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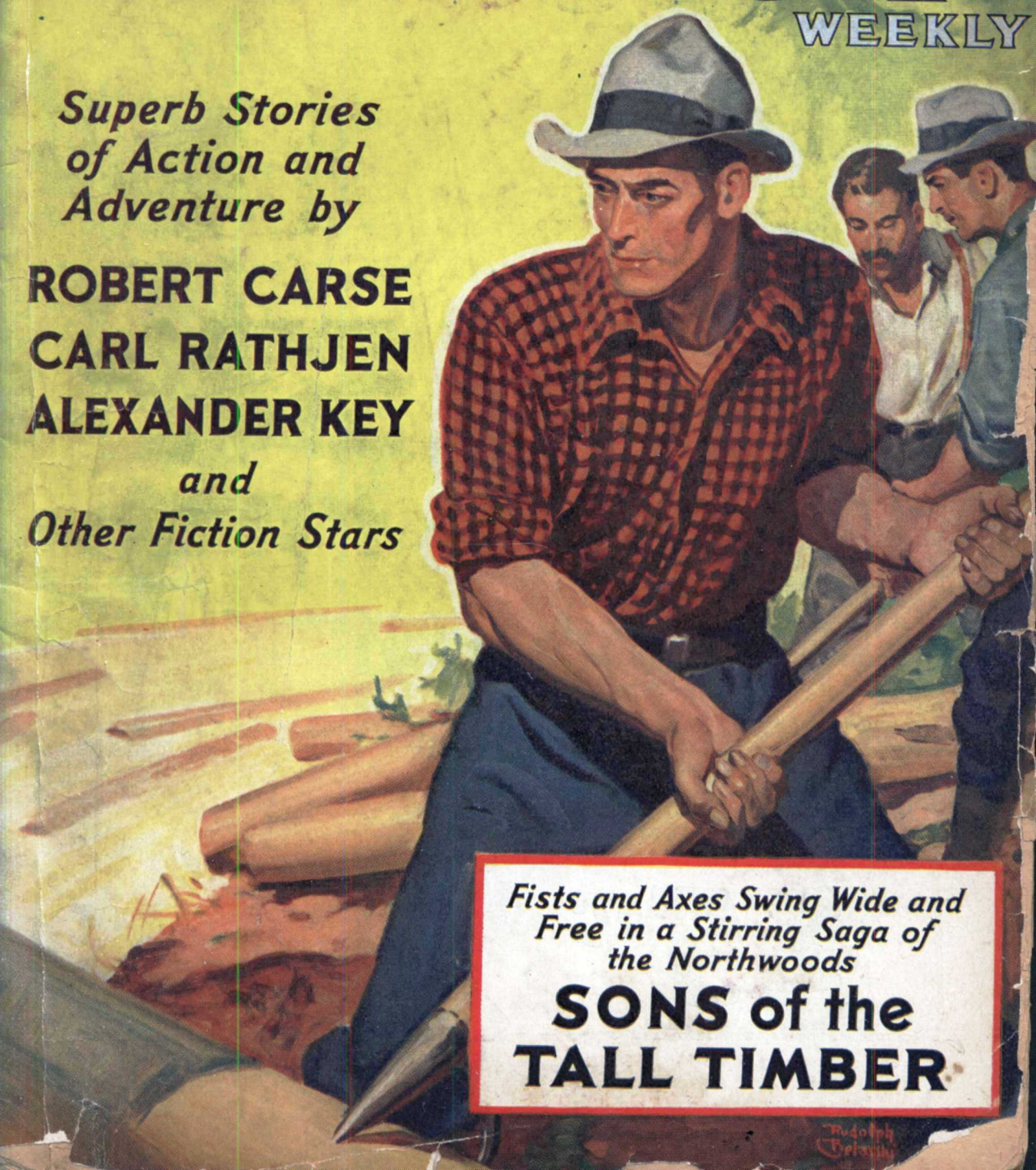

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Rudolph Belarski

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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

Volume 295 CONTENTS FOR DECEMBER 2, 1939 Number 2

Cover by Rudolph Belarski
Illustrating Sons of the Tall Timber

This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

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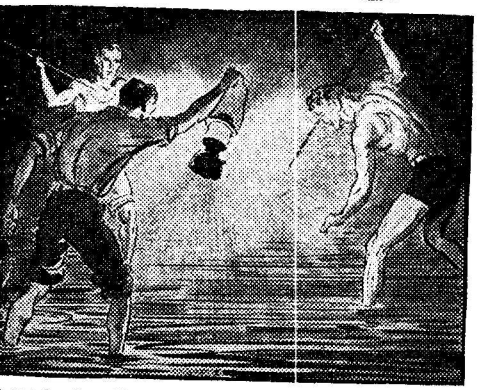
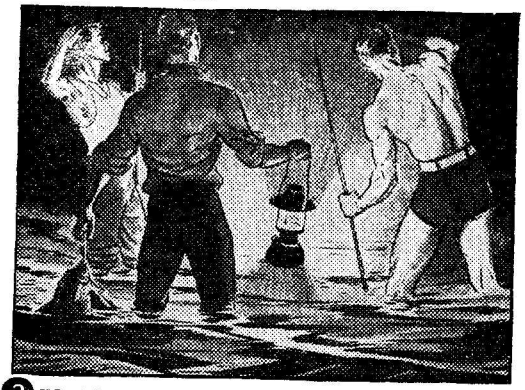
CAUGHT by rising tide in SHARK-FILLED WATERS!

G. BROOKS TAYLOR
Pledger, Texas

1 **"One night** a party of us started out to spear flounders in the warm, shallow Gulf coast waters," writes Mr. Taylor. "As the tide ebbs away, the flounder remains on the sandy bottom, often in only a few inches of water.



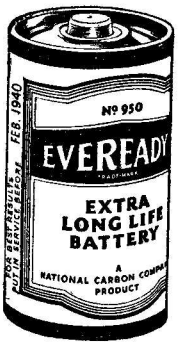
"Enjoying the sport, we wandered farther and ther from land, trusting the lantern left on the ch with one of our party to guide us safely back.



3 **"Suddenly,** we realized that the tide had turned! Then, our guiding light disappeared. We didn't know which way to run—trapped in shark-filled waters!

"Panic stricken, we scurried about madly. Then, a pin-point of light far away ked reassuringly! Unable to fix the disabled lantern, the man on shore had sensed plight, and luckily had a flashlight in his dufflebag. It probably saved us. From on we will sing the praises of 'Eveready' DATED batteries—the kind you can *de-* upon in emergency.

(Signed) G. Brooks Taylor"



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Complete Short Novel

Sons of the Tall Timber

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Old Yukon System," "A Ton of Gold," etc.

Old Paddy Madigan had twenty-four sons and more trouble than you could shake a redwood at. Then in a moment of weakness he let his enemy trap him into disaster—and annexed his twenty-fifth heir. It wasn't until later that he learned that the last shall be the best of all

CHAPTER I

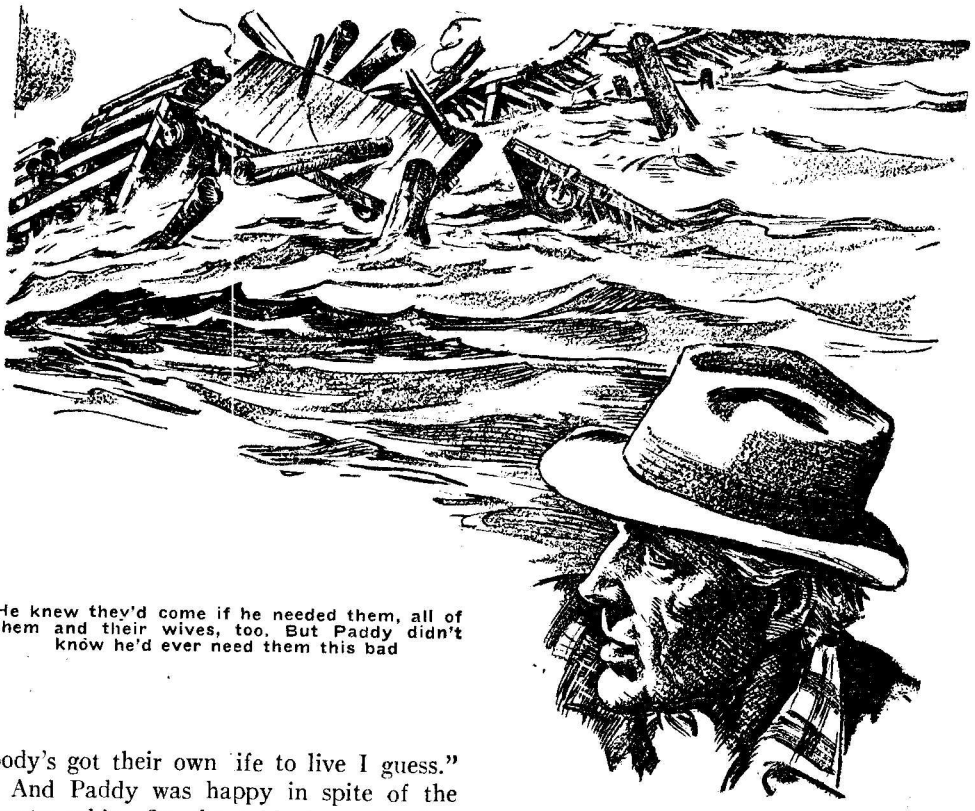
SONG OF WHITE WATER

PADDY MADIGAN, they said, had been logging in the Northwest ever since Peter Puget had dug the Sound and sold the dirt to Rainier for his mountain. According to his own opinion his age was "somewheres around seventy."

And it seemed, too, Paddy was always raising a boy. There was generally at least one boy in his rambling log cabin and sometimes four or five. They were orphans, for the most part, who had heard of Paddy and his inclination to help any young 'un down on his luck. A couple of them had traveled more than a thousand miles to get to Paddy's haven.

Paddy Madigan made 'em work hard and play twice as hard; each of them had to learn logging or some other trade. Then if the youngster wanted higher schooling, Paddy backed him to the limit.

But now the last boy, grown up, had been gone for over a month and Paddy was alone. "You fret over 'em and stew over 'em, and just when they can take care of themselves, they ups and leaves. They marries and has troubles of their own. But I dunno as I blame 'em. Every-



He knew they'd come if he needed them, all of them and their wives, too. But Paddy didn't know he'd ever need them this bad

body's got their own life to live I guess."

And Paddy was happy in spite of the empty cabin. On the table lay a lumber bid he had carefully prepared. If he landed the contract to supply the Bryant Development Company with telephone poles he would be busy for months to come. He had done some close figuring —too close in fact—but in order to win the contract he must put in a lower bid than Pete Ordway. It was too bad, he thought, that Pete was such a hog. If Pete would only change his policy to live and let live, both of them would make money. But you couldn't expect the Bryant people not to take full advantage of the cut-throat competition.

"I'm goin' to forget Pete," Paddy told himself. "I'm goin' to remember I've got a birthday coming up. I'm goin' to give a birthday party and all my boys and their wives will be there. I've writ 'em all! Gosh, maybe the wives, 'specially the rich ones, won't think much of my cabin. And that's somethin' else to worry about." He suddenly swore. "I've gotta make up my mind to quit worryin' in every form."

PADDY stumped down the short trail to Snow River, beamed on the frothing torrent and rolled a log into the water. As the current caught the big stick the old logger leaped and deftly landed. His sharp calks bit into the wood, checked a tendency to spin and turned the log downriver.

As he raced through the white water he sang in a roaring voice intended only for big timber and personal amusement:

My wife and I lived all alone,
In a little log hut, we called our own,
She loved gin and I loved rum,
I tell you what, we'd lots of fun.

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug don't I love thee.
Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug don't I love thee.

A mile below the first stretch of white water Paddy Madigan dug his calks deeper and prepared for the big rapids. "Some people say I'm crazy to ride white water," he mused, "but an old white-water man has got to keep his hand in, and what's more it's the quickest way to get to Sawmill City."

Again he burst into song:

If I had a cow that gave such milk,
I'd dress her in the best of silk,
I'd milk her forty-five times a day,
I'd feed her on the choicest hay.

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me . . .

Crack-wow! A thirty-thirty rifle stopped the song and nearly made Paddy Madigan tumble off the log. A jet of water leaped up just ahead and the glancing bullet thudded into a log jam at the water's edge.

"Come ashore!" a voice bellowed above the roar of the stream.

"Pete Ordway figgers to stop me from gettin' my bid in on time," Paddy growled. "Wonder if I'd better take a chance. I'll bob a lot in them rapids and make a mighty poor target. Still a man who can pick off the head of a grouse sittin' in the top of a fir tree wouldn't have much trouble smackin' me off this stick."

Crack-wow! repeated the rifle. The bullet struck the end of the log.

"That settles it," Paddy grunted.

Paddy sent the log onto the nearest bar and leaped to the gravel. "What's on your mind, Pete?" he yelled.

The brush stirred and Pete Ordway stepped into view. He carried a thirty-thirty rifle in the crook of his right arm. Behind him stood Moose Burch, his gigantic woods boss. "Let's see that bid you're takin' down to Sawmill City," Ordway ordered. "I want to get a line on your figures, then I'll know what to write down on my own bid."

Madigan's five feet five inches bristled with indignation; his blue eyes lost their joviality. They danced and flickered with angry sparks. He shook a gnarled fist into Ordway's beefy face.

"You, Pete," he snarled, "you were scairt to take a chance! You knew I'd slip in a lower figure."

"Sure," Ordway admitted. "That's why I stopped you. You'd put in some crazy low bid just to beat me and you wouldn't make a dime on the deal. Paddy, I want you to get that pole contract at a price that'll net you a fair profit. You always been suspicious of me . . ."

"And with good cause," Madigan interrupted bitterly.

"Maybe. But we're both getting along, Paddy; it's only right that we have a little peace now. Our fighting days ought to be over."

"Yeah," Madigan agreed, though his suspicion of Ordway's motives lingered.

"The only way I could get to talk with you was to stop you at the point of a gun. And here we are." Moose Burch removed the bid from Paddy's pocket and read the figures. "Too low," his employer said. "Way too low!" He substituted a blank with figures fifty percent higher. "That's something like. Sign it, Paddy."

Paddy, more from respect to the rifle than from complete confidence in Ordway, signed the bid. Ordway sealed it and tucked the envelope into Madigan's pocket. Then he produced his own bid and Paddy noted that his figures were even higher. He sealed and tucked that envelope, also, into Madigan's pocket. "There you are, Paddy," he announced, "you can deliver both bids yourself so you'll know I'm on the level!" Ordway beamed.

All the sentiment and impulse of Paddy Madigan's Irish nature welled in his breast. Suspicion died utterly. He enjoyed a fight, but he preferred peace with his neighbors, and the Ordway and Madigan holdings adjoined.

"By golly, Pete, but this is a grand day. I feel almost like adoptin' a half dozen more orphans and makin' somebody else happy. But no, I'll not do that—they ups and marries on you and each

artin' leaves an empty place in the heart."

Suddenly he expressed his emotion with a warm handshake, then blinking the little Irishman leaped onto his log and continued downstream.

Neither Ordway nor his woods boss spoke for several seconds. Madigan's skill in white water was entertainment for any man, never dulled by repetition. "A great white-water man," Moose Burch said, "but even Paddy's never ridden a log through Horse Trail Rapids."

"Nor anybody else," Ordway answered. Then abruptly Paddy was forgotten and business occupied his mind. He laughed. "The old fool fell for it—walked right into the trap."

"I told you he would," Burch answered. "Catch an Irishman in a sentimental mood, disarm him of suspicion and he'll meet you all the way. But what a roar there'll be when he learns you've got him hoof, hide, and tallow."

"And he can't do a thing about it, either," Ordway concluded. "Now all we've go to do is to wait until the Bryant people award him the contract, then show our hand."

WHILE Ordway and Burch were still grinning, Paddy Madigan continued his swift progress down the river. His joyous voice fairly lifted the bark off the trees. The very peaks echoed his song and the restless waters boomed an accompaniment:

'Tis you who makes my friends and foes,
'Tis you who makes me wear old clothes,
Here we are so near my nose,
So tip her up and down she goes.

Ha! Ha! Ha! you and me
Little brown jug don't I love thee,
Ha! Ha! Ha! . . .

He broke off suddenly as he reached a stand of timber different from the somber giant rows through which he had been passing. Each tree here was tall, slender and straight—a forest of living telephone poles. "Ah! There's a grand sight for any man's eyes, 'specially mine. It's proof—standin', endurin' proof—that many years ago a crazy, sentimental mick was right. It seemed a shame to cut down the forest and leave a tangle of stumps, shattered trees and brush and so I said that for every tree I cut I'd plant another. And they laughed, they did, at the thought of plantin' trees for other men to cut. And I told 'em I'd live to cut 'em myself and plant others—there they are and soon I'll be cuttin' 'em on the Bryant telephone contract—unless somebody sneaks in a lower bid on me which I misdoubt."

He stepped back a few inches as the log took another rapid and continued his banshee song.

The scene changed just below the next stretch of water. The land was cut over and abandoned. A few second growth trees were scattered among the wild blackberry vines and fire weed, but mostly the land was not pleasing to the eye.

The twin streaks of rust marking the old Epler Logging Company's road, however, were of paramount importance to Paddy Madigan. It was over this road he must take his telephone poles to market.

"And as soon as I land the contract I'll see Epler," he reflected. "It's an ill wind as the feller says that don't blow somebody good. Old Ep will be mighty glad of the freight money after all these years. And he can use it, too."

Horse Tail Rapids loomed ahead, marked by a heavy white mist which beaded the mossy canyon walls and the green leaves of the brooding trees. "I'd like to give it a whirl," Paddy growled, his eyes glowing with a daring fire, "but it's no time for damfoolishness."

He leaped ashore, let the log go, worked his way down stream to a bar and located the log again. But it was a different log now—stripped of bark, scarred and splintered at one end. "And that explains why logs can't be floated down this here river," Madigan said. He leaped onto the stick once again and calmly seated himself. From now on the river was smooth—travel was merely a matter of keeping the log from stranding.

CHAPTER II

ORPHAN ON THE HOOF

ARRIVING at Sawmill City, Paddy hurried to the Bryant Development Company's office. A square box, marked *Bids,* stood on the counter. Paddy thrust both the envelopes into the box then sat down. "Bad cess to any man who is suspicious of the motives of others," he observed. "But there's nothin' in this world to prevent Pete Ordway from sneakin' in a lower bid at the last minute."

But as the last minute came and passed and Pete Ordway did not show his face, Paddy was sentimentally ashamed of his cynicism. He listened to the reading of the bids and later on, with rapidly beating heart, signed the Bryant pole-contract. It seemed too good to be true.

"And comin' as it does birthday time, too. Ah, there'll be great rejoicin' around the Madigan cabin," he told himself.

He stopped at the hotel and hastily scrawled a letter to Epler offering him a good figure to rent his railroad and equipment. "Another man made happy," he chuckled, "and now to get the stuff for the party and slick myself up a bit."

As Paddy emerged from the hotel somebody touched his arm. "Can I have a word with you, Mr. Madigan?" a resonant young voice inquired. "My name is Johnny Keller, and I—" He broke off as a girl came down the street. At first Keller stared, then he pretended to be looking at something else; but Paddy knew he was watching the girl.

She was a pretty thing with hair that flamed red; her eyes were the smiling blue of a mountain lake. Her face was cut along engagingly bold and striking lines, the mouth wide and red; the jaw firmly rounded; the brow clear and high. Her cheeks might have been the reflection from a snow field when the sun is setting—a rare tint of pink on white.

The shrewd blue eyes took in Johnny Keller from thatch to foot, observing the down-at-heel brogans, the worn blue pants, relic of what had been a Sunday-bes suit. She saw the slim waist and note the new notches cut in the belt, trophie of skimpy victuals.

She said, "Hello, Mr. Madigan," an her voice was bright and cheerful, with faintly husky timbre.

"Hello, Julia," Paddy answered and h watched her approach. She was all fem inine, but her walk was that of a girl wh spent much time on the trail; the strid long, smooth, and easy. "How's the swim min' and the fishin' and the sailin' an the huntin' and the cookin' and . . everything?"

"Fine, Mr. Madigan." The girl laughe and white, even teeth brightened the da even more than the sunlight. "How's th little brown jug?" she asked as she passe them.

"Still got the cork in it!" Padd snapped. And looked both wistful and resc lute.

He looked at the stranger, but Johnn Keller was still watching the girl. " can look," he muttered, "I've alway looked and wanted, but never got. An yet—this is a new deal . . . why not?"

"How's that?" Paddy said sharply.

JOHNNY KELLER flushed beneat the heavy brown stubble on his sun burned face until he looked almost pur ple. "I was thinking out loud," he sai "my name's Johnny Keller and I hear you adopt orphans—and that's why I' here!"

"High leads and drag saws!" Padd snorted. "An orphan! You? How old a you?"

"Twenty-one," Keller answered.

"You look older, boy," Paddy said.

"I should look older," Johnny Kell said flatly.

Paddy Madigan nodded sympathetically Young fellows like this one had a toug time getting the good breaks nowaday But he was through with raising youn men. Paddy had no regrets; but he d have many heartaches. They grew u married and did not come back. That w

proper, as Paddy admitted, but it did not lessen the hurt.

"What's back of you?" Paddy inquired.

"Look!" he replied holding up a shoe for Paddy's inspection, "they were new when I left the East." Now they were worn through and cardboard inner soles kept Keller's feet off the ground. The East with its millions; the Central States with their plains and heat; the spiny Rocky Mountains and even Puget Sound lay behind this bone-weary young man. He was on the Olympic Peninsula in the upper left hand corner of the United States. Ahead of him only was Paddy Madigan, his goal.

"I've never adopted a grown man, Keller," Paddy stated, "it can't be done, legally. During my life, though, I've sort of fathered twenty-four orphans and . . ."

"I'm the twenty-fifth then," Keller said with determination. "I want to throw in with you in this logging business. I want to learn it from you . . . on your terms."

Paddy Madigan stiffened himself for refusal. He was through bringing up youngsters. Through. Why couldn't they let him alone?

Then the soft-hearted Irish in him stormed the fortress of his resolution. Hadn't he got his contract? Wasn't he about to cut the timber he had planted —something few men had ever done? Wasn't he at peace with Pete Ordway? He was.

"I might take you, but you'll do like the rest—up and marry about the time I get to thinkin' a lot of you."

"Marriage? Huh! Not me!" Keller insisted.

"Huh!" Paddy snorted. "Julia Wylie passed just now and you looked after her and I heard you say, 'Why not?' You wasn't answerin' any questions you'd just asked yourself by any chance?"

"I'll promise not to get married for ten years," Johnny Keller offered. "That's how bad I want to string with you."

"Then I guess I can't refuse," Paddy grumbled. "Here's my hand on it."

They shook hands. "And you start workin' for me right away," Paddy said. "Here's a list of grub I'll be takin' back tonight. Here's a fistful of money to pay for it. Buy the grub, get yourself some clothes, a bath, a shave and a haircut. Hold on, don't start thankin' me! Not a peep out of you, Johnny. You just got the worst of a business deal and ain't got any reason to feel good over it. Wait until you've fallen in love and want to get married and —can't!"

PADDY MADIGAN slipped down a side street and peered cautiously about. What he was about to do would not bear the glare of daylight and yet it must be done.

His blue eyes paused on a sign which informed the world the modest and rather shy-appearing establishment was a beauty parlor. With a final glance of quick apprehension Paddy darted within.

A blond goddess greeted him. "I want to get my fingernails manicured," he explained blushing to the roots of his iron gray hair.

He displayed a set of fingernails which staggered the girl to her very foundations. She glanced dubiously at her rather dainty tools, then at a steam shovel faintly visible through the window. If she had a steam shovel, an electric drill and some blasting powder she might make a slight impression.

The nails were clean, but they were also cracked and bruised and the fingers gnarled by a life time of hard work. Paddy sat down and continued to blush. "It's the first time I ever was in one of these here places."

The girl should have been an actress. "Is that so?" she queried in a tone of mild disbelief. "Well," she said. "I never would have believed it." She clutched gingerly at the horny paw.

"Yep," he barked. "But it's this way. I've got a lot of sons knockin' 'round the country. Next Sunday's my birthday. It ain't the real day, you understand, but it's the day I picked. I don't know the real day—nobody does. Some

of the boys married society women and the like. Well, I'm throwin' a birthday party and I've sent invites to the boys and their wives. I'm doin' the cookin' myself. You know how women are about what they eat. They're different'n a bunch of loggers and so I'm havin' my fingers slicked up, in case some of 'em are finicky. Now the boys—they wouldn't care. They knows I'm particular about washin' my hands."

"Of course," the girl sympathetically agreed.

"I'm proud of my boys, I am. They've done right well. This is the first time I'll have 'em together." She saw his face glow with the warmth of anticipation. "I'm kinda nervous about the women, though, I'm afraid they might not like me. I ain't much to look at."

The girl sensed the longing in his heart and suddenly wanted to cry. She understood how the old man must have dreamed and planned this event for months. The manicure was a tremendous concession in itself. "Take my Bob's wife, Katherine. You see her name in the society papers plenty. Picture, too. Kinda—well—kinda like a queen you might say. Mrs. Robert Talbot Madigan."

