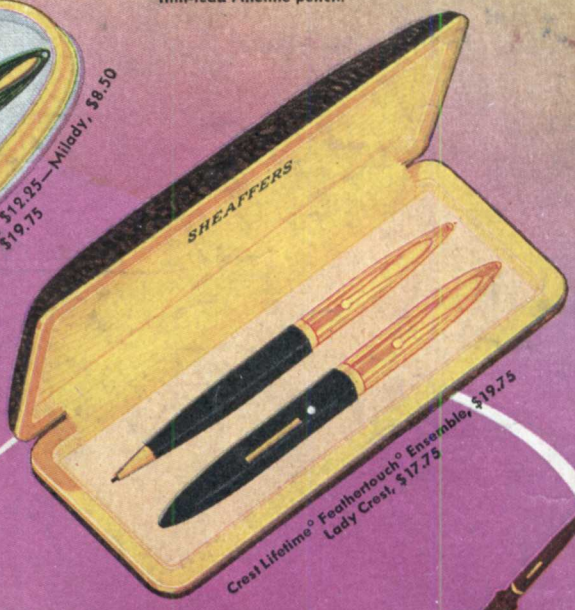

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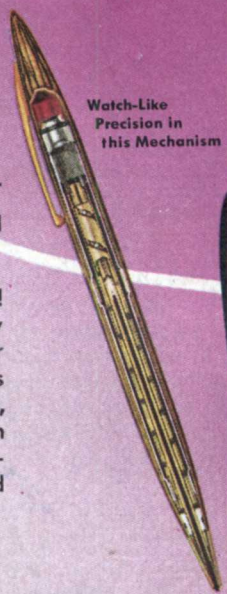

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