"Glory to Betsy!" the girl thought, eyeing Paddy with increased respect. Mrs. Robert Talbot Madigan—that darling of the West Coast rotogravures. Fat chance *she'd* show up at the old boy's backwoods barbecue—not without twenty maids and four chauffeurs.

Then, seeing the eagerness and the pride in Paddy's eyes, she felt a stab of pity and let her glance fall from his weather-lined face. Poor old geezer, he sure was riding for a beautiful tumble. She felt awful sorry for him—and she hadn't felt sorry for anybody but herself in so long that she hardly recognized the emotion.

"I've always thought Bob's Katie"—Katie, the girl's mind shrieked; Mrs. Robert Talbot Madigan, "Katie": what next?—"must have been a waitress before they got married," Paddy speculated. "The papers always talk about her pourin' the tea at them big blow-outs she gives. You think with all the servants she must ha to do her tea-pourin' for her. . . . Sti she likes to keep her hand in, I guess

The manicure girl narrowly avoid choking. " 'Smatter with you?" Paddy d manded sharply. "Swallow yer gum? Then there's Mrs. Doctor John Madiga Her that was Sally McCall."

"Your boys sure picked 'em," the g commented. Mrs. Doctor John Madigan the Hunt Club, the Opera Club, the Civ Women's League. . . .

"My boy Ed never married," Pad blandly went on.

And a good thing, too, the manicu girl reflected. With the Madigan skill choosing a bride, he'd probably ha waltzed off with the Princess Ingrid Sweden.

"My boy Ed," Paddy continued, "does some kind of sashayin' around folks' family trees, in search of plur or quinces, as he says."

Nice going, thought the girl. Robert a Dr. John no doubt had had brother look up a pair of ultra blue-blooded brid for them. Great family spirit.

When the girl had finished, Paddy garded his hands with critical interes "I wouldn'ta believed you could do it Paddy said. "I'm sure goin' to buy me pair of gloves so's I can keep 'em th way until Sunday."

He got up, paid the girl, instinctive overtipping her, and moved toward t door.

"Well, I hope you have a real ni party, mister," the girl said. "How ma sons did you say you had?"

"I didn't mention," Paddy answer "But I got twenty-four."

"Twenty-four?" the girl asked, gri ping a chair-back for support.

"Nope," Paddy said, and smiled a fa away smile. 'I just got me a new o today. Now I got twenty-five. All fi boys, too."

The girl didn't answer. There was speech left in her.

Paddy, unheeding her collapse, peer

cautiously up and down the street; when it was deserted he slipped out through the doorway.

Later that afternoon, Paddy Madigan, wearing bright yellow kid gloves and a creaking pack took the trail for Madigan's Bench and its thriving telephone poles. He left word with various merchants that as soon as the party was over he would be needing a few men to cut the poles. "Later I'll put quite a crew to work," he concluded.

Behind him came a strange, but happy individual. The afternoon had changed Johnny Keller. His haircut had left a wide white strip, on the order of a bumper state, between the tanned skin and the brown hair. He wore new shoes and a suit of good clothing. The washboard pack on his back was new and the pack bag contained new tin pants, flannel shirts, socks and underwear.

"Where'd you get 'em, Johnny?" Paddy inquired when they paused to rest.

"I found out Julia Wylie cashiered at a store and I got my stuff there," Johnny answered reddening. "My gosh, but that girl's pretty. But it don't mean a thing," he hastily added.

"No," Paddy Madigan muttered, "not much!"

CHAPTER III

THE PARTY'S OVER

ALL afternoon they traveled, but with the coming of night, Paddy headed for a Forest Service shelter cabin.

Personally he could have gone on through, but the new boots hurt Johnny's feet and Paddy was a considerate man. A man's first impressions are lasting and the little logger had no wish to mar the infectious enthusiasm Johnny had displayed from the moment they entered big timber.

"He's different than the others," Paddy mused, puffing away on a corncob pipe and watching the fire die in the stove. "Maybe it's because he's older."

A night's rest and a good breakfast put Johnny Keller in shape for the next day's pack. His feet were in fair condition in spite of his new shoes; and they made fair time until Paddy called a halt.

"There's my timber, Johnny," he said, "across the river. We'll run a half mile of loggin' spur from the end of the old Epler road and take it out that way. Pretty, ain't it?"

"It sure is," Johnny agreed, balancing uncertainly on a log to obtain a better view.

"Planted it myself," the older man said proudly, "and they laughed when I said I'd live to log it. . . . Come on, let's go!"

The trail followed the river to a gorge where it forked. The left fork turned into a cable bridge spanning the river and which swayed dizzily as they crossed.

Madigan's cabin stood a quarter of a mile away. It seemed as if it might have grown there. The cedar shake roof was covered with moss and the weathered logs looked very old. The path leading to the door was worn deep and the timber doorsill had been chewed out by the calks of many boots.

Water was piped from the creek nearby and there was flow enough to water a large garden. "I fed my boys lots of garden truck," Paddy said, "and they grew like weeds. Go inside and take the room that looks best on the second floor—there's plenty of 'em."

A massive stone fireplace, large enough for a small boy to walk into stood in one end of the cabin. The ceiling was supported by hewn logs. Deer heads looked down from the walls; there were bear rugs on the floors.

Johnny Keller hung his few belongings on wooden pegs driven into the wall and then stepped to the window.

The hurrying waters of the creek were subdued—a distant chorus of voices. There was a noble sweep of timber ending in the upper levels; and above the timber, brooding peaks, capped with snow. He could see a waterfall tumbling two thousand feet from an ice field. It was

like a silver thread carelessly tossed on a granite block.

Johnny thought of the weary miles that lay behind; he counted the cost, struck a balance and favored the timber land. The day was spent in performing odd jobs and slicking up the cabin.

THE following day they roughly slashed a right of way to Epler's railroad and then Paddy Madigan and his newest son began to get ready for the birthday party. Paddy never took his gloves off once and his manicure remained inviolate.

"Say," Johnny suddenly cried Saturday morning, "how're your sons and their wives going to get here?"

"I told 'em to take a Trent Logging Company speeder to Elk Creek; get off, take the Forest Service trail to the cable bridge and they'll be here. It's only a mile and a half over the ridge," Paddy argued.

"But a mighty stiff climb for the women," Johnny insisted.

"But, gosh, that shouldn't tucker 'em out," Paddy said, "they'll walk that far in a golf game."

They were awake at five o'clock Sunday morning. Paddy had baited up a hole in the creek with salmon eggs and it was swarming with trout.

"The boys will want to catch enough fish for dinner," he explained. "We've packed in the meat and we've gathered all the vegetables we need from the garden." The cooler contained a row of pies; the cake and bread boxes were filled; quarts of cream had been sunk in the creek to keep cold; and there was a dishpan filled with wild blackberries.

Paddy opened a box and brought out two long tablecloths of pure Irish linen. "My mother's," he explained, "and only used on special occasions." He ironed the linen with loving care and spread it on the long tables, one of which he had hastily constructed for the emergency.

He fussed a lot over setting the table. "I want Bob's Katherine to think everything's nice," he explained, pathetic in his concern over the arrangement of the silver ware. "She's society, you know, but I guess that looks proper now. What do you think, Johnny?"

"I don't know much about such things," Johnny confessed, "but it sure looks grea to me."

"And last," Paddy chuckled, "The little brown jug!" He crawled into a dark close and emerged with a brown jug, tightly corked.

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me.
Little brown jug, don't I love thee.

He sang the chorus of his favorite song "There was a time, Johnny, my boy," he explained, "when I used to drink more'n my share of liquor. The boys made me quit. I put the best whisky I had into this jug, corked it and it's been there ever since. And that," he significantly added, "was before the war."

"Holy H. Mackinaw," Johnny gasped "before-the-war stuff!"

"I want my boys to know I kept my promise to 'em. In honor of the occasion we'll pull the cork and drink a toast to the everlastin' destruction of evil," Paddy stated. "And now I'll dress in my best."

Johnny heard him singing:

The rose is red, my nose is too,
The violets blue and so are you.
Yet I guess before I stop,
I'd better take another drop.

Johnny knew he was shaving, because there were frequent pauses and distortion in the song. Paddy lathered his face from an old-time mug which bore his name in gold letters and he used a straight edge razor. After a time he emerged:

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug . . .

"Well, Johnny, what do you think of me now? I'm all decked out like a plus horse!"

JOHNNY noticed the carefully brushed hair, the face scrubbed until it glowed the extra-close shave. Paddy wore an old

time hard-boiled shirt, pearl studs, a high collar and a green bow tie. His coat was so ancient it was taking on a faint green shade and the pants were patinaed to match.

His feet threatened to burst from a pair of tight patent leather shoes, somewhat cracked. "Them shoes are old, Johnny," he confessed, "but they still shine like a hearse. And now for the hardest part—the waitin' till they get here. I'm as nervous as an old maid expectin' a beau."

An old-fashioned clock with hurrying pendulum seemed perpetually engaged in the hopeless task of overtaking progress. It struck rapidly, each hour and half hour, as if resenting the effort and anxious to finish.

An hour passed, during which Paddy calculated aloud: "If the steamer's on time, and she usually is; and the Trent speeder didn't break down—which it don't, they should be here."

Johnny Keller walked nervously about the cabin for he noticed the anxiety on Paddy's battered features. Some of the shine was gone from his face, like silver dulled by the breath.

"I know I mailed the letters invitin' 'em. I had to buy stamps at the post office because I didn't have enough. I stood right there and put the letters in the slot . . . I did!"

A half hour later a lone figure in stagged pants and calked boots topped the ridge and trotted steadily down the trail. He set the cable bridge vibrating from the swiftness of his pace and puffing lightly entered the cabin. Only then did he appear uneasy.

"Doggone it, Paddy, I was on the wharf with the speeder when the steamer landed and—nobody come!"

"Nobody . . . come? Nobody?"

Paddy licked his lips uncertainly and then rubbed his face with a gnarled hand. The color was gone and the eyes were stricken.

"Nobody . . . come? Nobody come to my birthday party?"

He slumped down into a chair and stared terribly at the spotless floor. Johnny ached to comfort him but, criminy Joe, what could you say?

After a while, Paddy rose, pushing himself up unsteadily, and in a rasping voice, he cursed his boys one by one, from the first to the last.

"In all the world," he shouted, "there's nobody who cares for me but myself." He cursed again in a bitter voice for nearly a minute and that was worse than the other had been.

Suddenly he seemed to relent, as if to salve his own wound by those who had dealt it. "They've gone ahead! I've stood still. I expected 'em to marry and leave —that's part of life. Each one left an empty hole in my heart that was never filled, but . . ." Again his voice thundered in fury. "I expected 'em to come back and see me on my birthday. I didn't want 'em to come because it was a duty. I wanted 'em to come because they'd want to."

Johnny Keller moved a little nearer. "Paddy . . ." he began. "Please don't." His big hand rested on the old man's shoulder.

"Take your hand off me," Paddy snarled, "you'll be excusin' them next. I know! It's the women they married. They've changed my boys. They've got nicer things now and the boys are ashamed of me. Their wives wouldn't think I'm good enough. 'Mrs. Robert Talbot Madigan poured tea!'" he jeered. "Bah! It should be: 'Katy Madigan rubbed out a week's wash Monday mornin' and swapped gossip with Sally Madigan, the janitor's wife.' That's what it should be."

He whirled on Johnny Keller. "As for you, you pack up and clear out. I won't go through it again. You're one that *won't* fool me—that you won't!"

"I promised I'd stick with you ten years, Paddy," Keller said.

"Promised! Sure! And what did it mean? Nothing. You looked at Julia Wylie while you was hittin' me for a job. And you wanted her even though you was in rags."

"That's right, Paddy, but just the same," he doggedly insisted, "I'll stick as I promised!"

"You'll never get the chance! Clear out!" He shook his clenched fists at Keller. "Git!"

THE Trent-speeder engineer quietly left the cabin, but he too was cursing Paddy Madigan's two dozen sons. "Of course all of 'em couldn't get here," he growled, "because they've scattered and there'd be sickness. But some of 'em—the most of 'em could have been here if they cared."

Johnny Keller left the cabin with the clothes on his back—nothing more, but a few yards from the door he paused.

"Nope," he said. "I can't do it. I can't leave him like that. I'm going back. For the first time in his life that swell old guy needs somebody to lean on. But how am I ever going to convince him it's me he needs. More'n I need him, I guess." He hailed the Trent man, "Didn't one of Paddy's boys even write him?"

"Doggone it, I almost forgot. There wasn't any letters from the boys, but here's something from Old Epler."

Johnny Keller took it with relief, for in this he saw a possible way of getting Paddy's mind off his troubles. If Epler's proposition was fair the lease could be made and Paddy could occupy himself putting his equipment in order, repairing the old Epler tracks and building the spur to the second-growth timber. I'll take it to him," he said, but stopped at the door to consider. Suppose Epler had refused.

Keller didn't like the idea of opening other people's mail, but this was a crisis. Paddy Madigan had been through enough for one day. He opened the letter and the first paragraph, it appeared to Johnny, justified what he'd done. It read:

Dear Paddy:

For some reason I can't figure out Pete Ordway offered me a good price for my old road. Naturally I took it and my faith in Santa Claus is renewed.

Johnny stepped quietly to the window and peered into the cabin. Paddy Madigan was sitting in his chair, eyes on the table with its mocking rows of plates and silver ware. "I've got to get hold of myself," the old man muttered. "I can't let it get me. I got poles to get out—a job o' work to do. He squared his shoulders and began to sing:

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug, don't . . . don't . . .

His voice broke. "I can't do it!" he muttered. "There's no reason to do it. Nobody to do it for!" He looked at the table, which seemed to taunt him. In a frenzy he caught up the nearest dishes and began smashing them. His hard fist clutched the linen table cloth, then he remembered. He couldn't tear that. Irish sentiment was stronger than Irish fury.

HE LIFTED his eyes to the brown jug—symbol of a promise to his boys kept for years. "Ah!" There was the snarling defiance of an animal concentrated in the single exclamation.

He roved the cabin seeking a corkscrew and he found it as Johnny entered.

"You? Again? Get out!"

"I'm here to stay, Paddy," Johnny retorted. "I know how you feel!"

"*You* know how I feel?" Madigan sneered. "What can the likes of you know of hurts in here?" He tapped his breast. "It ain't the young that suffer—not ever."

"Twice, I've hurt here, Paddy," Johnny answered, tapping his own chest. "The first time was when I was eight years old, right after I was adopted. Everybody told me I was dumb and I wanted to show the people who'd adopted me that I wasn't dumb and that they'd made no mistake in picking me. Well . . ." He was facing Paddy, but his eyes were those of one looking back at an unhappy stranger.

"Yes," Paddy urged.

"I learned slow, spent twice as much time studying as the other kids, but I got

A in pretty near everything. I took it home—ran all the way—and showed it to my foster-father. 'I passed and I got *A*!' I yelled. And he said, 'Why tell me about it?' And—something hurt."

"Go on," Paddy said.

"The second time it was the exercises the kids had at the end of the year. I had a hell of a time learning Barbara Freitchie, but I learned it. You see, Paddy, it was to be the first time in my life I ever had folks in school like the other kids and I wanted to measure up."

Again there we a pause and again Johnny's gray eyes grew retrospective. "Well, Paddy, my folks didn't show up and I said my piece to people that didn't care —much. I was hurting inside and I mixed up the lines and stuttered and somebody . . . laughed. I never went back home."

Paddy Madigan crossed the room.

It was not Johnny Keller, man grown he was thinking of, but Johnny, age eight and alone. With nobody. "You poor little devil," he growled. "You poor little devil!"

"I'm making one more trial for a dad, Paddy," Johnny stated. "I'm sticking!"

"I'll make one more try, too, Johnny," Paddy said. "Maybe it'll turn out different for us both. Maybe you won't up and leave me flat and forget."

"I'll never leave you, Paddy," Johnny Keller promised, "I figure we need each other a lot."

CHAPTER IV

TIGHT DEAL

IT WAS next day before Johnny mentioned Epler's letter. The dishes had been put back on the shelves, the Irish linen table-spreads carefully folded and stored away. The two of them were trying to forget Paddy's birthday.

"Here's a letter that came yesterday. I didn't know whether the news was good or bad. I couldn't take a chance on it containing more disappointment, so I opened it. I'm glad I did," Johnny said.

"This Ordway ain't a friend, Paddy. Ordway used to be an enemy, didn't he?"

Paddy read the letter through twice, slowly; weighing the phrases and frequently glancing at the timber in a speculative manner.

"What can he want with Epler's road unless it's to stop me from shipping them telephone poles? Epler offered him the road at junk prices five different times and each time he laughed at him. Pete's that way when he isn't interested in a deal."

He tilted a worn rain-stained hat onto the back of his head and scratched the iron-gray thatch. "I'd hate to think Pete would pretend friendship just to hook me on a deal. It's still hard to believe. . . . Johnny, we're going to town."

Johnny's attempts to ride a log ended in splashing disaster and he took the trail to town while Paddy rode the water. But today Paddy did not sing. His face was set in grim lines because every instinct warned him of trouble ahead.

Paddy first called at the bank and gently mentioned a loan. "Here's the contract signed by the Bryant people," he added, "it calls for all the poles I can supply them the next year."

"And it also provides a heavy penalty in case you fail," the banker snapped. "How are you going to get those poles out? That second-growth stuff is too far from your own logging road. To extend a spur would mean bridging Snow River and you can't afford that."

"Simple enough," Paddy replied with a display of confidence he did not feel. "I'm takin' them poles out over the old Epler road."

"Which is now owned by Ordway. Sorry, Paddy, but we can't make a loan as it stands," the banker said in a tone of finality. "Bring in an agreement with Ordway and we can do business."

"I'll see Pete right away," Paddy promised.

"Pete's away on a vacation—won't be back for a month," the banker informed

him. "He pulled out as soon as he closed the Epler deal.

"Nobody at his office can give any information—I asked, because I expected you would apply for a loan and I wanted details cleared up in advance if possible."

The banker smiled. "Paddy, speaking personally, as an old friend and not as the town banker, I'm afraid Pete is planning to take you to the cleaners."

"He's never done it yet," Paddy flared, "and he's tried it for years. He's had me in places so tight an Oriental dancer couldn't wiggle out, but I managed it."

"There's always a first time, Paddy," the banker reminded him, "Pete's advanced, grown powerful and wealthy the last few years. You've been busy raising other people's boys. You've stood still."

"I ain't regrettin' what I done," Paddy insisted. "But if he's out to get me why did he make me put in a high bid so I could make money?"

The banker's smile was bland and professional as he answered: "Because if he takes over your holdings, Paddy, he will also take over your contract with the Bryant people and naturally he'll want to make a fat profit. That's the reason he jacked up your bid and submitted an even higher bid of his own. Paddy, it's tough. But it's all quite legal. You can't do a single thing about it."

Paddy mentally checked on his own resources.

There was a fair balance in his checking account and this could be materially sweetened by the sale of bonds and other securities not affected by local conditions. He opened his safe deposit box, cleaned it out and dropped the packet onto the banker's desk. "Sell 'em and credit my account," he ordered, "if I've got a finish fight ahead I might as well hop to it."

"That's right, Paddy," the banker agreed, but with little enthusiasm. Privately he was of the opinion Ordway had sewed Paddy up tight, that Paddy didn't have a chance this time. Even a Fourth of July greased pig could not elude Ordway's grasping fingers. It was unfair and crooked and the law of the jungle, but it was the plain cold fact as well.

"WE'LL be here a couple of days," Madigan told Johnny Keller. "You might's well get acquainted. There's a dance tonight and most of the town will be there. I may even go so far as to strike a few slivers from the puncheon myself."

They were busy until the stores closed buying camp supplies and arranging for to ship them over the Trent logging road to Elk River. From this point they would be carried by pack train, since Paddy had decided to use the cabin and ranch as headquarters for logging operations. Paddy's other camps were too remote.

It was eleven o'clock when Paddy put in an appearance at the dance and looked hopefully about for a wallflower agile enough to dodge his feet and strong enough to last out one number with him. When Paddy danced he danced and so did his partner. There wasn't any likely looking Amazon in sight, so Paddy joined the men.

Moose Burch, Ordway's woods boss, was leaning against the wall, his face as dark as a thundercloud. Paddy noticed Burch had his eyes unwaveringly set on Julia Wylie, who was dancing with Johnny Keller. The pair behaved as if they inhabited a world apart above the fleeciest clouds.

"That's been goin' on all the evenin', Paddy," a high-rigger informed the little Irishman with glee, "and Burch is fightin' mad. He's sorta been keepin' company with Julia, you know."

"I didn't know," Paddy said, eyes narrowing. "So Burch is mad?"

Paddy slid along the wall, warming over the possibilities. He was convinced that the best way of getting a man to tip off his hand was to get him fighting mad. When the explosion came, interesting things sometimes emerged into daylight. In this instance Paddy was confident Burch knew plenty about Ordway's plans.

"Hello, Burch." He jerked his thumb toward Johnny and Julia. "They make a slick-lookin' couple, don't they?"

A scowl settled over Burch's heavy but not unhandsome face. He shifted his massive shoulders, then settled back against the wall. "That little rat's breedin' himself a mess of trouble," he answered, leveling a hateful gaze at Paddy.

"I never seen a mess of trouble I couldn't get out of," Paddy said, deliberately leaving himself open for a retort, "and Johnny's about my size. I guess he can take care of himself."

"You've never seen trouble you couldn't get out of, eh?" Burch laughed. "Well, Pete Ordway's got you in a place right now you won't be gettin' out of so slick. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, you sawed-off mick!"

"Thanks, Burch." Paddy grinned. "That's what I wanted to find out. Now I can go ahead accordin'."

Several loggers burst into laughter and Burch realized he had shown his hand. In a sudden burst of bull-like anger he lashed out his fist and knocked Paddy sprawling.

The little Irishman skidded over the polished floor and spilled a couple of dancers with resounding thuds. Fighting mad, Paddy got to his feet, but Johnny Keller was already rushing at Burch. "Hit an old man, will you?"

"Dang it, Johnny," Paddy roared, "I ain't old! Keep out of this—it's a private fight!"

JOHNNY'S one hundred and thirty pounds and five-feet-four inches continued the rush towards Burch's six-feet-three inches and two hundred and twenty-five pounds. It was evident Johnny took no stock whatever in the adage that a good big man can always beat a good little man.

In his efforts to stop, Johnny slipped and skidded into Burch's feet. Burch roared and yanked Johnny to his feet with a force that ripped his coat. Burch was thinking now of Julia in Johnny's arms, waltzing. "You asked for it. Now you're getting it!"

He lifted Johnny high above his head and crashed him down to the floor.

Paddy Madigan, howling Irish curses, hurled himself at Burch while Johnny was still in midair. He found the favorite logger's hold—a fistful of hair. Then several pairs of hands grasped the little logger and began pulling. Other hands were holding Burch, but Paddy kept his hold while Burch bellowed his pain.

Paddy still clutched a man-sized handful ripped from Burch's bleeding scalp when they were finally dragged apart. Paddy was hustled out the back door, Burch the front. But Paddy came back. "How's that boy of mine?" he panted, working his way to Johnny's side.

A logging-camp doctor came over to have a look. "Better put him to bed," he advised, "that slam on the floor may have injured him internally. We can't take chances."

"I'm all right, doc," Johnny said, though his lips were ashen.

"Do as the doc says," Paddy ordered.

Paddy fearfully wondered if maybe he hadn't paid too much to get that admission from Burch. If Johnny was bad hurt—why nothing was worth that much. . . . But at any rate he did know for sure now that Pete Ordway had bought the old Epler logging road for the sole purpose of blocking shipment of Paddy's poles. He knew it, but he didn't know exactly what to do about it.

JOHNNY was in bed in town the next day. "For observation," the doctor explained, but the hardship was not too great in Paddy's opinion—Julia Wylie was at the bedside reading aloud.

"Take things easy, son," Paddy ordered, "I'm starting a logging camp today. See you later!"

At noon a Trent Logging Company locomotive backed a string of flat cars into town, Paddy's men and equipment were loaded aboard and the train headed for Elk River. Every pack animal in the coun-

try was waiting to take the supplies over the ridge to Paddy's cabin.

A day later a cook was installed in the kitchen and Paddy's men were dropping trees.

Johnny Keller was away a week; then since nothing serious seemed to be the trouble, he arrived, eager to go to work. Paddy duly noted he was just as eager to return to Sawmill City at every opportunity. "It's Julia," the old logger muttered, "but it ain't goin' to do him no good. He's agreed to stick with me ten years."

One gang of men logged, a second peeled the poles which were stored in cold deck along the river bank.

As they worked the men speculated on Paddy's future course. How was he going to ship them out? To build a spur over the ridge to the friendly Trent road would be prohibitive. To slash a wagon road and truck them would be equally expensive. Nor could Paddy run a spur down Snow River and cross to his own logging road which extended through his big stand of virgin timber. Such a road would be three miles long and would necessitate a bridge across the stream.

All this, they reasoned, Pete Ordway had considered before he bought the Epler road. Paddy was blocked. There was no argument on that. What would he do about it?

He no longer sang *Little Brown Jug,* which was significant.

When Pete Ordway came back Paddy made no attempt to get in touch with him; and that puzzled Pete and the whole logging country more than anything else he could have done.

Bryant, hearing rumors, hurried up from Seattle. Then Paddy hopped aboard one of his logs and floated down river to see him.

Bryant got down to business at once. "Madigan," he said, "I know your reputation for delivering the goods as per contract. Furthermore you are heavily bonded. So I'm in no danger of financial loss if you fail. But unless those poles are delivered on time it will throw my whole organization out of wack. Our crews are in the mountains now and they'll soon be shooting across the desert. Then we're going to want poles quick. Well, I've made my speech. Now you have the floor."

Paddy made the shortest speech on record. "I'll deliver!"

"How?"

"One way or another—maybe over the Epler road," Paddy answered carelessly. His old eyes searched Bryant's face avidly. The bluff hadn't worked.

"Let's see Ordway now," Bryant insisted.

"Sure!" Paddy agreed.

They walked down the street to Ordway's office and as the little logger climbed the stairs he was whistling, *Little Brown Jug.*

"He's got no business whistling that," Pete growled, "he's bluffing. I've got the little devil at last and he knows it." He saw Paddy's outline through the frosted glass door. "All I've got to remember is—I've got him; and he knows it. Then he can't bluff me." Pete Ordway set his jaw and said, "Come in, Paddy!"

PETE started to speak, but Paddy beat him to it. "Pete! You offered a truce, even friendship. I shook hands and then you double-crossed me. You're makin' a play for my telephone poles and the big timber across the river. You ain't goin' to get 'em.

"You've paid good money for Epler's road and you won't get a dime of it back unless you do business with me. It's worthless to you unless you own that stand of telephone poles—which you don't!" he barked. "Here's my offer in black and white. It's fair! Take it or leave it."

He tossed a folded paper on Ordway's desk.

Ordway did not even glance at the figures. He tore the paper to bits and dropped the scraps into a waste basket. "Look here, you old weasel. I'm the one that's dictating the terms in this deal and I'm not saying a word—except that you can't ship

one lone, solitary log out over the old Epler road. Not a stick—not at any price."

"Gentlemen," Bryant interrupted. "I am not interested in your personal disputes, but I am interested in those poles."

Ordway raised a hand that was both confident and admonishing. "Don't worry, Mr. Bryant, any time you see fit to force the bonding company's hand and bring about a sale of Madigan's assets I'll bid in, take the pole contract over at the present figure and deliver. It is merely up to you."

"So that's the situation, eh?" Bryant drew a pad from his pocket and did some figuring. "Gentlemen, you understand I am not considering the merits of your dispute, either way. I, too, make a heavy forfeit if I fail to complete the pole line on time.

"Mr. Madigan I shall have to insist the poles be delivered on the twenty-fifth. Otherwise I will be forced to take the necessary protective measures. You understand, of course?"

"Sure," Paddy agreed. "But don't worry. I'll deliver." He turned to Ordway. "As for you, Pete Ordway, you lost your last chance to cash in on your Epler investment. Not a stick—not at any price, huh? Then I'll get the lumber down river my own way!"

CHAPTER V

OPENING OF HOSTILITIES

AS LONG as Bryant was in Paddy's presence he absorbed much of the little logger's outward confidence, but as soon as he was alone he began to worry.

"I've asked a dozen disinterested parties," he reflected, "and they all agree that Ordway's got him. They also agree that he has squirmed free before when things looked tight. On the surface those two were calm enough, but they were both fighting mad. It's going to be a finish fight with plenty of rough stuff thrown in."

Ordway decided to look around once more to assure himself he had overlooked no bets. Accordingly he took the Forest Service trail that afternoon and studied the ground.

On one side of Snow River was Madigan's big timber, untouched except for a logging road. On the opposite side, the Epler logged-off area; which ended at Madigan's stand of telephone poles.

"He's got to take 'em out that way," Ordway told himself for the hundredth time. "Unless he's crazy enough to think he can float 'em down river. That's never been done—and it can't *be* done. However . . . Come on, Burch."

They proceeded with caution for nearly a mile, then crossed the stream on a drifting log.

Edging along the bank they gained Madigan's first cold deck with its gleaming peeled poles. Using a pair of hastily cut saplings for levers, they rolled a half dozen of the poles into the stream.

"Now let's light out before some of Paddy's gang team up on us," Ordway cried.

At the next turn in the river they caught the poles, leaped aboard two of the largest and rode down stream.

Several hundred yards above Horse Tail Falls they made their way ashore and followed the bank. The drifting of the white mists as caught by the canyon currents resembled the switching of a horse's tail, which had given the falls its name.

It was impossible to watch the passage of the poles, but they heard the splintering crash of wood against rock even above the roar of the falls. Each pole completed the final leap in a shattering boom.

In the pool below the falls the poles eddied before continuing downstream. Logs such as Paddy often rode could survive the falls, but the telephone poles were now fit only for stove wood.

"That's settled," Ordway growled, "Paddy's no fool and he won't send the poles down river. But if not, then why is he piling 'em up along the bank?"

"If you take my advice," Moose Burch said, "you'll stop his logging. It's a cinch

he can't deliver standing trees. Stop his logging—don't let him pile 'em up along the river, then spring some delivery stunt the last minute. We've stopped other outfits we wanted out of the way. I owe that pair of runts something on my own account."

"What's the matter—Julia thrown you over for Johnny Keller?" Ordway asked.

"There's no accountin' for a girl's taste. She don't love Johnny Keller—she can't! Julie just feels sorry for him, but it's just as tough on me as if she loved him," Burch said.

"Don't start workin' on him in public like you did at the dance," Ordway advised. "It throws sympathy away. He's smaller than you. Get him when there's nobody around. He's cocky; all steamed up with loyalty because Paddy took him in and he'll be in the thick of the fight—that'll be our chance."

"When do we start takin' the Madigan crowd apart?" Burch inquired.

"Tonight."

THE ways of treachery in the woods are many and varied, and often difficult to detect until it is too late. Perhaps a logger is caught in the bight of a swinging cable which has been partly cut and breaks with the first heavy strain. A spike driven into a log will send a saw into bits when steel meets steel. A wrong signal may result in serious injury to those working with the hooks.

With all sorts of trickery not only possible but highly probable, Paddy Madigan was on guard. He was nervous when a crew of six failed to return to the cabin at dinnertime one evening. "Come on, Johnny, we'll have a look into this."

The two of them quit the regular trails for game trails and approached the point where the men had been at work. Numerous fallen trees testified to their industry, but there was a threat in the very silence which seemed to hover about.

Axes and saws had been hastily dropped and on every hand was evidence of conflict. Buttons, bits of cloth and ground badly scarred by calked boots were all significant. Bloodstains led towards a small creek, and Paddy followed. A groan reached their ears as they neared the stream and Paddy broke into a trot.

"What happened?" he shouted, "and where are you?"

"Here . . . Paddy!"

Three conscious men, badly beaten, were attempting to revive three unconscious men.

"Ten loggers jumped us," one of them explained. "We put up a fight, but they got us, and when they got us it was just too bad. I feel like a steamroller had worked on me. May have a couple of ribs broke—hurts when I breathe."

"Who were the men?" Paddy inquired.

"Don't know," the other answered, "but probably somebody Ordway's brought in."

"Go home, Johnny," Madigan ordered, "and bring back a dozen of the boys and my first-aid kit. I should have brought it along anyway."

Johnny Keller broke into a run that took him to the scene of battle. Briefly he paused and located a button he had seen a few minutes before. It had been torn from a shirt in the fight and there was something about it vaguely familiar.

He tucked it into his pocket for future reference and continued on to the cabin.

Instead of twelve responding to his call, every man except the cook followed him. "The rough stuff is okay with us," one of them said in a low tone. "Are you going to stick?"

"I'll stick until it gets too bad," his companion answered, "then I'll quit. I can't afford to get badly hurt—I've got a family."

"That's the worst of it," the first agreed. "We're nearly all family men. Ordway never fights much in the open when he's out to get a man."

Two of the injured men were taken to town next day. Paddy was playing safe where the possibility of broken bones was concerned. He return late that night on a Trent speeder and awakened Johnny.

"How'd things go today?" he asked.

"Not so good, Paddy. The men are on pins and needles. They are expecting something to happen any minute and—"

"I'm expecting something to happen any minute too," Paddy said. "If we can just keep 'em on the job another two weeks we'll have enough poles cut. Most likely Ordway will have 'em driven off before we're finished.

"The two men I took to town will talk, the families of the others will hear the gossip and begin to worry; and the women will send 'em word to quit and come home. Loggin' country women know what can happen."

"Well I haven't any wife to worry about me," Johnny assured him.

Paddy Madigan snorted. "Just as I left, Julia buttonholed me and wanted details about what you was doin', Johnny. She was worryin', you see."

"About me?"

"About you, dang it! Remember no weddin' bells for you, son. You're the child of my old age, you know. Suppose we turn in," the logger concluded.

"COME and get it or I'll throw it out," the cook bellowed the next morning. A logger groaned and rolled from his bunk.

"Another day—another dollar."

"If you last the day out," a companion grimly suggested.

The first man grew serious.

All that day and the next nothing happened. The men began to relax, and that was when Paddy's vigilance increased.

"There may be a spy in our midst," Paddy suggested, "and we've got to watch out for dirty work."

Paddy and Johnny inspected hundreds of feet of cable and Paddy double-checked equipment that Johnny would have passed by.

As they finished their work the old logger's glance fell on the great cold decks, but he breathed no sigh of relief. Victory was not yet his and nobody realized it more.

The echo of the starting whistle had hardly died away in the mountains when the thing they feared happened.

A gin pole—a fir tree which had been topped—supported a network of cables, blocks and lines which picked up the trees and carried them to the cold decks. The gin pole, in turn was supported with guy wires attached to conveniently located tree stumps. A donkey engine supplied the necessary power and as the engineer threw in the clutch and the drum began reeling in the cable, the exhaust puffed and snorted from the strain.

Several poles were dragged from a gulch and were almost in the clear when one of them jammed. The engineer opened the throttle, there was a series of violent jerks as the jammed pole broke free, followed by the crack of a parting guy wire.

A second and a third let go almost at the same instant.

"Look out!" Paddy bellowed. "The gin pole's goin' next!"

The engineer paused to relieve the strain, then fled to safety. The fireman, failing to hear the first warning saw the guy wires lashing through the brush, severing young trees in a flash; leaped from his post just as the gin pole crashed.

It came down on top of the engine bringing with it heavy blocks and the remaining guy wires. There was a heavy report as the impact of the gin pole burst the boiler; vapor filled the air and hot water was blown violently over a wide area.

From two separate spots came the cries of injured men. One logger lay under a heavy block; the fireman was somewhere in the débris about the boiler.

JOHNNY KELLER was the first to rush in. Heedless of scalding water he burrowed into the débris and dragged out the fireman. Others were carrying the man struck down by the block. Paddy Madigan's first-aid equipment was opened and Paddy himself with surprisingly sure and tender fingers felt their injuries.

"Get these two boys up to the cabin, then send for the doctor. There'll be no

more work for several days," he announced. "Johnny, you stay with me."

When the others had departed Paddy sighed. "It could have been worse. That hook-tender may have a fractured skull, but I don't think so. His breed is thick-headed in more ways than one.

"The fireman is sufferin' like the devil, but he won't have many blisters. He can thank you for that. Five seconds after you got him out the wreckage shifted and drenched the spot with scalding water. We're goin' to have a look, Johnny, so keep your eyes open."

Paddy went directly to the stumps holding the guy wires and examined the broken cable ends.

"See that?" he cried, his voice thick with rage. "Sawed deep enough so the guy wire would break under the first heavy strain or jerk. The devils were smart, too. They planned it so the gin pole would fall right on the engine, just like it did."

"Here's where he stood when he sawed the wire," Johnny said. "Look! His sleeve rubbed as he worked, and the bark on the stump picked up a few threads and bits of wool. That'll go with the button I found the other day. We got to fight back, Paddy. I'll be plowed right down to the ground if we should let those rats get away with this.

"Amen, Johnny!"

Next they inspected the donkey engine. "Junk," was the logger's verdict. "It can't be repaired and it'll take ten days to get another into the country. Let's see, this is the fifth of the month and the poles must be delivered by the twenty-fifth. Ten days for operations after the new equipment is set up. Hmmmm. Not enough time, but it could be done if I had a good crew—a whale of a good crew.

"In the old days when my boys were here I could have done it. Johnny, they were loggers."

"I suppose we might as well figure to start another donkey engine this way," Johnny suggested. "If it could be brought in over the Epler road the job would be finished in a day."

"And there's a gent name of Ordway who's goin' to see it ain't brought in over the Epler road."

CHAPTER VI

TWENTY-THREE FATTED CALVES

SHORTLY after Paddy and Johnny returned to the cabin, most of the men decided to return to their families until operations were renewed.

A Trent Logging Company speeder would be waiting at Elk Creek for the injured men. The doctor, it seemed, was on another case and could not get there immediately.

"Pack the boys over the ridge on stretchers," Paddy directed. "It'll get 'em to the doctor quicker as long as he can't come here. And don't you boys worry," he added. "Your pay goes on as long as you are in bed."

As the stretcher bearers moved slowly over the trail that night, Ordway and Burch looked on with satisfaction. "We've got 'em softened up," Burch chuckled. "Now they're ripe for the next move."

"It might not be healthy to act right away, on account of the men who got hurt today," Ordway said. "We'll talk it over tomorrow at Sawmill City." He looked down from the ridge to the scene of operations. "Are you certain Madigan hasn't cut enough poles to fill the contract?"

"I checked over twice," Burch replied, "he'll have to go like the devil for two weeks to complete the job. But I haven't got my crack at Keller yet."

"Don't worry, Moose," his employer assured him. "You'll get your chance."

NEXT day they managed to talk to every man Paddy had employed. "Madigan's through," they informed each of them. "From now on the country this side of the ridge is run by Ordway. Any man who works for Madigan from this date will be blacklisted by the Ordway Company and will never be employed

by them. You men who own homes here and depend on logging for a living, think that over!"

No matter how much the men might resent the injustice of such an ultimatum, they had themselves and their families to consider.

The Ordway Company was the big outfit; the Madigan Logging Company, though a heavy timber-owner, was really a one-man outfit and worked only occasionally.

Paddy Madigan took care of his men, though; and if he went under, many pensioners would suffer. Most of them thought of this angle; most of them cursed Ordway bitterly, but in the end they had to agree to his terms. They felt like skunks —but skunks always eat, and heroes sometimes don't.

A committee of three came to Paddy Madigan several days later with the news. Paddy was in one of his old camps, putting a donkey in order—the donkey which somehow must reach the job. He listened gravely until with much hemming and hawing they informed him.

"It's all right, boys," he told them. "You got your families to think about. I'm not licked yet. If I pull out of this, you can have your old jobs back and no hard feelin's."

As they walked away one of them growled, "If I was a single man I'd go through Hell in a wicker basket for that old boy. He takes it standin' up."

And Paddy's head was unbowed when he reached his cabin that night. "I can't see any way out, Johnny," he said and he seemed tired and his sturdy shoulders drooped. "My crew's quit. Ordway's scared 'em out. Now hold on, Johnny, don't blame the boys. They're married."

"What'll you do now?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know. I just don't know. Nobody's going to risk getting Ordway down on him just to help out a broken-down mick who sure looks licked," Paddy said. "I've got to think. Got to get that engine on the job. Got to get a crew."

"Then you won't give up, Paddy?"

"Hell, no!" Paddy snorted. "But neither can a man lift hisself up by his bootstraps."

"Do you mind if I take a few days off then?" Johnny asked somewhat reluctantly.

"Want to catch up on your sparkin', eh?" Madigan said. Then with a trace of anxiety: "You'll come back won't you, Johnny? I've learned to think a pile of you, son. And I guess I'm beginnin' to lean a little on others."

"Sure. I'll come back." But his eyes were evasive. Johnny Keller had something on his mind—something he was holding back.

AFTER he was gone, the cabin seemed dreary. "I'm sure alone," Paddy muttered. "I wonder why I like that Johnny boy. I suppose because he was kicked around when he was a lad—like I was." He lifted his voice mournfully.

My wife and I live all alone,
In a little log . . .

"Aw, what's the use. I don't feel like singing. But Johnny sang when he went down the river—he was happy, he was going to his girl. I can't hold him against her. I haven't any business to try, but—Aw, the devil. Now if I can round up a crew . . ."

And Paddy Madigan by a supreme effort forced himself to keep his mind on business and not the darkness that would be his when Johnny left him to marry Julia Wylie.

A week passed and still no Johnny.

Just when Paddy was on the point of dropping down river to Sawmill City, Bryant appeared. Bryant was worried. "I can't legally take action until the twenty-fifth," he said. "But if you can't see your way to make delivery, won't you let me know, Madigan? Every day counts with me. How about it?"

Paddy led the way down river to the scene of operations. "That's what I had logged when they stopped me, Bryant.

Now it's a question of a crew; then it's a matter of delivery. But I ain't ready to fold up yet. I've got to beat Ordway. Why hang it, Bryant, if he wins this time it'll make an old man of me. I've felt it coming on ever since his men cut my guy wires."

"That's a pretty strong accusation," Bryant ventured.

"But dang it, it's the Lord's truth. Even if I can't prove it," Paddy answered ruefully. "I'll let you know when I'm licked. And I'll be eternally hornswoggled if I'll wait until the twenty-fifth. Tomorrow I'm goin' to Seattle to see if I can round up a crew that ain't afraid of Ordway." He tried to make it sound as if it might work out.

"And you nor any one else hasn't much hope of your success, Madigan, but I certainly respect your courage." Bryant left the camp, as worried as when he came.

PADDY MADIGAN was alone. Less than an hour before Ordway had called him on the telephone and jeered. "Rubbed it in, he did," the old man growled.

He walked to the mirror and looked at his face. The lines had deepened since Johnny had gone and with a sinking sensation he wondered if Johnny would ever come back. When you beat a young 'un, the way Johnny had been, you sometimes got a man who'd turn yellow.

"No, Johnny's not that . . . ah! He's coming now! No! By golly that ain't Johnny's footfall at all. That's . . . that's . . ." Paddy's old heart began to pound with excitement. "That's my Bob's old swingin' stride! It's him sure'n taxes!"

Paddy nearly tore the door down getting out of the cabin.

"Bob! You imp of Satan, how in tarnation . . ." Paddy choked back the words.

There was no doubt of it, the beautiful woman in out-of-doors clothes directly behind Bob was Mrs. Robert Talbot Madigan, who poured tea. Paddy wiped his hand nervously then held it out. The manicure was all worn off now.

"Dad! It's great to see you," Bob crie "This is Katherine."

Paddy kept out his gnarled hand. Mr Robert Talbot Madigan seemed not to se it. Reddening, Paddy let it drop. And the Katherine Madigan had her arms aroun him, and her lips were brushing his cheel

"We've neglected you shamefully, Dad, she said, "but Bob has been so terribl busy. Really he has. I'm not just makin excuses."

Paddy's heart was almost melting witl happiness.

A shout caused Paddy to look up th trail. "Hell's bells!" he shouted, "That' my John—Doctor John—"

A laughing young woman was running behind the galloping John. "Her that was Sally McCall," Paddy said to himself "Née Sally McCall the papers used to call her."

She cut in in front of her husband and smacked Paddy full on the lips. "I told you I'd be here first, John," she cried breathlessly. "This is perfect. What a marvelous cabin! Is that where you grew up John? I think it is wonderful."

Paddy dragged a large handkerchief from his pocket and fussed with his nose. "This is my day, and I don't care a hang if Pete Ordway walks off with everything, I'm happy.

"But just let Pete try it. My gosh, look at the people coming down the trail. Why danged if it ain't Ed—him that is always lookin' up ancient history and what not. The same serious-lookin' cuss, but he's grinnin' at the sight of his old Dad. Ed . . . boy."

"Dad! . . . The rest of the boys are coming. Every one of them, except Dud and Jay. Dud's back East and Jay's prospectin' in Alaska," Ed told him.

After that Paddy Madigan was like a rock in the surf—he was smothered by succeeding waves, but in this instance it was waves of those who loved him. He moved about in a bewildered manner, half fearful that it was a dream from which he would presently awaken.

"But—but . . ." Paddy stammered.

"Bob, you do the talking," Doctor John said, smiling. They all acted a little drunk. Paddy most of all.

"It's like this, Dad," Bob said, "our new brother, the kid, seems to be quite a boy. We didn't know he existed until he came popping in on us the other day.

"He told us about the—the birthday party. I guess each of us thought all of the others would be there. We've all been pretty busy but that's no excuse. And Johnny certainly laid into us. You ought to have heard him. We're all ashamed of ourselves. And Katherine added a couple of remarks that your Johnny left out. He can bawl a man out almost as well as you can."

"Let me tell the rest of this." Johnny Keller had appeared unnoticed and Julia Wylie was with him. He eyed Paddy a little nervously—but Paddy was too overwhelmed for anger. He only mumbled, "You shouldn't a bothered them, Johnny. I—"

"I went to Bob," Johnny explained, in a hurry. "And I told him Ordway was riding you hard; that he hadn't been able to beat you by fair business tactics and was fighting crooked and that you needed help. And Bob sat right down to the telephone and called the rest of the boys, twenty-one in all. And every man dropped what he was doing and came—that's what they think of you, Paddy."

And Paddy just stood there, with his feet wide apart, shoulders erect, chin up, but saying nothing. But his eyes were glistening and he was singing *Little Brown Jug* inwardly.

"We talked it over," Bob told him, "and here we are. The girls are going to do the cooking and we're going to do the logging and put Pete Ordway in his place. We may be doctors, businessmen and what not, Dad, but first of all we're Paddy Madigan's boys and Paddy Madigan's boys are loggers. Now let's get organized and, Dad . . . for old time's sake, won't you cook us up a meal? We've been telling the girls what a wizard you are in the kitchen."

"Well, by golly," Paddy faltered and looked at his hands, "there ain't much left of that manicure, but—I'll do her."

CHAPTER VII

BATTLE ROYAL

PADDY MADIGAN filled several pans with strips of bacon; and as it began to sizzle, he yelled, "Time to get up, boys—goin' to lie in bed all day?"

Sleepy-looking girls in bright-hued pajamas and dressing gowns straggled out of bed. "The boys have been gone all night," Katherine said, yawning. "Something about a donkey engine."

Just then the blast of a donkey engine whistle shattered the morning stillness. Paddy yanked the frying bacon off the fire. "Good goshamighty!" he bellowed. "That can't be far away!"

He ran from the cabin and took the trail at full speed. When winded, he slowed up to a dog trot that took him across his own timberland to the stretch of cut-over land beyond.

In the midst of this desolation moved a donkey, steam pluming up from its exhaust and the whole thing rocking violently as its skids moved over the uneven ground.

Paddy's boys dragged a cable ahead, made it fast, and the donkey simply wound up the cable, pulling itself along at fair speed. Doctor John was at the levers. "More fun than an operation, Dad," he yelled.

"It was Johnny Keller's idea," Bob explained. "We loaded the donkey onto a flat car, shunted it onto the Epler road and went as far as the first bridge. It didn't look safe so we sent the locomotive back and let the donkey drag itself and the car to the end of steel. The rest has been easy. Ordway never expected anything like that and so there was no fight. Not much of a one, anyhow."

"Breakfast is ready," Paddy said, then, "as soon as that engine is on Madigan ground you better come and eat." He didn't have to say anything else.

It was two days later that Ordway learned what had happened. Moose Burch came storming in. "Madigan took a donkey in over the old Epler road. Knocked out your line-guards," he yelled. "And he's got a crew working twelve hours a day."

"Throw a scare into 'em," Ordway directed. "Drive 'em out of the woods."

"Fat chance!" Burch replied bitterly. "It's Madigan's orphans! Keller told 'em we had the old man cornered and they dropped everything. It's just like it used to be at school. You jumped one of 'em and you had the whole gang after you."

"Get our crowd together and be ready for anything," Ordway shouted. "If we can't stop operations, we *can* stop delivery. Bryant is going crazy anyhow."

That afternoon Ordway made a personal tour of inspection. He didn't need the testimony of the line-guards. The donkey had gone over the rusty Epler rails.

"I'll sue him for that," Ordway blustered, then changed his mind. "No. And have everybody giving me the laugh."

He watched Paddy's boys in action. It was evident they hadn't forgotten their training. Their teamwork was perfect and they accomplished more than twice their number of hastily assembled loggers could have.

IT WAS the morning of the twenty-fourth that the last pole was dropped into a cold deck. "Well, Dad, tip your hand," Bob urged. "How're we going to get 'em out?"

"We'll all take the trail for Elk Creek," Paddy state, "where a speeder will be waitin' for us!"

Mystified, they followed him. As they walked they excitedly discussed the old days. To a man they were in shape. There had been few stiff muscles the first days of logging and even these had limbered up. The speeder took them to Jerry Trent's Camp One. Jerry had fought battles on his own account in the past and was sympathetic. "You can have anything I've got, Paddy," he said, "without cost, unless it is broken up."

"In which case it'll be paid for," Paddy answered. "Well I'll want two locomotives, every logging truck you've got, and all of your cherry pickers! My boys will run everything—it isn't fair to expect your men to take the risk."

Three hours were needed to get the equipment into shape.

Slowly it moved through the timber to Madigan's old Camp One. The Trent and Madigan logging roads met at this point. Paddy's own locomotive, his trucks and cherry-picker were added to the rolling stock. The long string of cars moved to the main line which followed Snow River most of the way to Sawmill City. But Paddy switched the trains upstream and the locomotives doggedly dragged their combined burdens to the end of steel deep in Paddy's big timber.

Horse Tail Falls roared a hundred yards below the last car.

Bob Madigan dropped from the locomotive—which was headed downstream as they had backed all the way—and he looked at the falls speculatively.

"What's your game, Dad?" he asked, "you can't run logs through this. We've reached the end of steel and your poles are three miles upstream and on the opposite side."

They grouped about him, as they had done as boys, faces eager and confident. They knew from experience that Dad usually had a way.

"You're a fine bunch," Paddy said with a chuckle. "And your old Dad won't be keeping secrets from you much longer, but first—we've got to get them cherry-pickers off the line and onto special rails. There's extra ties and rails on them flat cars. Lively now "

THEY worked under the glare of locomotive headlights when darkness came and it was then that Paddy and Johnny slipped quietly away and began tunneling into the canyon wall just below the falls.

They worked until midnight, then returned to the train. "Come on, boys,"

Paddy directed, indicating a heap of freight covered with a canvas, "each of you pick up a case."

"Dynamite!" Bob exclaimed.

"The same!"

They carried it to the drift Paddy and Johnny had made in the wall and the old logger stowed it with care. "Now clear out—all of you!" he ordered.

When they were gone, he applied the fuse and followed them. There was no loud explosion—merely a sullen shock, then a growl.

The canyon wall heaved out violently, then everything above began to settle. Boulders, rocks, trees and hundreds of tons of earth poured into the canyon until it almost reached the crest.

They watched the river rise slowly. Paddy delayed a half hour, then turned to two of his boys. "You'll recall them cold decks will all spill into the river by a chopping away a couple of stakes. Well —chop 'em!"

The two were off immediately and the others squatted on the bank to rest. Paddy kindled a fire and filled a huge coffee pot, then opened a box containing sandwiches. They ate, drank coffee and watched the waters rise until boulders which shattered timber were covered and the falls itself smothered.

The site of the falls was now marked by a lake. In the east the dawn was just beginning to break.

"There's one thing you haven't thought about, Dad," Bob suggested, "when this dam lets go it will take out the railroad bridge four miles down river. Unless the train is across before the bridge goes out you'll be trapped."

"It's the chance we gotta take," Paddy answered, "and . . ."

"And it's the point where Ordway will strike when he gets next to your scheme," Johnny added. "Look over there—quick!" A light suddenly flared, lingered and died. "Somebody lighting a cigarette! I've seen it a half dozen times tonight. Ordway's men are checking up."

The sunlight flooded the peaks while it was still gloomy in the lower country. But as the first slanting rays penetrated the canyon several telephone poles drifted around a turn in the river—like scouts picking the way for an army.

Some of the boys manned the cherry-pickers, others raced upstream leaped onto the logs and sent them inshore.

Hooks came down from the cherry-pickers, which were like small donkey engines mounted on flat cars, picked up several poles and swung them into the nearest car.

Back they came for more. Paddy's boys, stripped to the waist worked without let-up. The water climbing steadily toward the crest of the dam was enough incentive. The poles crowded in until the surface was covered and in some spots poles were actually wedged in by the pressure from poles upstream.

They forced openings, threw chains around six and eight poles at a time, and sent them dripping to the waiting cars. As fast as one car was loaded it was dropped down the track and an empty pulled into position.

"Things are goin' along too slick," Paddy observed, "Bob, let's run down the track to the bridge. Ordway isn't one to twiddle his fingers at a time like this."

WITH Bob at the throttle and Johnny firing, the locomotive puffed easily down grade to within a quarter mile of the bridge. The three men left the engine and walked some distance, then climbed a ridge.

Fifteen or twenty of Ordway's men were hard at work removing the rails at the bridge. "And the bridge itself will come next," Paddy growled. "Come on!"

He returned to the locomotive on the run.

Bob opened the throttle and backed up to Horse Tail Falls at a speed which loosened roadbed ballast. Several sharp blasts from the whistle brought every man. "Load on some rails, tools and yourselves, boys," Paddy shouted. "The fun's about to start."

"Yeah and it won't be long until that dam goes," Doctor John answered. "We've got most of the poles loaded, but not lashed."

"No time to lash now," Paddy replied.

The locomotive's grinding brakes were a warning to the men who were wrecking the bridge; and as Paddy's boys spilled down to the right of way, Ordway's rough-and-tumble fighters were ready. "That big bird, Moose Burch is my meat," Johnny Keller shouted.

"He'll eat you up, Johnny," Bob insisted. "Better let one of us cut him down to your size."

"I'll cut him down, my ownself, thank you kindly," Johnny retorted, smarting. Fury of attack is often half of the battle.

At their various athletic clubs Paddy's boys boxed or wrestled according to established rules, but here there were no rules. If a man went down you went with him and worked on him until he quit.

Paddy's boys tried to elbow their dad out of the thick of things, but Paddy himself was adept at elbowing. When the two armies clashed he was right up there in front.

He leaped into the air and bore Pete Ordway to the bridge. As they struck Paddy's observant eye saw one of Ordway's men executing a flank movement on Bob who was busily engaged with two men. Paddy's calked boot smashed against the man's leg, leaving the calk pattern in the flesh and knocking him into the pool beneath.

"And that's where you're goin', Pete," he snarled.

CHAPTER VIII

WHITE-WATER TRIBE

PETE had already gripped Paddy's hair and was banging his head against the bridge timbers. Showers of stars floated before Paddy's eyes, but he got his teeth set in the muscles of the offending arm and the banging ceased. The stars vanished and it was daylight for Paddy again.

"Hah!" the little Irishman snorted in satisfaction. "you've been livin' the life of Riley and I've been workin'—you're soft and I'm hard. You're crackin', Pete!"

Paddy renewed the attack, then as an Ordway man rushed to the rescue Paddy dragged his enemy into the brush and the brush bent and shook as though in a storm.

Johnny Keller had taunted Burch and tricked him into a rush. As Burch charged, Johnny sidestepped, shot out his arm and caught Burch's throat in the crook at the elbow. Johnny tightened his grasp and Burch pawed for air.

Johnny climbed onto Burch's back and bore him to the ground. When Burch hit, Johnny was on top. He was faster, but Burch had more weight. There could be only one finish to a long fight and Johnny knew it.

He put everything he had into the first round. He drove his knee into Burch's stomach and though Burch's driving fist against his ribs made Johnny sick all over, Johnny didn't dare slacken his own attack.

He smashed both fists into Burch's eyes, then shifted to the jaw. Perhaps it was the tenth punch, possibly the twelfth, but to Johnny's joy and surprise, resistance suddenly ceased. Burch was out.

"And I'm none too good myself," Johnny panted. He dragged Burch to the brush and yanked off his shirt. "Here's the shirt the wool and the button came from, Paddy," he shouted, "it proves who beat up our men and who cut the guy wires."

Burch had come to, and Johnny addressed the rest of his remarks to him. "And you're goin' to talk, Burch, and tell about Ordway's part in all this, or else you're going to go over the road for your part in it."

"How about it, Ordway?" Paddy demanded. "You don't think Burch will go to the pen if he can escape it by admitting you hired him to do what's been done? You know he'll talk.

"Now here's my terms—payment for the

damage you've done my equipment; two thousand dollars for the men you hurt and an agreement that we can use each *other's logging roads*, and not waste our money in duplicatin' main lines and spurs. Yes or no?"

"Yes," Ordway muttered, wobbling *a* loose tooth with a bloody finger.

"Louder, so everybody can hear it!"

"Yes," Ordway snarled. The tooth had come loose in his fingers. He spat crimson. "But . . . even so you've lost." He held up his hand. "Listen!"

WATER was spilling over a small falls just above the bridge—a certain indication the dam was giving way. It might go slowly or it might go with a rush.

Paddy leaped to his feet. "Tie these birds up and pile 'em in a safe place," he ordered, "Bob you, Dee John and Ed, pile onto the engine, run back and bring them poles down. Run the trains in three sections and not too close to each other. Bob, be careful when you get here, the bridge may be out. The rest of us will get busy puttin' down the rails these devils took up."

Ordway's men had done their work well. As they removed the bridge rails they had thrown the parts into the river and brush.

Paddy's boys had laid miles of road in their time. They worked smoothly until the last section was put down, then they had to cut the rails to fit the space. They worked in relays with hack saws while the sound of falling water increased and lashed them like a whip.

A locomotive whistle echoed through the valley—a sharp, clear blast of triumph. It was answered, then answered again.

"They're comin', boys," Paddy yelled. Two Madigans with drills were drilling bolt holes and swearing softly because the drills were dull. The bits slid through and were removed, the rails swung into place and bolted.

The river bed was a muddy torrent, the waters carrying tons of earth from the slide. The torrent was climbing rapidly. It was halfway up the heavy piling and would soon be licking at the bridge timbers. Then it would spill over the rails, but long before that the bridge would be unsafe if it received much of a battering from the logs drifting downstream.

"To the high ground, all of you," Paddy ordered, "I'll get over here where I can stop Bob—if I have to."

He caught up a red rag and ran to a point which would enable him to watch both the bridge and the track beyond the point where it curved toward the bridge.

Hissing with triumph the first muddy wave spilled over the rails, then momentarily receded. "Won't he ever get here?" Paddy groaned, and yet he could tell by the roar that Bob was bringing that train down much faster than was safe.

Paddy Madigan's greatest moment, in a lifetime of adventure, was at hand. Curiously enough his part was not active, except that he must decide for others. His hand was not on the throttle. It was Bob's hand; but Paddy was to signal whether that throttle be closed or opened. If he failed to get the poles across the bridge then he was as hopelessly defeated as if the poles had never left the forest.

A wide flood of water marked the spot where the the bridge stood and except for the ripple no one could have told the rails existed. He looked up track as the whistle sounded and he could see Bob hanging out of the cab.

It was the same old Bob, handsome, daring, but more mature. The young Bob, he recalled, often did things against Paddy's will—took chances. The older Bob, of course now admitted as a youngster he had been foolish.

"They can't chance it!" Paddy cried suddenly and he leaped to the right of way and began waving his red rag. Sparks flew from the wheels as Bob applied the brakes and the long line of swaying cars came into view and moved towards him with the undulations of a snake.

Bob leaned far from the window and looked at the river and suddenly there

came to his face the old daring grin. "Don't you do it!" Paddy roared. "If you do I'll give you a danged good lickin', young fellow! Bob! Bob! Oh my gosh, he's goin' to chance it and what Bob done, the others always done."

HE SHOOK his fist and the only answer was the soft *puff-puff* of the locomotive going down grade, then suddenly speeding up. The water squirted from the wheels and Bob stepped out, ready to leap if the locomotive went through the bridge. It swayed violently then rumbled to the rails on higher ground. The speed quickened and the long line of groaning cars sped past.

Again Paddy flagged desperately. Doctor John, who had always been on Bob's heels, just grinned; but he, too, stood ready to leap.

As the last car disappeared around the bend, an ominous roar filled the canyon. "She's gone! The dam's gone!" Paddy bellowed. He waved the flag desperately, but Ed merely speeded up after his brothers.

The locomotive boomed past and Ed stood ready to leap when the crash came.

Higher and higher the flood mounted, spilling through the churning wheels. Then a solid wall of water struck the end of the train. The last five cars were lifted into the air and hurled from the bridge.

Again Paddy had worked his way out of a tight place and again Bob had taken a chance and the others had followed. True, Ed had lost five sections of his tail-cars, but what of it? There were poles enough to keep Bryant's men busy until Paddy could replace the five lost carloads.

After awhile he motioned for them to return upstream; but they saw him mount a log, when the flood had subsided, and float swiftly towards Sawmill City.

PADDY MADIGAN and his boys were together once more. Soon, he reflected, they would be gone and the place would be lonely.

But of course he would have Johnny Keller for Johnny was to stay there ten years. Johnny would be good to lean on, too. Johnny had suffered as a boy and understood. Paddy was afraid to ask when they would leave and he didn't. Instead he said, "How long can you stay?"

"We're staying until Sunday, Dad," Ed answered. "We plan a little party Saturday evening."

"An annual event," Ed added.

"And Julia and I are going to be married," Johnny Keller announced.

"In the midst of joy, sorrow," Paddy muttered as his heart stood still. "Luck's been good to me of late and I'm not one to deny the lad happiness, but still—it'll be gloomy after all the excitement."

The boys spent most of Thursday in town and the girls spent most of Friday cooking.

In the evening they chased Paddy into the woods for a time, then escorted him to the cabin in style.

At the head of the table was a heap of presents and in the kitchen a great cake was studded with candles. "But—but—" Paddy faltered, "I don't understand."

Ed—"him that investigates things"—spoke. "When I was in Ireland I looked up your family tree, Dad," he said. "Those of your ancestors who weren't killed in fights lived to a ripe old age. There's a record of your birthday in an old family Bible. Well, your real birthday's today and you are seventy-two years old and by the Lord, if I hadn't read it I wouldn't have believed it. And now we'll have the wedding."

Johnny and Julia were married in front of the big fireplace which had been lavishly decorated with flowers and boughs. Outside, a packhorse and two saddle animals waited for the honeymoon in the mountains.

"And now, Dad, take your place at the head of the table," Bob said, and Paddy who was all choked up inside, obeyed because he could not speak.

As in a trance, he ate, he cut the cake and he opened his presents. And he won

dered how his boys and girls could find out what he needed merely by living with him a couple of weeks. A new pipe, a smoking jacket, a hunting knife, a pair of binoculars and a new rifle. He wouldn't have asked for better—or even half so much.

"One thing more," he said suddenly, and disappeared. He returned with the little brown jug. "There she is, boys; the seal's unbroken." But he looked at Johnny when he said it. "Tonight we'll break it—just a taste for each."

He removed the cork and walked slowly around the table, pouring a bit into each glass. The jug was empty when he completed the round.

Paddy took his place at the head of the table once more and lifted his glass. "Wait, Dad!" Bob cried. "First, the old song. You know—the one you sing when you're happy—the *Little Brown Jug.*"

"Pick out your favorite verse," Katherine insisted. She was pouring tea and Paddy hoped there would be some mention of all this in the paper.

"My favorite verse, eh?' He chuckled. Sometimes it's one and sometimes it's the others. But tonight it's:

Tis you who makes my friends and foes
Tis you who makes me wear old clothes
Here we are so near my nose
So tip her up and down she goes.

Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug don't I love thee,
Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug, don't I love thee.

They applauded and Bob shouted: "So tip her up and down she goes—but don't forget to taste it as it passes."

Paddy Madigan did not sleep much that night and he was almost afraid when they left next day. With kisses and handclasps they left him, promising to return next year, but it was Katherine who said: "Try to keep me away from here a whole year, Bob Madigan."

And this was what Paddy remembered as he watched them cross the cable bridge and climb the trail up the ridge. He waved and they waved back, their arms against the blue sky, then they were gone and he was alone.

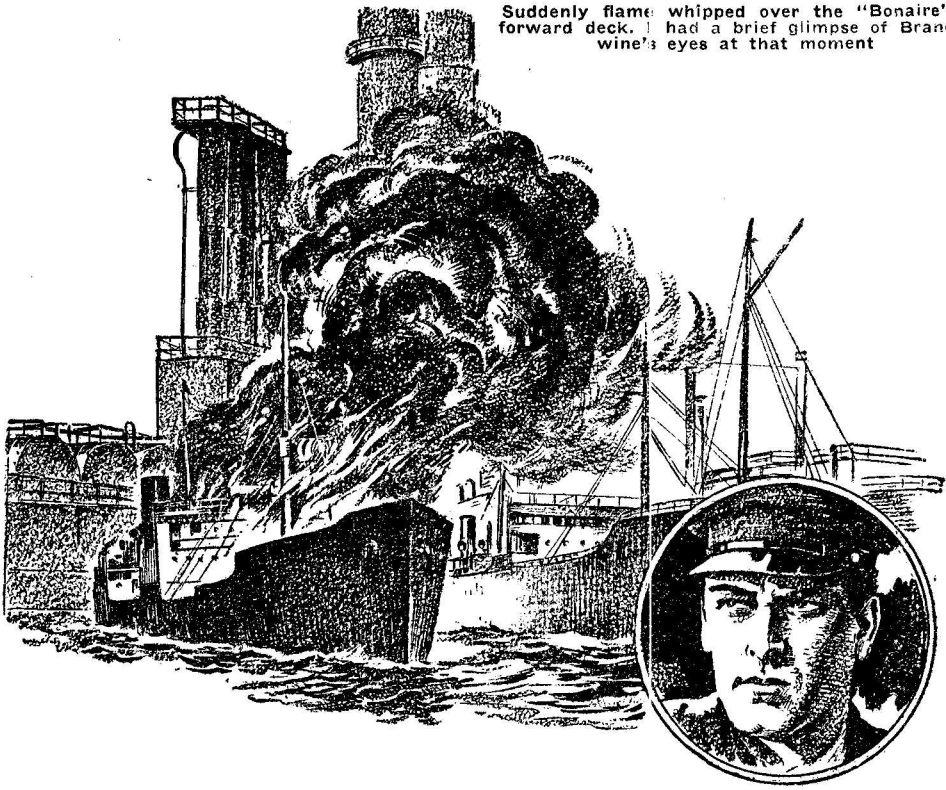
How gloomy the cabin? How sad the song of the creek near by. And Johnny was gone, too. He looked at the empty jug on the mantel over the fire place and smiled. Then he noticed an envelope beside it. He picked it up, opened a square of paper and read:

Dear Dad:
That ten year promise still goes, providing it goes for two—we're coming back to live with you. Love from
Johnny
Julia

Paddy Madigan stepped to the door and leaned as he looked at the creek hurrying to Snow River. "It seems to have changed its song, danged if it hasn't. Seems like it was saying:

"Ha! Ha! Ha! You and me,
Little brown jug, don't I love thee."

THE END



Suddenly flame whipped over the "Bonaire's" forward deck. I had a brief glimpse of Brandwine's eyes at that moment

S. S. Monotony

Mr. Stinky Pendarvis has a black eye. Stinky has nothing to do with this story; but his eye is another matter. It is a tribute to heroism in a heat-ridden hole, and a slight memento of the hero's reward

By CARL RATHJEN

Author of "Fairweather Skipper," "Crash Man," etc.

Bayonne, New Jersey
September 15, 1939

Mr. John Stewart,
Tanker *Cabello*,
Oranjestadt,
Island of Aruba,
South America.

DEAR UNCLE JOHN:

I saw in the papers how you and Captain Brandwine and Mr. Williams from your tanker was all heroes and are going to get medals from the oil company.

And me and the gang that swim together in the Kill van Kull and hang arour the oil tanker docks here in Bayonn would like to know all about it becau we want to grow up and be like you.

You see the reason I want you to wri a letter and tell he how you was hero is because Stinky Pendarvis (he's in m class at school, I'm in the sixth grade now is always belittling and he says you ain real heroes because you ain't real sailors.

Real sailors he says are always goir to differunt ports all around the world lik his father does who is on a rusty old boa and Stinky says you and Captain Brand wine and Mr. Williams can't be sailo because you always are in one place.

Your letters and birthday presents for ne (thanks for the catcher's mitt you sent ne the last time, I'm hoping Ma or some-ody will give me a catcher's mask to go vith it for Xmas) always come from the ame place, Oranjestadt, Aruba.

So Stinky says how can you be sailors r heroes at sea when you never go sailing nywhere.

So I'll be watching for your letter, Jncle John, and the gang too, so we can ell Stinky he's all wet and that we ain't razy in wanting to grow up and go to ruba and be heroes like you and Captain randwine and Mr. Williams.

Your neffew,

ALBERT

P.S. Ma read this and said I shouldn't lways hint what I want you to send me. wasn't hinting about the catcher's mask ven though I would like one. I'll be watch-g for your letter. Tell me all about the edal and what you did.

Oranjestadt, Aruba
September 30, 1939

EAR ELLEN:

I'm writing this to you in care of your rother in Brooklyn because I don't know ow to answer Albert's letter. He's a good d, any boy of yours and my dead rother's would be, and I don't want to do ything that would hurt or disillusion m.

This hero business, for instance. I know w important such things are to a kid s age. A growing kid like him has to keep s aims high, so if I told him the truth what happened down here at Aruba . . . That's why I'm writing to you, Ellen. aybe you can pick out the good from e bad and give Albert a story that will tisfy him.

'VE never told you much about Aruba, have I? It's a port of lost seamen, len. Men like me who lost good berths nen the depression hit the shipping busi-ss.

All we do aboard the tankers, there are enty-eight of them here, is sail at dusk with full tanks from Maracaibo in Venezuela out to the Dutch island of Aruba where there's the world's largest refinery.

We arrive at Aruba at dawn. At dusk we sail empty for Maracaibo, arrive at dawn. At dusk we leave again for Aruba. Just a lot of lost seamen, marking time on an endless track while we wait for better times to come again so we can get better jobs with a future.

That's why I've never come home, Ellen. Why I've never sent for you and little Albert the way I promised I would when I left two years after Al died.

It might have been a different story if I were a refinery engineer like some of the men on Aruba. They're doing something, building, progressing. They've got their wives and children, some of them, and that's partly one of the reasons why I can't write and tell Albert about this hero business.

You see, Ellen, for every twenty men on Aruba there is only one unmarried woman, and she doesn't stay unmarried for long. That's how the trouble started with Jack Williams and Captain Brandwine.

Brandwine had sent for a girl he'd known in better days to come here and marry him. He's British and he'd last seen her ten years ago in England, but he'd heard recently that she'd taken a position as governess with an American family who had brought her to New York and then changed their minds without giving her passage money home.

So Brandwine had asked her to marry him and sent her passage money to Aruba. The oil company would provide them with a six-thousand-dollar stucco bungalow and supply all their needs. It was an offer Brandwine's girl accepted readily.

I was down on the wharf in the glaring afternoon sun with Brandwine when the tanker from Bayonne arrived with his bride-to-be. The tanker, by the way, also brought fresh water, the only way we can get drinking water on Aruba.

And it also brought Jack Williams who was to be the new first mate a board the tanker *Cabello* under Brandwine.

I was doubtful about Williams before I ever met him. He was American, and Americans don't seem to be able to stand the monotony down here unless they have the high posts like captains of a tanker or an important post in the refinery. Most of the men are British. There's something in the stolid British make-up that suits them to the tropics.

Well, the tanker arrived and I went up the gangplank with Brandwine. The girl, rather good-looking for the usual bony type of English girl, was waiting on deck to meet us, and nearby was a lean tall fellow with a devil-may-care look in his black eyes. I assumed he was Williams, for he wasn't in uniform like the crew and he appeared to be the only passenger besides the girl.

"Hold on," he said as Brandwine stepped toward the girl. "She's my wife."

Ellen, I didn't know what to expect from Brandwine. Ten years in the monotony of Aruba and its hellish sun is a long time for a man to be thinking of the woman he loves and then to get a blow like that.

I JUST stood there, waiting and watchful. There was a sultry haze over the sea, a poised cloud of smoke over the gleaming aluminum-painted works of the big refinery, and a glassy glare from the water around us.

Brandwine never moved. His blue eyes were as glassy as the sea. His big ruddy face was as motionless as the sun-baked coral island. He never so much as twitched a finger.

The girl looked scared.

"I'm sorry, George," she stammered. "But—but ten years is a long— I—I didn't realize I'd—changed until coming down on the boat I—"

"She met me," said Williams. "I know just how you must feel, Captain, but—well, these things will happen you know." He extended an envelope. "Here's the passage money you sent. . . ."

He became a bit uncertain himself, the way Brandwine just stood there.

"Can I buy a drink or—"

Brandwine stopped looking at the girl then and turned to Williams.

"You'd best be getting your things ashore," he said. "We sail for Maracaibo in two hours if you expect to be aboard."

He turned expressionless and trod down the gangplank. Williams stared at me.

"Is he my skipper?" he demanded.

"Yeah," I answered curtly. "I'm Stewart, chief engineer of the *Cabello*. There's a tanker sailing back to Bayonne in just—"

He turned and handed the girl a bill.

"Will you give this to the steward, hon," he said; and when she had gone he turned to me.

"I know you hate my guts, Stewart, but things are as they are, and there's no use moaning about them. I feel kind of guilty about this myself, but there are some things which just take a grip of a guy and make him act without stopping to think matters over."

"Yeah," I said. "Brandwine's had ten years to think, and now—"

"Forget the tanker to Bayonne," Williams interrupted. "I haven't got a cent of dough to carry me back to New York. I've been on the beach too long."

He looked along the wharf after Brandwine, then turned to me and held out his hand. "Well, what's the setup down here?"

"If you mean what kind of a future, shuttling a tanker," I said, "I'll give you just about three months. You're an American."

"So are you," he said, "so where's the difference?"

"My job keeps me busy. I'll never be more than a chief engineer. But you're a guy who likes to be going places, doing things in a hurry. I'll give you three months, wife or no wife, before you chuck it all up, thinking you can do better elsewhere."

"I just came off the beach," he snapped, pulling back his hand. "So you and Brandwine think I'll crack by myself, is that it?"

"It's happened before," I remarked. "We sail in two hours. So you'd better get

our wife settled ashore if you're stay-
ng. The company hasn't any hotel.
here's not much in San Nicholas that's
utside the company compound, so un-
ss you find someone who'll put her up
emporarily you'll have to take her to
ne of the Dutch hotels in Oranjestadt."
He looked at me. "Two hours isn't much
me. You wouldn't—"
"I live in the bachelor quarters," I said,
nd left him there in the midst of his
ggage.

HE WAS aboard at six bells when we cast off for the run in to Lake Mara-
ibo. I stayed up on the bridge, just in
se, leaving my assistant, a big Dutch-
an, in charge of the engines.
Aruba isn't so far from the Line, and
we went out the sun dropped from
ght with a flash of red that tinged the
rbid waters. Nearby, a big sea-going
nker, loaded with the world's best avia-
n gasoline, was casting off for Bayonne.
illiams met my gaze briefly.
"Steady as she goes, Mr. Williams,"
id Brandwine impersonally and left the
idge. His eyes caught mine slightly. I
untered down to his cabin a little later.
e handed me his revolver. "Take care
this for me, will you, John?" he said.
I paused a moment. "Williams is wear-
g a gun, or didn't you notice?" I said.
"Goodnight, John," was his only answer.
"You'd better keep this," I tried to in-
t, "because there's no telling what he'll
when Edith has time to think and realize
e was talked into—"
"Goodnight, John," he said sharply.
I left, swearing.
. . . I was standing the engineroom watch
m midnight to four. Along about three,
ns, my big Dutch assistant who came
m Pennsylvania and whose lost name I
ver could remember or pronounce, came
wn.
"You're an hour early," I said.
He nodded. "Maybe you better go the
dge up. Villiams is there still, yet, und
captain he soon goes the bridge up to
e the ship the bar over."

"We'd never get over the bar if he sailed the way you talk," I remarked, and Hans chuckled.

I went up to the bridge. It was hot there; the northeast trade was behind us and it didn't cool things off much. The second mate was on watch and Williams lolled against the rail of the port wing as the *Cabello* steamed through the dark Gulf of Venezuela.

"It doesn't pay to learn your job too quickly in this country," I remarked. "It doesn't give you enough to do."

He lit a cigarette and looked at me.

"Is that advice or a hint?" he asked. "You still think I won't last three months, eh?"

"That's up to you," I said.

"Is it?" he demanded.

I didn't answer, but I thought of that revolver in my cabin. I didn't know how to answer for the moment.

There were the running lights of a ship approaching ahead to port.

"The *Caracas,*" I said. "Tanker just like this. In a few minutes we'll pick up the lights of the *Maracay,* then the *Asuncion,* after that the *Ocumare,* and then—"

"Just like clockwork," he said.

"And as devilishly monotonous," I declared, thinking of Brandwine, "until it gripes you inside and you're ready to tear things apart unless you've someone, or a thought of someone, to hang onto to keep your head steady.

"Williams," I said suddenly, "I've got a little dough socked away that I haven't been sending up north. There'll be a cruise ship putting in at Aruba in a couple of days and—"

"You'll finance a honeymoon, is that it?" he snapped.

"I'll pay your passage with something extra to boot," I said, "if you'll go. Alone."

He swore and swung at me. I hadn't expected that and I caught the blow hard and hit the deck heavily. I was charging to my feet when—

"Belay that!" barked Brandwine's voice.

The three of us stood silently a moment.

"You'd better go below, John," said Brandwine.

Williams flicked ashes from his cigarette.

"Mind if I stick around?" he drawled. "I'd like to learn the passage over the bar. It must be tricky if you need shallow draft tankers like this."

I DIDN'T get a chance to speak to Brandwine alone until morning when we were moored by the oil wells in Lake Maracaibo. Some of the wells are out in water a hundred feet deep.

"You shouldn't have broken it up last night," I said.

"I'll have no brawls aboard my ship," he said.

"What does that mean?" I demanded. "What are you going to do about—"

Another tanker captain was coming on our bridge. Conningsby of the *Bonaire*. Sloppy Edward we called him. He was the opposite swing of the usual Britisher you'll find in the tropics. His chest had sunk to his beltline. His clothes always looked as if the cook had used them to mop up the galley, and they reeked of every *cantina* in San Nicholas and Maracaibo.

He hadn't yet been caught drunk on duty, but he'd been up on the carpet more than once for letting his crew slop up the *Bonaire's* decks with oil. He'd been a good skipper though, before he'd got caught in this endless track of lost seamen.

"Say, Georgie, old boy," he said thickly to Brandwine, "what's the inside on this blarsted double-cross of your bride-to-was? I mean, old boy, about Williams. How long do you give him?"

Brandwine's eyes were stony.

"Better get back to your ship, Edward, and sleep it off," he said curtly. "But before you go below, stop your crew from messing up the deck or you'll find yourself blown sky-high one of these days."

Sloppy Edward scowled.

"Listen," I said, "you'd better get back to the *Bonaire* and—"

He swayed and caught Brandwine's co

"It's this way, old boy. Some of us layin' bets. Y'know. A bet on anythin' kill the blarsted monotony of this blarst hole. Some're bettin' five months for W liams. Mine isn't down yet, and—w Georgie, old boy, I been thinkin' you mig drop a tip if you've any personal pla to—"

Sloppy Edward was a big man, a heavier than Brandwine by a good fo pounds; but Brandwine grabbed him the collar and the baggy seat of his pa and literally carried him off the bric and tossed him on the narrow pier. Bran wine stalked back and faced me.

"Does that answer your questions too

I suddenly decided it would be a more comfortable at the moment down the blistering furnace of the engineroom

Hans was out on deck for a bit of when I went aft. He shook his big blu head.

"Worse it gets yet, even. No?" he mu tered. "Two years ago when the capta three months vacation got, he should England married her then."

"In the first place," I growled, "s wasn't in England then. Some place do around the Mediterranean. In the seco place, instead of taking time to go a see her, he spent all his time in Engla trying to land a better berth because didn't think it right to ask her to co down here to live. But it was differe when he heard four weeks ago she w stranded in New York."

Hans grunted. "Very different it w yet, even. No?"

We sailed at dusk for Aruba, and rived at dawn.

WE KEPT on sailing at dusk, arr ing at dawn. Back and forth. dozen times a month. And the next mon a dozen more. Aruba to Maracaibo. Ma caibo to Aruba. Dusk. Dawn.

No new ports. No new peculiarities tide and current to be bucked. Just Aru and Maracaibo. The same faces. The sa orders from the same men until you kn

what those orders were going to be before they were ever spoken

No variation to break up the monotony. Not even in the weather. Always it was those cursed northeast trades. No matter where or when you stepped out in the open you always knew just which side of your face the wind would strike. Even the trees of Aruba reminded you of how the wind blew. Every last one of them was bent sharply in the same direction. They were like warped, stooping old men.

Williams had gotten his wife and himself settled in one of the company bungalows inside the compound. He was pretty well set; a married man usually is on Aruba. No bills to worry about if he goes along content to let the company supply him with the things he needs. And there are always parties and social affairs among the married set.

But after about six weeks I noticed he was beginning to get a bit grim about the eyes. He was brooding, snappish. There was the evening we cast off for Maracaibo. "Slow astern," Brandwine ordered, and Williams manhandled the telegraph and jangled the bells as if it were an emergency.

"Half ahead," said Brandwine when we had backed clear of the slip. And again at manhandling by Williams. I saw the helmsman glance at him briefly. Brandwine said nothing.

Then Williams rang for full speed ahead before Brandwine gave the order. Still Brandwine said nothing, though it was a bad breach on Williams' part.

I surmised then that Brandwine was playing a waiting game, avoiding open trouble while he wanted for the monotony to break Williams who was beginning to act just like the American crews that once manned these tankers. The company had fired them and put in the Britishers. The same monotonous routine day after day under the blasting heat had too often given the Americans the inclination to fly off at the handles.

A man's got to do something to break the monotony here. Take, me for instance. I've made engines my life. There isn't a sweeter running tanker in the whole outfit than the *Cabello*. And it takes most of my spare time to keep her that way. I'm always taking something apart and putting it together again. At first Hans used to get sore at me.

"Dammit," he'd say, "you the pump take part to see if the pistons they are there still."

But he knows now I do it to keep from taking myself apart. A man's got to have something like that down here. I have my engines. Sloppy Edward has his binges and gastric ulcers as a result. Brandwine had his hopes for the future, until Williams came along and destroyed them.

Or were they destroyed?

That's what none of us knew. Had Brandwine put Edith out of his mind? At first it seemed so. He had plunged deeper into one of his hobbies.

It seemed strange that a burly two-fisted man like him—I saw him once single handed break up a six-man brawl in a Maracaibo *cantina,* scattering men like ten-pins—should have reading as a hobby. He was an avid reader, subscribing to half a dozen magazines and always getting books from New York.

If you could get him started there wasn't a subject he couldn't talk about with an air of authority. He would have fitted in swell on a big luxury liner where it pays for a captain to know more than seamanship when he sits down at mess with the passengers; but here he was on this endless track of lost seamen.

And how endless was it for him now without Edith? Had he put her out of his mind? He hadn't attempted to see her. Or was it part of the waiting game he was playing with Williams.

THEN one day he met Edith outside the post office when he had gone there to get a new shipment of books. I wasn't near enough to hear what was said, but my glimpse of her wistful expression was enough.

Williams appeared. He gave Brandwine

a sharp look, but said nothing. He and Edith went off together toward their bungalow. Brandwine started for the *Cabello,* then he saw me.

"John," he said kind of thoughtfully, "toss these in my cabin for me, will you?"

He handed me the package of books and turned away before I could say anything. He went back inside the post office and I saw him starting a letter.

I wondered about that. And I wondered more when it suddenly dawned on me more than a week later that every time we were at Aruba he was going ashore and disappearing for a good part of the day. I overheard island gossip that Edith wasn't always at home either, though her name was carefully not mentioned with Brandwine's.

Then one evening when we sailed from Aruba I caught Williams several times staring hard at Brandwine when Brandwine wasn't looking. I made it a point to stay on the bridge. Later that night Williams got me alone on the port wing during his watch. He spoke like a desperate man.

"Stewart," he said abruptly, "you made me an offer once to pay my passage away from here."

"Yeah. You were broke then," I said.

"I still am," he snapped. "I've been paying off some debts up North. If your offer to lend me the money still holds, I'll take it."

I didn't answer him right away.

"You'll go alone?" I asked.

"Did I ask you for passage for two?" he retorted.

I scowled at him in the starlight. To tell the truth I was disappointed in him. He didn't seem like a quitter to me. I know, I'd said I'd give him three months; but that was because I was sore at him and wanted to side-track trouble between him and Brandwine.

I'd had a feeling all along, which I wouldn't admit to myself, that he had it in him to lick the tropics and the monotony of this job; but now I saw I was wrong.

"Well?" he demanded.

"All right," I said. "I'll give you th dough when we get back to Aruba."

I didn't say anything about it to Bran wine. That was a mistake: I should hav told him.

WHEN we got back to Aruba, I wa busy on board for awhile helpin Hans get hooked up with the pipe lines the refinery.

In the next slip across the narrow ar jutting at right angles from the pier wa the *Bonaire,* and Sloppy Edward's crew a usual was messing up the decks again wit crude oil. They weren't getting their con nections tight enough.

Finally I left Hans to watch thing aboard the *Cabello* and beat it ashore t get the dough for Williams. There wa a cruise liner that would stop by the nex morning and he could take it if he didn sail with us that night. Brandwine an Williams had gone ashore almost as soo as we got in.

I saw Brandwine coming out of th post office with some letters and I sti didn't tell him what was afoot. He pace past me as if he didn't see me. I went o through the hot sun to get the dough.

I telephoned Williams. I didn't want t go to his house. He said he'd meet me i half an hour in San Nicholas. I strolle out of the compound in the hellish sun.

In San Nicholas a half-hour went by and no sign of Williams. I went lookin for him, thinking I'd been mistaken abou our meeting place. I bumped into Slopp Edward and his first mate, a young Brit isher The mate was grinning like Cheshire cat.

"C'mon, Stewart, old boy," invite Sloppy Edward. "Join the farewell party.

"What farewell?" I asked.

"Mine," grinned the mate. "Just got m three-month vacation. Four months ahea of time at that. I'm flying up to Mian at noon and sailing for England fro Jacksonville tomorrow. Three years I'v been here. Boy, am I itching to get ou of this damn clear weather and get myse lost in a London pea-soup!"

"C'mon, Stewart, old boy," said Sloppy Edward.

"I've got a farewell party of my own to arrange first," I said.

Sloppy Edward stared at me. "Didn't think you thought that much of Williams, old boy, to give him a party when he transfers from your ship to mine."

"What!" I exclaimed.

The mate grinned. "Williams is taking my place aboard the *Bonaire.*"

"That's what Williams thinks," I snapped. I started grimly for the compound and Williams' bungalow.

I'd gone only a short distance when I came face to face with him.

"Never mind the money, Stewart," he began, "I won't be—"

"You're leaving tomorrow just as you'd planned," I told him.

He shook his head. "I never had any intention of leaving."

I hit him then and I hit him hard. He went down and rolled over and stared up at me blankly.

"You're a worse rat than I thought you were," I snapped. "So you were just going to take my dough when all the time you knew you weren't going to leave. Well, get this, guy. I'm seeing to it right now that you're leaving tomorrow. Tried to pull a fast one on me, eh?

"Maybe you've got plans for Brandwine too. If you try anything against him between now and tomorrow, so help me, I'll —I'll—"

I LEFT him still lying there dazedly rubbing his jaw. I went looking for Brandwine. He wasn't in his bachelor quarters ashore. On his desk I saw an envelope with the return address of a New York detective agency.

I remembered Williams had come here from New York. There wasn't any letter in the envelope: Brandwine had taken it with him, wherever he was.

I beat it up to the bungalow where Williams and his wife lived. She was alone.

"Do you know where Brandwine is?" I asked her.

"I haven't seen him since that one time we—"

"We'd better find him then," I interrupted hurriedly. "He got a letter from a New York detective agency this morning and—"

She just stared at me with big frightened eyes.

"Did you talk Williams out of leaving the island?" I asked her.

"I?" She stared at me.

"No, you wouldn't have reason to," I said. "If you see Brandwine, tell him your husband's up to something."

I started for the *Cabello.*

The refinery hulked over the inlet like a big mass of white-hot aluminum in the glaring sun. I ran out on the pier and turned down the narrow arm that reached between the *Cabello* and the *Bonaire.*

Williams was standing there, scowling up at the oil dripping down from the *Bonaire's* scuppers. He started to go aboard. I called to him.

"I know now why you're planning to stay," I warned him. "Brandwine knows too much and—"

"Knows too much?" he snapped.

"Yeah. Take a tip." I started bluffing. "I saw that letter Brandwine got this morning from the New York detectives."

"What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded, glaring at me.

"You know as well as I do," I retorted. "So if you try anything you'll only be sticking your neck out because Brandwine isn't the only one who knows about you now."

I turned my back on him and crossed the narrow pier and went aboard the *Cabello.* I saw Brandwine pacing up on the bridge.

"What in tarnation are you up to, John?" He frowned, staring across at the *Bonaire* where we could see Williams pointing at the messy decks and laying down the law to Sloppy Edward's men

"Listen," I said. "Williams was going to take an offer of mine to leave, alone. He changed his mind suddenly this morning. He must have found out about that

letter you got and now he's out to get you."

Brandwine stared at me.

"Letter? How do you . . ." He felt his coat pocket.

"I only saw the envelope," I said. "I bluffed him on the rest of it."

"Bluffed more than you thought," he muttered. "He doesn't know a thing about it. He couldn't."

"Well, he knows now," I stammered finally. "What's in that letter? Can we use it to make him leave alone and—"

"There's nothing in it we can use against him," Brandwine muttered, staring across at the *Bonaire's* oily decks.

"This changes everything around," I said, scowling. "If he didn't know about the letter . . . Then the only reason he could have for staying is that lucky break he got getting transferred to the *Bonaire* where he'll be as good as in command."

BRANDWINE still stared at the *Bonaire*. Heat shimmered from her decks and you could smell the dangerous reek of oil fumes.

"I had him transferred to the *Bonaire* this morning," Brandwine said slowly.

"*You* had him transferred!"

Brandwine nodded. I looked uneasily across at the *Bonaire's* sloppy decks just waiting for something to touch them off. Williams was hazing some of the crew to work cleaning up.

"Why?" I asked softly. "Because of Edith?"

He looked at me quickly. "You know? I didn't think you—"

"I wish I didn't know now," I muttered uneasily. "Brandwine," I said reluctantly, but firmly, "you can't do it."

He frowned at me. "Do what?"

I motioned hurriedly toward Williams on the *Bonaire's* oily forward deck.

"I know how anxious you are to get rid of him. But you should know murder won't gain you anything. And it will be murder when the *Bonaire* blows herself to—"

"You don't know what you're saying," he cut in.

"Good Lord, Brandwine," I said wretchedly, "you don't think I'd say this to you if—" I grasped his arm. "You've got to go over there and stop whatever you've—"

He braced against my pull on his arm. He stared at me.

"You've been working too hard. How long is it since you took a vacation?"

"You're the one who's let things get you," I insisted, trying to make him come with me. "Ten years you've been planning and hoping. Then you got that blow when Edith arrived married to Williams. You thought the monotony would break him, but it didn't. You thought you'd get something on him in that letter from New York, but you didn't.

"And now you're making a last attempt to . . . I'd probably try it myself if I were in your shoes, but I'd want you to stop me. You've got to listen to me and go over there."

He wouldn't budge. He just stood there and stared at me. I was tempted to yell a warning to Williams and his crew, but that would incriminate Brandwine. I didn't want that.

I wanted to save him. I wanted him to save himself. My voice rose frantically as I tried to get him into action.

"Look," I pointed at the pier where Edith was hurrying aboard the *Bonaire*. "Even Edith," I pleaded, "knowing she was wrong in marrying Williams, suspects what you're doing. You've got to get over there now, Brandwine. Snap out of it, man. I'll go a long way with you against Williams, but not this way."

He scowled at me and grabbed my arm in a grip of iron.

"You don't understand," he began.

"I do, and you know it," I said. "Don't you realize what you're doing? Edith is over there. You don't want to include her with Williams when . . . For the love of Pete, Brandwine, come on before it's too late."

He shook me. His eyes were piercing.

"Give me a chance to explain," he snapped.

But it was too late.

THERE was a sudden shout from the *Bonaire*. It sounded like Williams. The next instant there was a hollow boom, a sheet of flame over the whole forward deck of the *Bonaire*.

I saw Edith's dress flaring and Williams grabbing her as she fell. He dragged her back and wrapped her in his coat. Men shouted. Others cried out in pain. Several with flaming clothes dived off the far side of the ship.

Brandwine let go of me and grabbed the rail for support.

"I'm sorry, damn sorry for you," I shouted at him over my shoulder as I slid down the ladder from the bridge. Hans came dashing along the deck and followed me across to the *Bonaire*.

A seaman carried Edith's limp form down to the pier. A panicky guy with a seared face all but bowled me from my feet as he fled from the flaming tanker. The refinery whistle was shrieking.

I saw Williams barking orders at the pitiful handful of men he had aboard. His cap was gone. So were his eyelashes and eyebrows. His hair was singed white.

Williams grabbed me and yelled in my ear above the din.

"If she blows up here she'll set off the whole refinery. We've got to take her out of here. My engineer and his man dived overboard. Will you—"

"Cast off. Get to the wheel," I told him. "I'll tend to the engines."

Hans was beside us. His big bland face looked like a mass of melting candle grease.

"I go," he called to me. "You on the decks stay. Get someone the valves to shut."

I'd been thinking of those myself. Any tanks that were open would have to be closed off. I wasn't worrying so much about the full tanks. It was the empty ones full of gas that would rip the ship apart.

The forward mooring lines had burnt through. Williams was ordering a man to cut the afterlines.

"And when you finish that," I shouted, "check all valves on your way forward again."

He raced aft. Williams scrambled up to the bridge. I beat it into the nearest cabin and yanked open some lockers. I jammed my legs into a couple of pairs of trousers, bundled myself into all the coats I could find.

Coming out on deck again I saw Williams had the *Bonaire* clear of her berth. Out beyond the breakwater I glimpsed some shark fins. Black smoke swirled about me. I ran clumsily to the men with the fire hose.

"Douse me with that and keep it on me," I yelled.

I picked up a wrench, covered my nose and mouth with a wet towel and started forward through the fire. Roaring flames licked about me. The deck underfoot was like a hot griddle.

I didn't expect to save the tanker. I don't think any of us did. All we could hope for was to delay the inevitable explosion long enough to get the tanker away from the refinery, and long enough—I hoped—so that we could all get off alive.

I could hardly breath through the towel in the heat as I stumbled over the deck pipelines. Everything blurred before my watering eyes. Flames battled the spray from the fire hose.

I remember kneeling at the main valve for the forward tanks. Swearing at the wrench in my clumsy hands. Swearing at Sloppy Edward. Cursing Brandwine . . .

After that memory staggers the way I staggered about the burning deck until a grinding jolt from the tanker's keel pitched me headlong. I couldn't seem to get myself up.

I remember Williams charging through the black smoke and flame. He lifted me. I saw the skin on the back of his hand puff and split. I heard him shout as he carried me back.

"Everyone aft. Lower the boats."

Suddenly I felt him stop.

". . . fire's spread, cut us off from the boats," a voice yelled.

"Overside, swim for it," Williams ordered.

"No, don't! Sharks!" We were trapped.

I heard swearing, then cheering. I forced my eyes open. A tanker was edging in toward the *Bonaire* to take us off. It was a risky chance for that plucky tanker captain. If the *Bonaire* blew up before he could pull away, or if his tanker went aground . . .

The tanker was the *Cabello!* I saw Brandwine on the starboard wing of the bridge. He was bellowing through a megaphone. No matter what he did now, I thought, he'd done his damage.

But I didn't think about that long. I was wondering who the devil was down in my engineroom on the *Cabello,* and would he treat my engines with care. Then I passed out.

I CAME to in the company hospital on Aruba. The next week was just a blur as I hovered between painful consciousness and deep blackness. In one of my waking moments I learned that Williams was still confined to his bed in another room. So was Brandwine who had been struck by a piece of flying metal when the *Bonaire* blew up.

And this morning Albert's letter arrived, asking me to tell him how we had been "heroes."

Heroes! Williams, a man who practically stole another man's sweetheart. Brandwine, an attempted murderer. And as for myself—I haven't yet corrected the impression that the fire was an accident. So that makes me an accessory after the fact. Heroes!

How can I try to explain a story like that, Ellen, to a growing kid like Albert?

But I know you'll understand my part in this, Ellen. You're pretty swell that way, and if I hadn't become marooned on this endless track of lost seamen I could have tried to be to you what my dead brother was.

You'll notice there's a bit extra in the monthly amount I'm sending you this time. Get Albert that catcher's mask for me, will you? Maybe it will side-track his disappointment at my not telling him the story of what happened here. I don't know just what I'm going to do, how it will all turn out, when we're well enough to face an investigation.

As ever,
John

Oranjestadt, Aruba
October 1, 1939

DEAR ELLEN:

I wish I hadn't had my other letter posted so promptly yesterday.

I was wrong in all my assumptions.

Briefly, this morning I was wheeled into another room to find Brandwine and Williams occupying it on the best of terms. And here's what I learned after a decidedly awkward and embarrassing time for me.

The entire cause of all that happened was not Brandwine, was not Williams. It was Edith!

It was she who proposed marriage to Williams on the way to Aruba. He didn't know till after the ceremony that Brandwine would be waiting for her.

And Brandwine hadn't been as disappointed as I'd thought, but he's not one to let on much what he's thinking. He'd given me his revolver though, because he thought Williams, expecting trouble, might try to goad him into action to get matters out in the open and settled.

Then he began to have his suspicions about Edith after that first time he met her on the island. From slips of the tongue she made he suspected she was paying too much attention to other men on the island.

So he not only began watching her every chance he had, but he'd also written to the detective agency in New York to check up regarding her dismissal from the governess job. The wife of her employer had fired her. The reason is obvious after the above.

Meanwhile Williams, who thought

Brandwine had been pretty square toward him, was also on to Edith and knew she was going to make a play for Brandwine again. So Williams, by borrowing money from me, planned to pay her passage from the island to prevent her causing any more trouble for himself and Brandwine. But she wouldn't go.

And Brandwine, when he received the letter from New York, was in a spot. He wasn't sure whether or not Williams suspected Edith, so he decided to play safe and let Williams speak up first, if at all. He liked Williams, so he had him transferred to the *Bonaire* to give him a better post and to give him more work to keep his mind off his troubles if he were on to Edith.

And as for the fire, you remember I mentioned the letter to Edith. She suspected Brandwine had been checking up on her. She knew she was finished on the island then.

She came down to the tanker to tell Williams she had changed her mind, she would leave. Before he could warn her, she struck a match to light a cigarette. When the fire burst into flame, she must have inhaled some of the flames . . .

Sloppy Edward has been discharged, and Williams will get command of the new tanker that will replace the *Bonaire*. He'll make good at it too.

Everything seems back to normal now, the normal monotony of our jobs. I hope times get better soon, Ellen, so you and I can enjoy them together while we are still young. As ever,

John

Bayonne, New Jersey
October 15, 1939

DEAR UNCLE JOHN:

Thanks for the catcher's mask. Ma got your two letters, but all she said was that you *was* a hero and she wouldn't tell me any more. Know why?

You're soon going to tell me yourself.

I mean, Ma and me are coming to Aruba. We're going to live with you in one of those stucko houses.

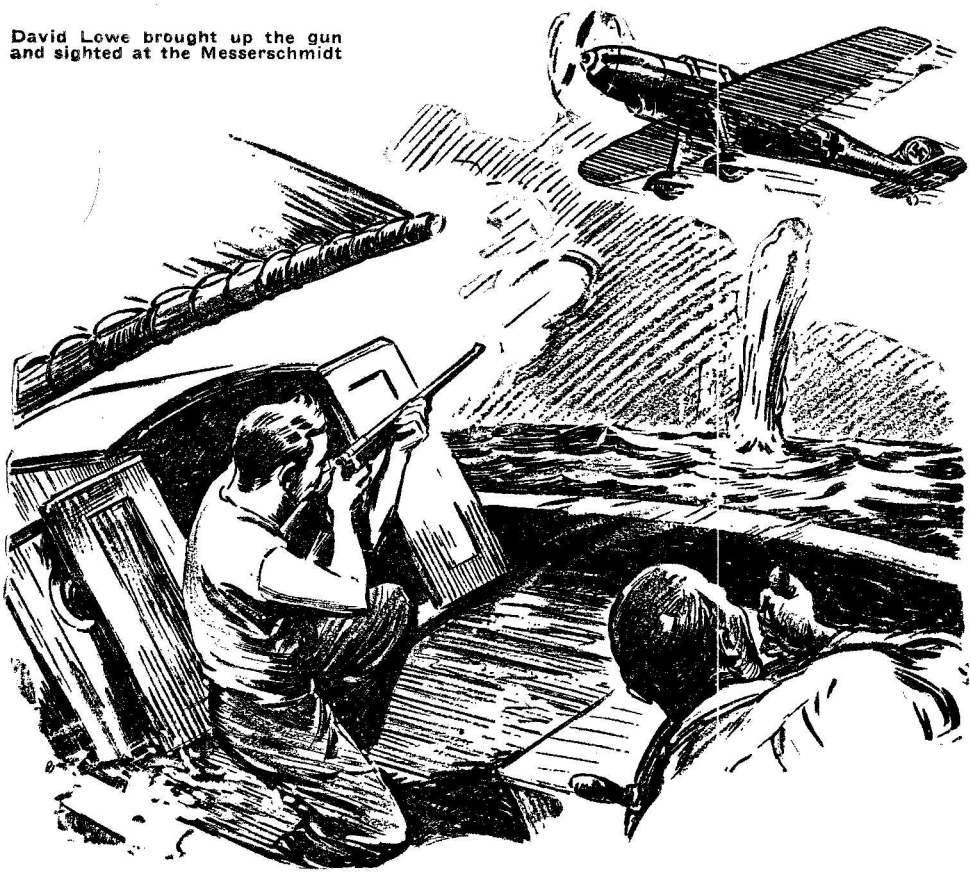
I wondered why Ma made up her mind so suddenlike, and she said something about you're only young once whether you're in Bayonne or Aruba and that it's time people stopped waiting for better times and tried to make each other happy right now.

Gee, am I happy. I can hardly wait until the tanker bringing us sails from Bayonne next week, and Ma acts the same, and when she asked me if I'd like to have you for a pop I told her she didn't have to ask.

We'll be seeing you Uncle John, I mean Pop.

Albert

P.S. Stinky Pendarvis, he's the one who said you wasn't a hero because you wasn't a real sailor, says you are both now. And he said it without me having to blacken his other eye.



David Lowe brought up the gun and sighted at the Messerschmidt

Dark Thunder

By ROBERT CARSE

Start now this powerful novel of international intrigue in the Caribbean

DAVID LOWE, foreign correspondent, comes to Paris, exhausted from the horror of the Spanish War. But in the days following his nervous tension and despair are miraculously relieved; he meets a beautiful German girl, and he finds himself swiftly falling in love with her. She is Margett Von Rudvig, whose family has lived for several generations in Haiti; her brother Ernst, a Condor pilot, has been wounded in Spain, and she has come to take him home to Haiti. Her admirer and constant attendant is Colonel Count Maxim Spelke, a high Nazi officer; he warns David Lowe to cease his attentions to Margett, and finally Spelke's Storm Troop thugs beat up the American.

LOWE returns to Spain for a few months, and then he goes to New York. There, in a bar frequented by *Falangist* Spaniards, he meets Margett once again, with her brother and Spelke. But this meeting has been engineered—by Lowe's two friends, Brick Hanegan, his managing editor, and John Folsom, a major in Army Intelligence. They know why Spelke is accompanying the Von Rudvigs to Haiti; and they must use David Lowe. That night Lowe has only a word or two with Margett before he gets into a fight with Spelke, which eventually becomes a barroom free-for-all.

This story began in last week's Argosy

Hanegan's negro servant, Monk, takes Lowe to the managing editor's yawl, the *Hyperbole*, moored in the North River. Later Folsom joins them on the boat, and explains what he has planned to Lowe. Spelke, Folsom says, has come over to establish a secret Nazi dominance in Haiti; the German officer holds absolute control over Ernst Von Rudvig. Someone, not officially connected with the American government, must break up this Nazi intrigue in Haiti, which threatens the safety of the Caribbean.

So David Lowe agrees to sail immediately for Haiti on the *Hyperbole* with Monk. His job is to discover why the Von Rudvigs are so completely at Spelke's command, and to expose the German plot; his special mission is to find his girl, Margot . . .

CHAPTER VI

WARRIOR GULL

WIND rose howling to half-gale velocity off Hatteras. The *Hyperbole* staggered south, close-hauled, her decks constantly doused. David Lowe held the helm for long hours at a time, wearing a suit of oilskins Monk had brought him from the cabin, and welcoming all of this.

Spindrift stung his face, made a flat rattle on his sou'wester brim. He braced with his legs distended, eyes on the tautly drawn canvas, then the jerking compass point within the binnacle hood. He was getting back, he realized, finding himself again, although the life he began here was so entirely new he could only guess at the vague outlines of it.

But the strength and the peace he had hoped for the night they had left New York were entering into him. The dark-flickering memories, even consideration of what was before him in Haiti, no longer passed through his brain. All he thought of now was keeping the *Hyperbole* straight on her southing. He and Monk seldom spoke, and only when the black man brought him food and coffee or he gave the other an order.

He let his entire consciousness be lulled by the threnodic majesty of the wind, the sea. He watched white-roiling blue waves rise to meet the great, bland emptiness of blue sky, and the stars rise, shine clear and sharp, then dim with the dawn, and the dawn flame the horizon rim, sweep ruddy across the sea until each small, familiar object before him in the cockpit was plain.

His hands began to puff with brine, to cramp from their locking grip about the spokes, and he gave the helm to Monk, went below to sleep. He slept undreaming, for the first time in many months. But when he awoke, he was instantly alert, trembling, for deep in his nerve centers he sensed that something was wrong.

He came on deck barefooted, dressed only in his oilskin trousers and undershirt. "What's the matter?" he called to Monk.

Monk stared at him. "Nothin', sar," he said. "We just makin' knots, that's all."

"No," David Lowe said. "That isn't all." He climbed up over the cockpit coaming, clung to a backstay and stared aft, and across all the sky. That simple gesture brought to him in absolute fullness recollection of the past weeks and just what his purpose in life had become. A plane was somewhere in that sky, he knew, a plane which sought the *Hyperbole*. Then he saw it.

It had sat high, behind cumulus clouds banking the West. Now it broke from the cloud, dived, and he could make out the design. "German," he muttered. "The kind thy flew in Spain. A Messerschmidt."

HE DROPPED back to the cockpit and went down into the cabin without speaking to Monk. A thirty-thirty octagonal-barreled Savage rifle was in a rack over the port bunk. He took it down, slid off the canvas case, examined the action. The piece was oiled, well kept, and there was ammunition for it in a pocket of the case. He levered open the breech, slid in a clip, then went up on deck. Spelke, he told himself very quietly, was in that plane. And if not Spelke himself some man he had sent. Who

else would fly here five hundred miles to sea to seek out the *Hyperbole?*

Monk looked unblinkingly at the rifle. "Them gulls," he said, "ain't no fitten target for such a piece. But they make practice for a man."

David Lowe grinned, and shrugged a shoulder upward. "The gull I want is that plane," he said. "And I know—I've got about a one-in-a-thousand chance of cracking it. You want, lash the wheel and go for'd in the chain locker and hide your head. The guy flying the plane is after us."

Monk spat down-wind, shifted his grip a bit on the wheel. "Well," he said, "if it's right by you, I think I stay right here. That fella's goin' to get us, he's goin' to get us. Hidin' my coco in a bight o' anchor chain won't save me much."

They didn't talk after that. They both stared up through contracted lids at the plane. Its flight down the western sky was a quivering, almost unseen flash of silver. The guy's a good pilot, David Lowe thought. That's war-time style of flying, with the sun at your back and in the other man's eyes. But he'll have to come pretty damn' low to make his target here.

The plane came very low. It drove in a power drive that made wind cry from the air-foils and struts in a wail keener than the motor crescendo. David Lowe went to one knee, his body braced against the backstay. In a soundless voice, he spoke to Margett. "Margett," he said, "I love you very much. I always shall. Maybe you're right, and I shouldn't see you again. But this man should be stopped. He's nothing but a murdering swine."

Then he called an order aft to Monk. "Run a zigzag course," he told the black man. "Start the motor, so you can check quick if you have to. But whatever you do, don't lose your head."

"Not," Monk said, "'less that fella take it from me."

David Lowe had begun to shoot. The plane was flattening out, had just released a bomb. He was like a kid with a pea-shooter trying to stop an express train, Lowe knew. His shots were all wasted, and the slender black bomb struck the sea less than a cable length off the bow.

Spray leaped fan-shaped, sparkling. A vast shudder ran across the sea. Then water gouted up in a sheer, solid column and the rumor of the explosion seemed to come from the ultimate depths.

The *Hyperbole* slewed, rolling her gun-wales under. Her sticks bent and whipped whanging. All her standing rigging shivered, and in the galley mess-gear clanged. But David Lowe laughed, and cursed. "He'll need more," he told Monk. "A lot more. We're no easy target. Keep her going as you've got her now. You're doing fine."

None of Monk's facial muscles moved. He sat like a man locked by paralysis. "Couple more close as that," he said, "and the shock caves in our sides like an oyster shell."

"That's our gamble," David Lowe said. "We've got to make him miss wide."

THE plane had gone into a banking turn, climbed for another dive. They could see the bombs in the rack along the fuselage underside; they could count each one as it dropped.

Explosion after explosion raged a huge white wall of water about the *Hyperbole.* She wallowed through it half-submerged, and reeling. Blood ran from Monk's ears and nose, Lowe saw, and then noticed it ran from his own. They were dazed, made stupid by the repeated shock. But they had to keep going; the plane was diving once more.

He moved aft and took the wheel from Monk. "Get down under the hatch," he ordered. "This time it's the machine-guns. That guy's fresh out of bombs."

The plane slid down the sky the way David Lowe had seen a fish-hawk dive upon bullheads in the Connecticut ponds of his early youth. He watched the plane, thinking that somehow it was now no

more dangerous than a hawk. He was sure he wasn't to be killed here. Not yet, he told himself. He had to get to Haiti, find Margett, free her from that weird miasma of horror in which she lived.

But then he ducked. He couldn't help himself; he had seen too many people killed by those green-flashing incendiary bullets. Rage came to him, rage at his own cowardliness. He rose up, and a plan formed distinct and cold in his brain.

The plane was so close he could read the markings on the wings, see the flare of the exhausts and the pale tonguing of the machine-gun flame. Through the steel-ribbed cabin glass he made out the pilot's face, white, strained, and suddenly afraid.

"So you've guessed," David Lowe yelled, as though the pilot could hear. "But it's too late—I've got you!"

He drove in the motor clutch, slammed the big Matthews seventy-five into reverse. He reached and flipped clear from the cleats the main and jigger sheets. Canvas sagged down on the sticks as the sheets slacked. The *Hyperbole* heeled trembling back on her course. He lifted his hands high above his head and yelled.

That swift shifting of the canvas, the veering suck of air as the yawl jibed, had created a wide pocket beneath the plane. It slung wildly downward, then bucked to climb.

A wing tip touched the sea, grazed up a flutter of foam. The engines boomed in full fury, and the propellers were glistening whorls of tremendous power. But the split second's contact had torn the wing tip jagged. The plane dropped again, and this time hit the sea with a long, shattering crushing blow.

"*Dios Mi!*" Monk croaked. "Mister, how you done that nice?"

It was only then David Lowe realized that the great motors were stilled and that the plane rested completely wrecked upon the sea. He signed for Monk to take the helm, picked up the rifle and went to the bow.

Two men were crawling out of the fuselage hatch to a wing. One of them was hurt, moved hunched with pain. But the other carried a pistol, and his eyes were darkly violent. "Put that down," Lowe called in German to the man with the pistol. "Drop it in the sea or I'll kill you."

But the flyer lifted it, started to shoot. Lowe killed him with a shot through the chest, and quickly swung the rifle. The other man had stripped off his helmet, then raised his hands high. David Lowe recognized the twitching face. It was Ernst Von Rudvig, Margett's brother, and not Maxim Spelke.

CHAPTER VII

WORDS TO TORMENT

A KIND of gagging curse filled Lowe's throat. His desire to kill was so vast, so innate that his hands ached holding the rifle. But he lowered the rifle, and called over, "You surrender, Von Rudvig?"

"*Ja,*" Van Rudvig said. "Yes, I do."

Monk waited until David Lowe had the dinghy overside and was stepping down into it. "Ain't rightly my business," he said. "But you're riskin' your own life now to go get that fella. Why don't you just leave him for to rot? He done his utmost to plaster us apart."

The direct simplicity of Monk's logic took away the last of David Lowe's rage. "You make sense, Monk," he said. "I almost gave it to him before, when I was up in the bow. But he's my girl's brother, and I promised to do a job for Major Folsom and Hanegan, and this guy knows things I should know.

"Call what I'm doing 'good policy'. It sounds nice, even if it doesn't mean much. Now give me a lee while I get him aboard."

He sent the dinghy down-wind with slow care, the rifle propped between his knees against the thwart. But there was no fight left in Ernst Von Rudvig. The

man stretched nearly unconscious on the wing, his breathing harsh with pain.

David Lowe placed him prone across the dinghy floorboards, and the added weight brought a wave tumbling inboard. It crested cold over Von Rudvig; he looked up clear-eyed at Lowe. "You're mistaken in doing this," he said. "I won't talk."

"Shut up now," David Lowe said, "or I'll bat your skull in with an oar!"

It was all he could do to keep the dinghy up into the wind. The seas mounted quartering, gray and mean. The little craft rose and rolled to them, then slithered crazily down the far sides. Lowe pulled until the oars buckled in his grasp, watching nothing but the next sea slope, putting all his trust in Monk.

The black man handled the yawl with consummate skill. He came down aboard under the jigger and a jib. Then he filled away, slacked off, and the heaving line he hurled flipped right across Lowe's shoulder. "You're a real sailor," Lowe told him when the dinghy was in under the yawl's lee. "Tamp on with a boat-hook while I dump my prize on deck."

He pushed Von Rudvig inert over the coaming into the cockpit, then followed him. With a bight of the heaving line, he lashed the man's hands and feet. Von Rudvig's eyes flickered open; he watched every action as the dinghy was davitted, the yawl brought about and set on her course south. "I might have a drink?" he asked when Monk was back at the wheel.

David Lowe gazed at him for a long instant in silence. "I'll give you a drink," he said. "I'll feed you and keep you alive until we make our port in Haiti. But reach for a gun or anything else like a weapon, and I or the Negro will instantly kill you. That's understood?"

"Fully," Von Rudvig said. "Make it a big drink, please. I'm suffering some—decided pain."

The man's resemblance to Margett was so marked that a curious emotional conflict disturbed David Lowe as he carried him into the cabin. He poured a full glass of rum, shoved it in Von Rudvig's hand without looking directly at him. "If you're hurt," he said, "and I can help you, tell me."

"No," Von Rudvig said. "It's just this." He drew his trouser leg back and exposed the withered, purple-scarred flesh of the ankle, the calf and the knee. "One of my Spanish souvenirs. You shocked it a good bit when you brought me down."

"I meant," David Lowe said, "to put that plane in the bottom of the sea. I thought Maxim Spelke was handling it. Where's he now? Why did he send you here to get me?"

A faint smile tightened Von Rudvig's lips. "Don't," he said, "confuse me with Margett. I tell nothing to my enemies."

DAVID LOWE poured himself a drink, a short one with a lot of water. "It's not at all clear to me," he said, "why you figure I'm your enemy. You look like too intelligent and proud a man to do Spelke's thug work for him. He must have you pretty thoroughly blackmailed."

"Who—" Von Rudvig began, then stopped. For a moment, under the lash of Lowe's words, his face had tensed with rage. But now he was once more calm, closely controlled. "You're an utter fool," he drawled. "Such talk just wastes my time, if not your own. Pardon me; I'm very tired. I think I shall stretch out here and catch a bit of sleep."

"Like hell," David Lowe said in English. "You're going to talk if I have to keep you awake from here to Haiti. I'm in love with Margett. I want to marry her, and now I'm on my way to find her. You're her brother, and the man to tell me what's wrong with her, and you—and why Maxim Spelke has got power over both your lives. Come on, man. Let's have it. Answer me those things."

Ernst Von Rudvig yawned at him. "If you insist I stay awake," he said, "do give me another drink."

Lowe poured him another one, but

pulled the bottle back beyond his reach. The old-timers among the police detectives in New York had a system for such a job, he remembered. They took a lot of time and used a lot of words, but they got results.

"Von Rudvig," he said, "Margett told me a good bit about you and your family while she and I were together in France. I was given to understand by her that you're not real Nazis, but only people of German blood who for a number of generations have lived in the islands. The war in Spain wasn't your show at all. But still you flew for the Condor Legion, served as an active fighting pilot."

"I'm proud of my Condor service," the blond, thin-faced man said. "The Condor Legion was a German outfit. The tradition of my family insists that each male member serve with the German forces."

"Sure," David Lowe said. "That family tradition stuff always makes nice talk. But are you proud of the unprotected women and kids you bombed and gunstrafed to death? Is that your idea of what German military honor means?"

"The war," Von Rudvig said, "is over." He fingered his empty glass, stared down at it. "Might I have another drink?"

"In a while," David Lowe said. "When your tongue is hanging out to your shoulder for need of it. I was at Malaga, and on the Almeria road during that war that's over. I saw German planes of the Condor outfit come down and machine-gun the folks fleeing from Malaga.

"Old men, and sick and frightened women, and young kids. More than ten thousand of them, killed right there. They couldn't even run; they were too tired, and there was no place to run to anyhow. So you and your buddies slaughtered them.

"You came down so close we could see you in the planes. And when you were through, two German cruisers right offshore shelled the survivors. Remember that? Remember the women, covering the kids' bodies with their own?"

"Mercy," Von Rudvig said tonelessly, "has no place in war."

"Mercy," David Lowe said, and he pronounced the word as though it were a curse. "Your mother would have done a merciful thing to have throttled you at birth. Didn't you think of her, there on the Almeria road? Didn't you think of Margett, and what conceivably some day might happen to her, in another war?"

Von Rudvig ran his tongue across his pale lips. Sweat beads were on his brow, the backs of his hands. "Give me a drink," he said. "I can't answer that. Don't talk of it any more. It won't do you any good."

"All right," David Lowe said, and poured a finger of rum into the upheld glass. "We'll talk about Maxim Spelke, the man who forced you to go to Spain and take up the trade of professional butcher. He's a tough guy, the Herr Colonel Count. He doesn't have to keep himself half drunk all the time to check the war horrors in his head.

"In Burgos, he treated you like an unruly school brat, bawled you out for doing a little gambling. He wouldn't even let you see your sister alone, and he bought up all your I O U's on the quiet so she wouldn't find out about them. Why was that? You're big enough to handle your own affairs."

"Be still!" Ernst Von Rudvig said. It was a sort of fierce, hysterical cry. "Don't mention that man's name again! Don't mention Spain!"

David Lowe laughed, sitting forward crouched on the bunk rim. This felt good, he thought. He was being cruel, as tough as Spelke, and it felt good. "No," he said, "I'm going to keep at you. I'll beat what I want out of you, but I'll do it slowly, and only with words. So let's go back to the Almeria road again. I'm a reporter, you see, and I couldn't write all of that for my paper; it was too terrible for them to print. But there were women there who—"

"Stop!" Von Rudvig said. This time, he really screamed. But David Lowe kept

on talking, word after measured word, creating the images in stark and simple sentences, draining his brain of the black, terrible wells of memory.

VON RUDVIG broke in upon him many times. The man covered his eyes, his ears, screamed and cursed as if demented. David Lowe never halted. His sentences struck the other man like blows, jarred his whole being.

That scene on the Almeria road was no longer something out of a past war. The blood, the cries, the aghast and dying people, the great, down-thundering planes were right here, brought to full vividness by the power of his language.

David Lowe had no idea of how long he talked. It must have been hours. For the man across from him had become a bit insane. He wept, and blurted thickly gasped fragments of words. His hands raised out before him, as if with them he could keep the dead, the dying from him.

"No," he said once. "No. The blame's not mine. Spelke said he would have Margett turned over to the Gestapo unless I made those flights. But Spelke won't get what he wants, and you won't, either. There's water there, and it's deep, deep. No man can reach it. . . ."

David Lowe rose up then, came close. He took Von Rudvig by the throat, shook him. "Go on," he said. "Tell me more. It's the only way you have of squaring your soul. You're licked for life; that show finished you. But if you talk to me, at least we can save Margett."

But some final thread of control kept Von Rudvig silent. He checked himself, sat still except for the convulsive shivering of his body. David Lowe went back, sat down, started once more the story of horror. He talked as though to the dead themselves, asking their condemnation of the man before him. He went on for a very long time, hoarse-voiced and slow, memory driving every word, making it clear.

Monk stopped him. Monk came down into the cabin and gripped him by the shoulder. "Skipper, cut it out. You gone off your top yourself. That fella, he won't talk. He's so scared death don't mean nothin' to him, and he just lives for to drink likker.

"But you keep this up, you just won't be no good to yerself nor anybody else in Haiti. Man whose name you callin' is the man for you to catch. Now ain't I right?"

"Yes," David Lowe said whispering. "You are." He had been over the borderline himself, he realized. What he had just done here had been an insanely cruel thing. He got to his feet and staggered stiff-legged to the companion hatch.

It was night, he saw. Moon showed above cloud scud, and stars were coming forth in pale points of light. He took a long, gradual breath, held the salt-sharp air in his lungs. "I'm tired," he told Monk. "Just about pooped out. Do you think you can take the wheel for another couple of hours?"

"Sure," Monk said. "I can put the gaskets on her an' doze beside her. Wind's fallin' off. We'll be across the Stream and have nothin' but the Trades after dawn. You want for I should call you then?"

"At eight bells, four o'clock," David Lowe said, and returned to the bunk. Across the cabin, Von Rudvig already stretched full length, face down. He lay absolutely quietly, as quietly as a dead man, Lowe thought. Then he too slept.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DARK ISLAND

THE sea was sapphire color, the sky iridescent emerald. Bonito and marlin broke whitely leaping, left a thin trace of silver in their wake. Sail-fish crested after them, and high up against an ivory-shaded buttress of cloud a land bird winged.

David Lowe looked from that back to the chart spread before the wheel. "Cap du Môle," he said. "We pick up our landfall

there. Then right on down the Windward Passage to Baie Saint Marc. That's where we put into port."

Monk had been servicing a halyard end. He lowered it to nod to where on the foredeck Ernst Von Rudvig sat solitary. "How about him?" he asked.

"All my bets with him are off," David Lowe said. "Yesterday, he admitted to me that he'd been flying that plane at Spelke's orders, and that the guy with him was one of his buddies out of the Condor. But that was all he would tell me, except he wants to go back to Haiti, and Margett's already there.

"So I'm going to start up the radio tonight and talk to *Gendarmerie* headquarters at Port au Prince. I can just about raise them with this set. I'll ask them to get a message up to the Von Rudvig place to tell Margett that her brother's with us. Then when we get into port, he can answer his own questions."

"You ain't going to talk to Major Folsom, or Mr. Hanegan?"

"The set's too small to call New York. But I'll cable the major from Saint Marc. Hanegan's running a newspaper that I'm not working for any more. So he can wait. Don't mention either of those men's names while we're in Haiti: savvy?"

"Yes, sair," Monk said, and moved his head emphatically. "I don't ever want to step out wrong and have you put the heat on me the way you did that German fella. Skipper, when you get the mood on you, you can be a real tough man."

"I learned a little something about being tough in Europe," David Lowe said unsmiling. "It comes in handy these days. Now get supper. I figure to raise the Cap du Môle light around ten o'clock, and then I'll want you to take the wheel while I get a bearing."

Haiti was like a dark cloud upon the horizon of the moon-crossed sea. Then the mountain ranges took form, bleak knife ridges and great, black mornes dimmed by mist. The Cap du Môle light came ruddy to them off the port bow where the *Hyperbole* hauled southeast.

David Lowe took his bearing and checked twice before he gave Monk the new course. "Great big hunk of a bay in there behind that head," Monk said. "Big enough to hold plenty of ships, and she sets right here smack on th' Windward Passage. Fine place for an outfit like the U. S. Navy to have. Mr. Hanegan, he told me about it when him and me was coastin' down off here last year."

Ernst Von Rudvig had been seated on the windward side of the cabin trunk, staring at the huge mass of the island and the winking glare of the light. Now he turned to face aft, drawled, "The United States isn't the only nation who could make use of Baie Saint Nicholas. Its uses have been obvious for a long time."

"Yeah," David Lowe said. "But why tell us?"

"Because I know Haiti very well," Von Rudvig said. "I've been all over it, from end to end, and in Port au Prince and Europe I've talked with men who understand its true worth."

He started down the companionway into the cabin after he said that. But on the top step he stopped. "You've saved my life," he said to David Lowe. "In exchange, allow me to give you a small bit of advice.

"That island over there isn't a place where strangers are greeted well. Men have gone into the back of Haiti for what they said were reasons of their own, and they've not returned. It's rather curious; no trace has ever been found of them. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," David Lowe said, "and thanks for the needling. When and if I get in a jam in Haiti, I won't call on you."

HE AND Monk took turns at the wheel throughout the rest of the night, tacking past one light and high, somber headland after another. Then in the violent flicker of the false dawn, they raised Cap à Foux, came about to stand in across the Gulf to Saint Marc.

The dawn spread splendid in carmine flame. The mountain ranges were all blue, then deep green and a black-streaked ocher where forest fires had reached, and the lower mornes and valleys were cast in shimmering silver by the lifting mists.

The coast here was low, sandy. Tall cactus and small, wind-bent trees grew along it in sparse desolation. But the tin roofs of the town of Saint Marc shone, and the walls of the houses were bright white, pink, orange, the sails of the fishing craft putting out for the morning's catch were vermillion, shaped like the wings of birds.

David Lowe came smartly to anchor past a big freighter loading sugar off the beach. There was a crowd of people on the dock who stared and waved at the *Hyperbole*. "My radio got us quite an audience," he told Monk. "Put the dink overside, and take the oars when we go ashore. I want Von Rudvig in the sternsheets, where I can watch him all the time."

He never took his eyes from the flyer going ashore. You've got pretty cocky again, Von Rudvig, he thought. It must be your idea I've saved you because of Margett. There's a lot in that, but not too much. I learned a bit from you on the way south, and maybe you don't remember just what.

Now, though, I'm certain Spelke sent you to kill me. And I know there's some definite, concrete thing Spelke's trying to get from you. That's the source of your trouble with Spelke, why you're afraid of him. For some reason, you think I know what that thing is, that Margett told me about it, and that I'm after it, too. Keep on thinking so. As long as you do, I've got a chance to get to Margett, talk with her.

MEN in khaki uniforms wearing the badges of police called down at him as he swung the dinghy in alongside the dock. He answered them shortly, for Margett was right there at the stringer-piece. She had on a cotton dress with a kerchief about her head like the one she'd worn in France. He climbed from the dinghy and went straight to her, knowing Ernst Von Rudvig was close behind him.

"Margett," he said, "it's good to see you. In fact, it's very fine."

She smiled taking his hand and said, "I'm glad to see you, David. Thanks for your message." But then she looked at her brother, and no longer smiled.

Ernst Von Rudvig held her in his arms, kissed her, called her *Liebchen*. They talked together in German, speaking very fast, and low. The tight, stiff look went from Margett's face. She patted her brother's shoulder, and David Lowe could hear her say, "Now I understand. But I was very worried. Nobody told me anything, not even he."

"It's finished," Ernst said in a louder voice. "Now perhaps you should thank Herr Lowe for what he did for me."

They advanced side by side. Margett took David Lowe's hand again. "My brother has told me," she said, "that you saved his life out to sea when his friend's plane failed. You seem to be developing a knack of being nice to the Von Rudvig family, David."

David Lowe put his hands behind him so Margett couldn't see that they had closed into fists. It was his desire to hit Ernst flush on the jaw. But he grinned at the man and said, "Whoever Ernst's friend was, he chose the wrong time to take a plane to sea. They ran straight into a half-gale. It was just by sheer luck that my sailor and I were close enough to save Ernst. His friend was a little slower, and he didn't make out so well."

"Ernst," Margett said, "wouldn't it be nice if we asked David to come and stay with us for a few days at Crête à Moulin? I know our life there would please him, after what he's seen abroad."

Ernst Von Rudvig ran a thumb along the twitching muscles of his cheek. "Perhaps," he said, "he has other plans. After all, Crête à Moulin is pretty removed from everything that would be of interest to a man like Herr Lowe."

"Don't be worried," David Lowe said in an easy voice, "about any need of mine for entertainment. I should be delighted to visit you and just sit under a tree with a book all day long."

"Good, then," Ernst said, almost sharply. "There are many books at Crête à Moulin. We can leave right away, Margett?"

"No," Margett said. "Not until tomorrow morning. The car snapped a spring on the way down. It's in the garage now being fixed. The road beyond Bohon is nearly impossible. To make the trip to Crête à Moulin by automobile is quite an experience, David."

"I'm sure I'll like it," David Lowe said. "Now, if you don't think it's too early, let me buy a drink."

The rum they drank was like nothing Lowe had ever before tasted. It was light-bodied as whisky, but the flavor was rich, aromatic and yet sharp; it lasted a long time on the palate. They sipped it sitting on the shadowed porch of the little hotel off the sunny, dusty main square.

"I'll take rooms for us here," Ernst said. "Then we'll get a good night's sleep, be fit for the trip tomorrow. How about your man, Monk, Herr Lowe? Do you wish to take him with you?"

David Lowe waited for a moment to answer, knowing both Ernst and Margett closely watched him. "I shouldn't care to leave Monk here," he said. "You see, when I pulled out of New York I had no definite plan. I just hired the *Hyperbole* to cruise down here through the islands. Monk came with the boat, and I'm responsible for him to his real employer. If I left him to tend the boat, I'm afraid he'd fall fast for the local flesh-pots."

"Then bring him," Von Rudvig said. "I'll find some fisherman here who'll guard your boat for you while you're gone. Now you'd better get your things ashore, and make sure everything's locked up tight aboard. That should take you a couple of hours. How would it be if you were to meet Margett and me here in time for dinner?"

"Fine," David Lowe said. He walked back slowly along the sun-struck street to the dock. All about him were laughing, yelling, sprawling Negroes. Women hunched in the dust selling cod heads, pimentos, mangos, plantains, and needles and thread and buttons. Men stood and scratched themselves, watching the women, helping in the yelling each time a sale was made.

LOWE'S ears accepted those sounds, registered them, but his brain was concentrated in absolute clarity upon thought of Ernst Von Rudvig. There was some definite purpose, he understood, behind the man's invitation to Crête à Moulin. Von Rudvig was the head of the house and of his family; if he wished it, nobody was invited there.

But Von Rudvig called him his enemy, had tried to kill him, and now had no reason to trust or like him. Perhaps Margett's insistence had caused him to make the invitation, and in any event that made it sound plausible. In back of Ernst, though, and in back of Margett and everything that went on at Crête à Moulin was Maxim Spelke. He was the one to consider; it was his orders that were really obeyed.

Go up there to that place, David Lowe told himself, and it's an eighty-to-one shot you walk square into a trap. Spelke and Von Rudvig don't want you around loose with what you know now. There's no doubt at all that Spelke's somewhere close in this moment.

He's probably got guys watching everything you do, even walking here to the dock. Spelke's out to pull some really big job in Haiti, and you're the only lad who's got any sort of lead on what it is. So get aboard and get ashore, and up to Crête à Moulin. Take your chances with Spelke. You made a promise to John Folsom in New York that you're going to keep.

He found Monk in the middle of an admiring group of Negroes at the dock end. Monk had bought a straw sombrero,

a chicken on a string and a bottle of white rum. "This here rum, skipper," he admitted, "sets a fella's teeth right to fire. But I ain't but sampled it, figurin' you'd have need of me."

"Push off, out aboard," David Lowe said. "We're going up in the mountains tomorrow. Now we've got to batten down and bring our gear ashore."

"We going up in them real high mountains, skipper?"

"That's right. Way up. We've been asked to stay at my girl's family's place."

Monk raised his head to squint at the far vastness of the mountains. "Some piece o' walkin' back from there," he said. "Hope we was asked just for our health. That brother, now, he ain't the kind to—"

"Skip it," David Lowe said. "Start getting the canvas below. I've got a couple of lines to write before we go ashore."

He sat on the edge of the bunk with Brick Hanegan's portable typewriter on his knees. But he didn't write to Hanegan; his carefully worded sentences were for John Folsom:

Nice trip. Bit of fun with same nice people out to sea. Will visit them here. See you afterward. Hope to enjoy myself a lot.

He put Folsom's full military title to it, addressed it to Army Headquarters at Governor's Island, New York City. It wouldn't take much of a bribe, he thought, for Ernst Von Rudvig to get a copy of this at the cable office here in town.

But if he was to chance going to Crête à Moulin, it was just as well that Von Rudvig and Spelke recognized that he was aware of the danger for him there. And a cablegram sent to a major of the United States Army would be sure to be delivered, no matter what bribes might be given to a local clerk.

THE sun was down in brassy flame before he and Monk had secured the last bit of gear aboard the *Hyperbole*. They went ashore in silence, Monk taking a swig at the rum bottle as he looked back at the yawl. "Now fling it overside," David Lowe told him. "There's going to be no more fooling around for both of us for a while. I want you to take this up to the cable office. Send it in my name, then meet me right across the street at the hotel. Don't talk to anybody except the cable clerk, not even a wench."

"*Por dios,*" Monk said. "Serious times when a fella can't have himself a gargle o' rum and talk to a gal."

David Lowe leaned forward and looked deep into the black man's eyes. "You can stay here, Monk," he said. "Or if you want, I'll ship you home to the States. But you're the kind of guy I'd like to have with me up in the mountains. That place may not turn out so pretty for me."

"So," Monk muttered, and spit into the ripples the rum bottle had left alongside. "Then I don't drink, and I don't talk to no gals, and I ride right in your wake. Comin' south, I got to tellin' myself you're just about the best skipper I ever had."

"Stick with that idea," David Lowe said, and laughed. But his grip as he took Monk's hand was long and hard.

The town was different in the dusk, he saw. There were little fires along the street. Negroes squatted about them softly chattering, their black-shining faces and pale cotton clothing caught in reddish highlights by the glimmer of flame. Some of the women had small children, and they sang to them in low, lovely voices until a drum began to play. The drum was somewhere outside of town, out in the plain, but all the Negroes listened to it. Their huge, flat feet twitched, then a man took up the rhythm of the drum in a song.

"*Bamboche,* these folks call it," Monk said. "I've heard the same thing, over to Cuba. Be big dancin' and drinkin' where that drum is tonight. Thing for a man like you to see, skipper."

"Maybe I'll take my girl out," David Lowe said. "But you head for the cable company. I'll be waiting for you in the hotel."

A dice cup jounced on the bar of the hotel, and he heard laughter, the click of a swizzle stick in a glass. He stopped at the door, looking in, a strange tightening going over all his body.

Margett was seated at a table in a corner of the big room with her brother and another man. Ernst was already a bit drunk, and it was he who had laughed. But the other man sat so he faced the door. He was Maxim Spelke.

CHAPTER IX

LISTEN TO THE DRUMS

IT TOOK David Lowe several seconds until he was sure of himself. Then he moved slowly into the room, his hands at ease at his sides. Let Spelke start it, he thought. Let him make the first play, if just for Margett's sake.

But Spelke rose and bowed from the waist to him. Margett nervously touched her little evening bag before her on the table, then murmured," You've met Colonel Spelke before, David. He—he's just arrived, and is going to Crête à Moulin with us."

David Lowe made a bow as faultless as Spelke's. He said, "Of course I've met the colonel before. How are you?"

"Very good," Spelke said, his harsh voice evenly pitched. "Sit down, please. Tell me about your trip. I hear from Ernst it was an interesting one."

"It could've only been more so," David Lowe said, "if you'd been along with Herr Von Rudvig. I regret a lot that you weren't."

Spelke nodded, almost smiling. "Understood," he said. "Yet there is an old German saying, 'Every man to his duty, then to his pleasure'. . . . Boy, four rum cocktails!"

The insistence of that drum out in the plain increased while they sat at dinner. It had a definite effect upon Ernst that he openly accepted. "Haven't had a dance with a Negro girl in a long time," he said, his blood-shot eyes blinking around at them. "Good thing for me if I did. What do you say we go out to the *bamboche?* I'd like to dance, dance and drink all night."

Margett flushed and said nothing, not looking at her brother. But Spelke clapped Ernst on the back, laughed. "A real Creole sportsman," he said. "And why shouldn't he dance to a drum? It's an excellent idea. Let's all go to this *bamboche.* What do you say, Herr Lowe?"

Why is he asking me, David Lowe thought. Maybe he's fully certain I've been sent south here by Folsom to find out what he's doing. There must be something he's trying to put over tonight, but what?

Then Margett said, "If you've never seen a *bamboche,* David, they're a lot of fun. Everybody in Haiti goes to them sooner or later."

"All right," David Lowe said, his glance quietly searching her anxious eyes. "I'm for it. Will you give me a dance?"

"White women don't dance," Ernst blurted. "That you must learn right now. But there'll be plenty of good-looking Negresses to suit you fancy."

They drove to the *bamboche* in a powerful Mercedes-Benz. On the car doors was the Von Rudvig coat-of-arms, and the mulatto chauffeur wore a well-cut uniform. "Best driver on the island," Ernst said. "Hugo's the only fellow who can make the road to Crête à Moulin between dawn and dusk. How about it, Hugo?"

"Yes, sir," Hugo murmured and stared straight ahead.

The *bamboche* was in a clearing in a canefield back from the road. Little kerosene flares and battered lanterns marked the path to it. An open-sided structure of poles with a palm thatch roof covered the dancers. There were several hundred of them jammed together on the hard-packed earth of the dancing space, and now three drums played.

Dignified, elderly Negroes wearing clean white cotton clothing came forward to shake hands with Ernst, then Margett. The women smiled in greeting to Margett, gave her low curtsies. David Lowe watched

her intently, a warm wave of love sweeping through him. Here was the Haiti of which she had told him in France, the Haiti of the high, blue mountains and the rich sugar plains and simple, sweet-natured black people. He was not the only one to love Margett. These folks, too, had a great affection for her.

Cane-bottomed chairs were brought forth for their party, and they sat down close by the drums. "As precise as good German artillery fire," Spelke said. "I admit surprise at such skill."

"You would," David Lowe said, then gave his attention to the drums.

THE drummers sat on chairs, the drums held between their knees. Each instrument was different, one quite big, taller than knee height, and the next smaller, the third no larger than a bucket. The man in the middle set and kept the rhythm, made the breaks for the new tunes. His hands and the hands of the other drummers were long, powerful, gnarled from many years of playing. The knuckles were puffed, shoved back, and as calloused as the dancers' feet.

From time to time, the dancers came right up to the drums. They swayed with constant motion, heads jerking, shoulders rigid and arms distended, heels pattering the earth in complete obedience to the drum calling.

It got into your blood, David Lowe realized. For the drums wailed, and then they fiercely sang and roared, dropped into a murmur as soft as rain on leaves. Ernst was up, dancing to it. He had a tall, smooth-flanked girl whose skin was the color of honey. She gave herself to the music with abandon, her gaze fixed almost hypnotically on Ernst.

David Lowe reached over and took Margett's hand. "Let's walk out to the car," he said. "I was supposed to see my sailor, Monk, before we left the hotel, and I forgot. Maybe your chauffeur would take a message for me."

"He will," Margett said, sitting stiffly erect upon her chair. "Just tell Hugo that I ask he does it. But I've got to stay here. You see, Ernst is sometimes carried away a bit by the drums. And these people here are my friends."

"I figured that," David Lowe said, and wanted to take her in his arms.

Hugo stood beside the car in the road, a bunch of black children around him at a respectful distance. "I want you to go into town for me," Lowe told him, "and find a man named Monk. He's waiting at the hotel. Bring him back out with you. But maybe I'd better write a note. He doesn't speak any French."

Hugo drew himself up, brought his shoulders square. "I speak real good American, sir," he said. "Six years, I was in the *Garde d' Haiti,* corporal, then sergeant. I fight with the United States Marines against the *caco* outlaws. They teach me how to soldier, and how to talk American. I am damn' possible to talk straight to your man, sir."

"Very nice," Lowe said. "You seem to have picked up quite a liking for the Marines."

"A big lot, sir," Hugo said. "All fine men, 'cepting maybe on pay night."

David Lowe slowly formed the question. "Hugo," he said," if you liked the Marines, what do you think of M'sieur Ernst's friend, Colonel Spelke?"

Hugo turned his head so Lowe couldn't see his eyes. He kept silent for a long moment. But when he looked around and spoke, his gaze was level, quite fierce. "No good," he said. "And his friends no good. They give M'sieur Ernst some kind rotten deal."

"Which friends?"

Hugo's voice became a whisper. "One over there with Spelke now. Spelke come to meet him, not make *bamboche.*"

"Bring Monk out, and bring him fast," David Lowe said. Then he moved soundlessly back into the cane.

Spelke and the other man stood just beyond the *bamboche* lights. The other was a white man, Lowe noticed, and held his body rigidly gathered. It was he who listened, Spelke who talked. "*Ja,*" he said

at last in answer. "I shall see that it's done, *Herr Oberst.*" He clicked his heels then, brought his right arm shoulder high.

The Nazi salute, David Lowe told himself. That guy's a German officer. But why's he dressed in civilians, and what the hell is he doing here? This must be part of what Folsom told you. Spelke's starting some sort of Nazi show in Haiti. . . .

SPELKE had turned back toward the *bamboche.* But the other man was heading for the road along the narrow path through the cane. David Lowe stepped out to meet him square. "Well," he said, "fancy seeing you here. Last time it was when you were with the Condor outfit, in Spain."

"Excuse me," the man said. His hand was up inside his jacket on a pistol butt. "You're wrong."

David Lowe grinned. "But Ernst," he said, "told me—"

"You're wrong," the man repeated, and shoved on past.

Lowe stood still, cursing himself in a furious, soundless voice. You were sure before, he thought. This isn't any longer a personal affair between Spelke and the Von Rudvig family. Spelke wants something big from Ernst, but he wants more, too. The man who was with Ernst in that Messerschmidt most probably came from here. Wake up; get going. The tough number who just left you is another guy from the Condor, and in Haiti to do some sort of job for Spelke. Get him, and you'll find out what you should know.

The automatic pistol was in his side jacket pocket. He took it out as he advanced to the road. The sturdy German was climbing into a lightless car parked perhaps fifty yards away. Lowe called to him, the pistol showing. But then the car started with a booming rush.

The German leaped onto the running board, caught the door, climbed inside. Lowe braced himself, sent a warning shot into the headlights. The car hurled screaming on the slippery dirt road. Lowe saw it as an immense black shape that crowded out all the sky. He swung aside in the very last second. A fender caught him waisthigh, knocked him endwise and senseless back among the green, tall cane.

Monk found him there. Monk picked him up in his arms and carried him to the road. "Thought I'd come on you somewheres close," the black man said. "Folks to the *bamboche* had the idea they heard a shot here, but the drums was so loud they wasn't sure. Who done this to you, skipper?"

"I'm all right," David Lowe said. "Nothing's busted. I just met up with a couple of hardcase guys. I tried to stop them, and they tried to run me down."

"Pals o' Ernst?" Monk said.

"Pals of Spelke, anyhow."

"Oh, oh," Monk said, and stared around in the lightening dark. "You was lucky they didn't finish you."

"I know it," David Lowe said. He was painfully standing straight. "But what happened to Miss Margett, and Spelke and Ernst?"

"Went back to town some time ago. Spelke says no reason for to wait for you. Says you must be out somewhere with a black girl. Miss Margett says she don't think that, but then Spelke and her brother make her go back in their car. That Hugo find a fella here who'll take us in. He's got a truck full o' stuff for market, and says there's room, we pay him a little."

David Lowe nodded. "Let's go," he said.

"But, after this, we goin' up in them mountains tomorrow?"

"Absolutely. Now there's more reason than ever."

"Right," Monk said. "But I sleep inside the door o' your room tonight, an' I sleep with a gun in my hand."

Margett was alone at breakfast when David Lowe came down into the hotel dining room. She was pale, and under her eyes were dark marks of worry. "May I sit with you?" Lowe asked.

"Please do," she said. "Ernst and Maxim have gone out for a bit of shopping before we leave."

"Margett," he said, "there's something I must tell you, and tell you fast."

"About last night?"

"That, and what really happened out to sea. Ernst—"

"Don't falsely slander me." Ernst had moved soundlessly to the table. He wore a fresh linen suit and crepe-soled sport shoes, and his gaze was clear, very keen. "We were not sure yet just where you went last night. Maxim has the conviction you found the belle of the *bamboche*, took her off so you could learn Creole."

"Not so," David Lowe said, and forced himself to smile. "I had two girls. I was afraid to be alone with one."

"But you didn't find enough heart-throb," Ernst said," to keep you from going to Crête à Moulin with us?"

"Margett's my hear-throb," David Lowe said. "I'd be a fool if I ever changed my mind."

Ernst laughed. "You may get a different opinion at Crête à Moulin. But finish your breakfast. The car's ready, and Maxim's waiting there for us."

CHAPTER X

SMALL CITADEL

EXTRA gasoline drums were lashed to the rear of the car, and skid chains and a shovel held ready on the running-boards. Maxim Spelke stood beside it, softly whistling an old German *lieder* tune. "You passed a good night, Lowe?" he asked.

"Better than some," David Lowe said, then looked at Ernst. "Where shall Monk ride?"

"In front," Ernst sharply said. "With Hugo. You may sit next to Margett. Get in! We're already late."

The car went north from town, along the desolate coast, and then east. A huge yellow swirl of dust dragged raggedly behind. David Lowe stared back through it time after time. Another car followed them, he saw; it had picked them up at the first crossroad.

It stayed there mile after mile, keeping a regular distance, never losing place. But as they began to climb into the mountain passes it came closer. He could make it out plainly, distinguish the faces of the occupants.

They were all white men, all had the hard-mouthed, stolid look of professional German soldiers. And the man at the wheel was the one he had tried to stop last night at the *bamboche*.

Green-yellow fields of cane bordered the road across the valley they entered when they left the first mountain range. Then a river cut the road, and the cars jounced down fender-deep through the ford.

Beyond that ford came a town, where a French priest in a faded cassock lifted his sun helmet and called, *"Bon jour!"* to them.

"Must like his work," David Lowe said to Margett.

"Yes," she said. "He does." She raised a hand and pointed. "Look ahead. This village is the last. From here to that ridge, all the road has been built by us, the Von Rudvigs. Our ancestor, old Captain Johann Von Rudvig, began it.

"He brought a hundred men of the Royal Dahomey Guard when he came south here from his service with Christophe. He was an engineer, and under Christophe the guardsmen had learned how to drive other men. They recruited a labor gang from former runaway slaves. The road was built in six years."

"How about the house at Crête à Moulin?"

"That took longer. The captain imported every piece of his furniture from Germany. His wife insisted on it. She must have had had real spirit, to stand up to the captain."

"I imagine," David Lowe said, and was again silent. He looked ahead, marking each ridge, memorizing the terrain. Ernst, he remembered, had told him in that frenzy of hysteria aboard the *Hyperbole* about water that was "deep, deep." It was there without doubt that Ernst's secret was hidden. But in these mountains was no

place which could hold water as deep as Ernst had meant. There were no lakes the map showed, and the steep, shallow streams only filled their banks during the rainy season.

SPELKE hadn't spoken or moved for miles. He, too, studied the mountains ahead. In this hour of growing dusk they raised through the strata of valley cloud in immense, fantastic shapes. Their colors all somber—black, and tenebrous gray a brown the shade of rust-eaten iron. They were to be feared, David Lowe recognized. A man could easily lose his life there in the mazed ravines and precipitous gorges.

Now the two cars were constantly in low gear. Sweat was on Hugo's sinewy neck and hands. He never took his eyes from the road, and his hands moved the driving wheel with slow, deliberately sure care. David Lowe turned to see how the other driver took the road, and Ernst caught his glance.

"Don't worry about his making it," Ernst said. "He used to be a staff driver for the German High Command."

"Quiet!" Spelke snapped. "Do your boasting later."

The car had just swung a sheer-walled cliff curve onto a small plateau. Beyond, there was only one more ridge. It massed high, fierce and magnificent against the sky. But the line of its summit was broken. A square stone tower reared on that height, and in the dusk breeze the huge windmill arms blackly beat the sky.

"Crête à Moulin," Margett murmured to David Lowe. "How would you say it in English?"

"Windmill Crest," he said. "But who built it?"

"Captain Johann Von Rudvig. He used it as a grinding mill and a watch-tower. Up there, the wind always blows, and from it you can see into Santo Domingo, and north almost to the Haitian coast."

"His own citadel," David Lowe said. "He picked up a trick from Christophe."

"Yes," Margett said. "In his will, he ordered that he be entombed there. But his widow was a devout Lutheran. She buried him in a grave out behind the house, had a headstone made for him in Germany."

"Quite a family."

"One with many traditions." Margett sat closer to him, looked into his face. "Some of them, other people don't like."

David Lowe smiled. "Don't worry about me, *cherie,*" he said. "I'll take my chances."

A mahogany forest covered the plateau and the slope to the crest. There cultivation began. Coffee plantings spread behind rows of lime and orange trees. Fields of maize, cotton and tobacco lined the road. Then the road became an avenue, and they passed through a great, arched gateway decorated with a coat-of-arms.

Now you begin to understand, David Lowe thought. This is something you couldn't appreciate until you came here. The old captain not only built himself a home to last a long time, but set up pretty much of a tidy little kingdom in his own right. Then, across the lawn, he saw the black people.

THEY came in a column, marching in close rank. Drummers led them, and every man wore a machete in a scabbard at his hip. But there were women and children, too, and they all kept step and sang.

"Our fieldhands and servants," Margett said. "This is their way of greeting us when we've been gone for any time."

"A fine feudal touch," David Lowe said. "You and Ernst should be wearing ermine."

The car had stopped. Ernst and Margett got out, stood side by side. A gray-headed Negro in formal livery with a silver chain about his neck advanced alone from the column, took Ernst's then Margett's hand. He made a simple and yet eloquent speech in French, telling them of the "happiness of the people at Crête à Moulin that *m'sieur* and *mam'selle* have chosen to return."

Yells from the drummers punctuated that. They began to play again, and

couples left the column, danced with wild grace over the lawn. But Maxim Spelke was moving from the car. He called harshly to Ernst:

"Give them their ration of rum and send them back to work. Enough of this silly business."

Ernst's mouth twitched, and a dark look of anger came into his eyes. Then he obeyed, signaled to the liveried butler, and the drums were still, the people walked away mumbling, blankly staring back.

"So," David Lowe said soft-voiced to Monk. "Our big, bad pal is boss even here."

"He sure act like it," Monk said. "But he try to shove me around, I give him his grief all in one chunk."

"No, you won't," Lowe said. "We're in a very tight spot here, and acting tough too quick won't get us out of it. You stick with Hugo. He's the man to take care of you. Hugo, can you find a place for him to stay?"

"Yes, sir," Hugo said. He had got down from the car, too, gazed through lowered lids at Spelke and the other Germans. "I take Monk with me, over to my quarters, back of the house. But, Mr. Lowe, you know who are these men there?"

"Spelke's strong-arm squad," Lowe said. "Every one of them looks to me like a former German soldier. I've got to shove along now, with them and the rest. Keep your nose out of the rum, Monk. I'll be seeing you later."

He was introduced to the six hard-faced men in the great front hall of the house. Margett and Ernst had gone on into a further room, were out of sight. It was Spelke who made the introductions. He gave the six their military titles. One, the sturdy man Lowe had met at the *bamboche,* was Major Gilschau. The others were captains, lieutenants.

"Here to experience the delights of Haiti just like yourself," Spelke said smiling. "They're chaps who love the sun."

"No doubt," David Lowe said. "But if you'll excuse me I think I'll go to my room, get a wash and a change."

"One moment," Spelke said. The note of heavy mockery had left his voice; it was sharp with power and the certain knowledge of command. "Let me make clear to you now that while you're here you'll have no chance to speak alone to Fräulein Margett. Don't try it. If you do —" he closed his blunt fingers, snapped them. "This!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Restlessly, the great bird soared

Bird in the Sky

Hats off to the bubblingest blunderer of the Western plains, the champion of left-handed Injun fighters. Hats off, we say—because your scalp stays on, and all because of the youngster

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "North of the Jinx," "Warden Bait," etc.

ON HIS stomach Ben Egan crawled out on a lip of cliff that jutted over a rocky valley. Shading his eyes with his hands, he peered at the ranges of hills that folded into one another for as far as he could see.

He couldn't see anything else, which was what worried him. It was just when you couldn't see the varmints, and let yourself believe there wasn't a Dakotah or Arikarah within a hundred-mile radius, that their bullets began clipping the rocks around you.

Then, over the fourth hill to the south, Ben detected a single wheeling speck in the sky. For a full five minutes he kept his gaze steadily on it. It was a buzzard. A second bird joined the first. A third

appeared from nowhere, to wheel slowly.

Ben crawled back from the bare cliff into the shelter of the pines on the hill. Somewhere in the hills Running Elk was leading sixty young braves, who would rather go on the warpath than on a reservation, against the hated paleface. The party had skipped out of the reservation two weeks before, and hadn't been seen or heard of since. But a band of Sioux could sink out of sight where chipmunks couldn't find shelter.

As a scout for Terry's cavalry Ben was supposed to find them and report back to the cavalry—a detachment of which, under Lieutenant Tooker, had been camped for three days on the left fork of the Mark River.

He had been in the hills three days now without finding anything more dangerous than a few deer and elk. But the buzzards were swinging over carrion, possibly that left by Running Elk's hunters.

Ben pondered. If the war party was in the vicinity, their most logical objective was the Tomlinson ranch. That was just a little more than a hundred miles southeast on a branch of the Tongue River, and it was defended by only five men.

By riding all day and the rest of the night, Running Elk's party would be within twenty miles of Tomlinson's. They wouldn't ride tomorrow—there was too much danger of some drifting trapper or rancher stumbling onto them and getting away again—but they would be set to sack the ranch tomorrow at dark.

That gave him thirty-six hours. But Tooker's camp was also on a line with Tomlinson's, and only a few miles farther away. The cavalry could make a forced ride all day tomorrow too, and beat Running Elk to it.

Ben walked back to the knob where he had left the kid and the horses. He cocked his battered derby over his eyes as he caught sight of the kid's gay buckskins.

He'd just as soon fight the entire Sioux nation singlehanded as spend another three days in Indian country with the kid. Ben had known men of marvelous talent when it came to gun work, or tobacco spitting, or something worth while. But never had he known another with the kid's infinite capacity for doing things wrong.

BEN crawled slowly up on the kid, who with his hand shading his eyes was peering intently at a blank wall of evergreens ten feet away. His rifle was in his hands, his knife and tomahawk loose in their sheaths.

Ben tossed a pine cone that lit in the brush ten feet behind the kid. The kid jumped like a startled rabbit, the foolishly long fringes on his buckskin trousers flapping as he jumped.

Ben shook his head. Of all the clothes to wear—

"Ain't you seen nothin' warlike?" Ben drawled.

The kid's chubby face expanded into a grin. "I watched the horses like you told me," he said. "It would of took some Indian to get near them."

"Blind one couldn't possible of done it," Ben remarked dryly. "That is, if he was tied. Come on. We're ridin'."

Ben swung to the saddle. The kid followed suit, drawing the reins tight and making his horse prance. Ben rode past him.

A dozen times he had bawled the kid out, and a hundred times had tried to impress on him the fact that Indian hunting was a cold, hard-headed game—and a dangerous one. But none of it had done any good.

The kid was Indian crazy, frontier wild. He had joined Ben the first morning out with the bland assurance that Tooker had sent him to help find Running Elk.

What Tooker really had told the kid Ben didn't know, but he was reserving several choice things to tell Tooker as soon as he saw him again. He had been afraid to send the kid back until he knew where Running Elk was.

Ben rode his horse into a small creek,

and followed its winding course two miles or more. You never could tell about a war party of young bucks. It was likely to be a loose one, with hunters out and drifting lone braves not at all averse to counting coup on such wandering palefaces as they might find.

Ben reined his horse out of the creek and onto the bank. He waited for the kid, who appeared presently around a bend in the creek, his arms laden with willow shoots that he was trying to tie onto his saddle.

"What in tunket you been doin'?" Ben's voice was as close to exasperation as it ever got.

The kid's face was bewildered. "Why," he stammered, "I thought these would make a nice basket for my sister back east."

"That's right," Ben said mildly. "Of course, it ain't important that the places them shoots was picked from will show every loose Dakotah and 'Rick'ra that happens by here that we come this way. If it's all the same to you, could you manage to pick daisies and such where there ain't so much danger of losin' your hair doin' it?"

"But these are from a place where there's genuine wild Indians," the kid explained.

Ben turned his horse up the hill. On top he dismounted, and led his horse into a grove of evergreens. The kid followed. Ben retraced their trail back down to the creek, carefully brushing out all tracks.

He looked thoughtfully at the kid when he returned. If he left him with the horses, there'd be no telling what devilment he'd find. If he took him along, he'd at least know where he was.

"You come with me," he said. "Be easy about it."

"Yessir!" the kid said eagerly, his eyes glowing with the prospect of long-awaited action.

THE buzzards had descended to earth when Ben got to the edge of the treeless valley where he had marked them. The kid behind him, he slowly crawled on out.

Five flapping buzzards took wing as he approached. The skin, head, and viscera of a cow elk lay where they had been. A befeathered arrow still stuck through the elk's neck. Ben twisted it with his fingers.

"War party all right," he announced. "Young Dakotah Sioux. They've all got guns, but they don't want any more noise than necessary, so they're usin' arrows on their game. They'll stop long enough to piece out this elk. We'll get a chance to see them."

"How do you know all that?" the kid asked eagerly.

Ben looked at him gently. In spite of the kid's numerous faults you couldn't dislike him all the time. He was so young, so pathetically bound up in the romance of what he was doing.

"Dakotah arrow," Ben explained. "And they got plenty of guns because they didn't bother to take the arrow with them. They're young bucks because they done things in such a hurry here. Older men would have covered it up.

"And it's a war party because they took only the meat; Indians ain't wasteful. They'll stop and every man will fix three days' rations because they'll have it then if they have to light out sudden and ride hard."

"How did you know they was here to begin with?" the kid pursued.

Ben flipped a hand towards the buzzards swinging patiently above them. The kid's face lighted rapturously. "You knew it on account of them buzzards," he exclaimed.

"That's right," Ben agreed. "Come on. We'll have a look at what Running Elk's got to offer."

Ben led the way back to the horses, and at a rapid trot continued on down the creek. If Running Elk was going to Tomlinson's, he would come down another valley two hills over. Ben swerved from the creek to the top of another hill, with uplifted hand cautioning the kid to silence.

He tied both horses in the evergreens. The kid trembled in excitement. For the first time Ben's rifle was out of its scabbard.

Side by side, they crawled to the edge of another rocky bluff that overlooked a deep valley. Three hundred yards up, the valley made a right-angle turn, hiding from view everything above it. Nothing showed except a few crows flapping lazily below them.

The kid became bored after a bit, and began to pick at the shaly bluff with his finger nail. Ben kept his eyes riveted on the place where the valley turned.

His right arm stole across the kid's shoulders as three braves, mounted on three black horses, came into view. Ben tensed his arm and pressed the kid to the ground as he felt the shudder that ran through his frame.

The kid gasped audibly. Ben's hand flew to his mouth.

The three Sioux, no doubt honored warriors who had already counted coup in battle, rode directly beneath them. A red feather bobbed in the mane of each horse.

They rode with only buckskin pads between themselves and the horses. Parfleche bags were hung from the horses' flanks. Rifles were slung in the crooks of the warriors' arms.

There was little of color or decoration. The Indians, particularly the younger ones, had learned a lot from the whites, and lately had dispensed with a lot of color and foorafaw in favor of a swift, deadly attack.

RIDING in loose formation, the rest of the party appeared around the bend. Their horses, of every imaginable color, presented a gay pattern against the somber background of the valley. A band of loose horses was driven behind the mounted warriors.

A few of the warriors had stuck war feathers, that they probably had not earned, into their scalp locks, and a few of them had painted their rifle stocks. In all the party there were not more than half a dozen bows.

Ben counted them. Including the first three there was a total of sixty-one—all warriors. They were well armed and well mounted, and urging their horses rapidly down the valley. Beyond a doubt Tomlinson's was their objective. If they went back, they would either have to stay in the hills or return to the reservation. If they cut east, they would be getting dangerously close to the cavalry.

Ben waited until the last one had passed, then drew the kid back to the horses.

For five minutes he sat unmoving. At last the kid could be of real use; but Ben hesitated. He had come to hold a vast awe of the kid's propensity for blundering. Still, even though important, this was a simple enough mission.

With a pointed stick Ben traced a map on the ground.

"Look," he said to the kid. "Here's where we are now. This strip here is Mark River. All those little gullies runnin' into it cover it from Squirrel Run, where Tooker's camped, down to Beaver Run. This long valley is where the Injuns are ridin' down. They'll camp some'rs this side of Beaver Run tomorrow at daybreak.

"You can reach Tooker by ridin' straight up this holler we're in now, and crossin' the saddle we camped in the first night. Think you can do it?"

"I know I can," the kid said, his eyes shining with thought of the dashing deed that had, at last, come his way.

"Aw right," Ben continued. "Never mind that hoss of yours. Kill him if you have to, but get there. Don't waste any time. Tell Tooker that Running Elk is goin' to Tomlinson's Ranch. He'll be set to take it tomorrow night. Tell him he can cut him off in Beaver Run sure. Have him let Ike Prillifew guide him in there. Don't slip up. There's five men at Tomlinson's might die if you do."

"I won't slip," the kid said. "What are you goin' to do?"

"I'd go get Tooker myself," Ben said in a troubled voice. "But them's all young bucks. I cain't just be positive that they're goin' to Tomlinson's, though I'd stake my hair on it. But Running Elk's a crafty devil. Now that we got him spotted I'd like to keep him in sight. If he changes his mind about Tomlinson's I could cut the cavalry off before they got too far down."

The kid achieved a spectacular vault into the saddle. "I'll find Tooker," he promised.

"Ride that hoss," Ben warned.

At full gallop the kid rode up the valley. Ben watched him out of sight, then mounted his own horse to trot slowly along toward the Tomlinson ranch. He'd better, he decided, trail Running Elk all the way down. He told himself again that there couldn't be any slip-up. The kid could certainly get word to Tooker.

Ben had ridden scarcely five miles from where the kid had left him when three mounted Sioux thundered out of a bunch of evergreens straight at him.

Ben wheeled his horse, dropping over the saddle and thrusting his rifle under the horse's neck. He shot. One of the Indian horses jolted to the earth, throwing its rider.

Ben pumped another shell in. A volley of shots rang from behind. A jarring blow smashed against Ben's head.

But only as his horse fell on top of him and he sank into oblivion did he realize that there were more Indians than the three he had seen.

WHEN he awoke, the sun was a golden ball sinking in the west. Ben looked at it, and closed his eyes again while he strove to collect his scattered thoughts and formulate some distinct impression of what had happened.

He was aware both of a great thirst and of a trickle of water running near him.

He opened his eyes again, to look straight up a needle-like spire that stretched above him into a mass of shimmering blue that gradually resolved itself into the sky.

His head throbbed; he became aware of dry and hardened substance on his face. It was, he realized vaguely, caked blood.

He tried to turn over on his stomach, struggling furiously for a full minute before he became aware that he was held to the ground by buckskin thongs driven in beside him, and that he was stark naked.

Gradually full perception returned. He moved more slowly, trying by sheer force of will to overcome the undulating throbbing in his head. He looked again at the needle spire, and knew a sudden shock of panic as he realized where it was.

He had, he remembered, been following Running Elk's war party toward the Tomlinson ranch. Running Elk had ambushed him. Then he had exhibited some of the qualities that had made him a war chief. He had back-tracked Ben to where he had sent the kid back to Tooker, and had correctly read the story of what had taken place there.

The needle spire was a landmark, but it did not mark the way to the Tomlinson ranch. Instead of wasting time and warriors tracking the kid down, Running Elk had let him go on and carry word to Tooker that the Tomlinson ranch was about to be attacked. Then, with the cavalry a hundred miles down country, he had an unobstructed trail to the settlement of Grant.

Undoubtedly the Indians had gone up the valley in which Ben found himself staked out. Instead of a hundred miles south, they would swing down Mink Creek, twenty miles north of Tooker's camp. From there it was only a day and a night's ride to Grant, that had been impossible to attack with the cavalry in the way.

Ben groaned, and fell to fighting the thongs that bound him.

But he relaxed and lay quietly after a bit. He couldn't do anything but waste his strength by struggling. Cautiously he

wiggled his scalp. It sent pains shooting through his head, but his hair was still on.

He had, he remembered, shot one horse from under an Indian and then been attacked by others that had killed his horse and wounded himself. His wound must be only a superficial one.

Probably the Indians who had attacked him had disagreed as to which of them had counted first coup, and each one had disdained his scalp rather than have it said that another had aided in taking it.

Running Elk's party was in a hurry, which explained why none of them had lingered to witness the torture they had contrived for him. Staking out was a particularly choice method of relieving the hated white man of all worldly cares. It insured a maximum of discomfort, and plenty of time to meditate on past sins, as well as a specially repugnant method of entering the Happy Hunting Grounds.

It was a plains Indian custom, Ben thought; but lately the various young bloods of different tribes had been adopting customs of other tribes that applied to their requirements.

But he was still luckier than he might have been. Anthills were the most favored locations for staking prisoners.

Slowly Ben edged his head around until he could see the farther bank of the creek. He tried not to think of the raging thirst that assailed him. Staking him close to water was a typical Sioux touch.

HE TURNED until he was again able to look at the needle spire. A bald eagle volplaned out of the sky, circled the spire three times, and settled beside the mate that rested there.

Ben looked at it gratefully, eagerly. It was distraction, something to take his mind from the maddening trickle of the water. By straining his eyes, concentrating every faculty on the spire, he was able to discern the eagle's nest—a huge bundle of sticks that blended with the gray of the rock on which it was built.

Ben stared hard at it until the lengthening shades of twilight enveloped the spire in blackness. As best he could he fitted his body into the contours of the ground. The night would be endless.

Its beginning brought chill. Ben shivered, but his thirst did not decrease. He thought of his boyhood on a Pennsylvania farm, and how he used to drive his father's cattle home from the pasture every night and wait while they drank from the trough beside the barn.

His throat was burning, dry; his tongue a twisted piece of rope within his mouth. He forced his thoughts away from water and animals drinking and began to concentrate on horses he had ridden, fights he had been in, warm places he had known, fires he had built in storms.

But in spite of his best efforts, toward morning he found himself lying with every muscle tense, every nerve awake. A cold sweat bathed his entire body.

He knew that he had been asleep for a few minutes, in the grip of a horrible nightmare. From somewhere a startlingly clear voice had shouted, "Running Elk and sixty braves burned Grant while Tooker's cavalry was at the Tomlinson ranch.

"Ben Egan sent them there."

AFTER an eternity, a faint patch of gray appeared in the sky. Ben stared at it incredulously. It seemed to him that he had never known a year as long as the night had been. It was impossible that it should ever come to an end; he had given up hope that morning would ever be again.

For ages he had been in a black void filled with mounted Indians. At times the chubby face of the kid had grinned at him from the background. Ben was glad that the kid wasn't having to endure this. Somehow he couldn't picture the kid staked out.

The patch of gray widened, to reveal a sky of cloudless blue. Ben lay silently, apathetically awaiting what he knew would be a day of torture. The night had been

bad, but the day would be worse. He tried to speak, and was startled at the croaking whisper that came from his lips.

Then, just as the first rays of the sun began to paint the top of the spire a warm yellow, the eagle took wing from its eyrie.

So surely that there seemed to be solid substance instead of air enfolding the spire, he arose. In great swooping circles he climbed, growing fainter in the distance and at last going out of sight. It was as if the sky in whose lower reaches he made his home had admitted the eagle into itself, as one deserving of a higher place.

Eagerly, anxiously, Ben waited for him to come back. The eagle was something alive, something that moved and could reassure him that life still existed in that great void into which he must stare.

The spire was the only thing he could see, and now that seemed part of the monotony. The sun descended into the valley to send warm fingers creeping over his body.

It warmed him, but Ben shrank before it. What the sun might do in the course of a single day he knew full well; and he could not hope for death in less than three days. He would literally be cooked alive.

After half an hour the eagle came back bearing a jackrabbit in its claws. Ben smiled as he hovered above the nest and lighted there, leaving the rabbit for his hungry mate. He rose again, swooping about the nest in long curves and headlong dives as he assured himself that all was well.

If, by some miracle, Ben should escape, never again would he harm a bird.

But when the eagle flew away again, emptiness returned to smite him like a blow. Ben thought of yesterday. He had failed miserably to do the job he had set out to do, that others had depended on him to do. Only a few dozen miles away, a short ride, Tooker's cavalry were pushing their mounts towards a futile goal.

In his mind Ben reconstructed their arrival at the Tomlinson Ranch, the wonder of the men who would receive them there, and the concern of Tooker when he found no raiding Sioux.

Then, perhaps while Tooker had more scouts out looking for Running Elk, would come the wild-eyed messenger on the lathered horse, the news that Running Elk had gone to Grant.

And always, on every part of the frontier, men would say that Ben Egan had sent the cavalry on a wild goose chase while the Sioux had raided.

THE sun became hotter, began to burn. His inability to escape it, to do anything to help himself, was maddening. He stifled the impulse to struggle in thoughts of the kid. Bubbling and eager, the kid would be pushing his horse along at the front of the cavalry column.

But the kid wouldn't be so eager after he rode to Grant. He had never seen one of the things that a white person became after the Sioux had passed. You couldn't tell the men from the women. You could pick them up, and talk to them, and treat them gently, and never once would they move or talk back.

No, the kid would probably tone down considerably after he rode to Grant with the cavalry. Ben hoped that what he would see at Grant wouldn't spoil him, or rob him of all that bubbling spontaneity that became exasperating at times.

He didn't think the kid should ever become a cold-faced killer of men—even of Indians. What the kid should do was mix it up in a couple of skirmishes and then either go back east or settle down on a ranch.

Ben screamed huskily, and fell to fighting the bonds.

The return of the eagle restored him to sanity. For a few seconds, exhausted by his screams and futile struggle, Ben lay back on the ground watching the bird swing down to the nest. He paused there a moment, then on lazy wings ascended into the air and hung there.

Ben kept fascinated eyes on him. With all his being he hoped that the eagle would not go away again.

Slowly, infinitesimally, the day burned on. His body was parched. But it was not as he thought it would be. The pain did not torment him nearly so much as the absolute helplessness, the inability to cover himself, to get out of the sun when every reason and instinct screamed that that was what he must do.

With gaping mouth he stared at the eagle. The eagle hovered over the spire, changing his position from time to time but doing it so swiftly that he seemed always to be in one place.

Then, toward evening, the eagle flew away. Ben watched with sick eyes. The first faint murmur of delirium stirred in his brain. This time he was sure that the eagle would never return and he would be left alone.

HE LAY back, choking and gasping. The full, unallayed horror of things that were about to be returned to seize him. A curtain of red mist hung before his eyes. The spire grew ten times as high as it had been, and at a dizzy pace expanded and contracted into itself.

Ben emitted a croaking whisper that would have been a scream if his throat had been capable of more sound. Senselessly he began fighting his bonds.

His mouth opened and snapped shut. He writhed to each side as far as the thongs would let him move. Finally, exhausted, he lay still.

With closed eyes he lay a long time. He fought an almost overpowering impulse to open his eyes again and look for the eagle. As long as he kept his eyes shut he could hope that it was there. Opening them, and not seeing it, would be unbearable.

Fantastic visions began to chase one another through his head. He saw three braves mounted on three black horses. The three became thirty, and thundered down on him while he shot at them without hitting any of them. Finally, the thirty became a yelling horde, trampling terrified people beneath the feet of their horses, shooting others down as they ran.

Then, out of the mêlée, rode one figure. A chubby-faced, grinning kid who put the savages to rout. For a moment thereafter he bestrode his horse, the victor in the field. Then, startlingly distinct, he turned his horse towards Ben.

Ben heard the pounding hoof beats. At full gallop the kid rode, swinging from the saddle as he reached Ben's prostrate figure, bathing his body with cool water, giving him water to drink, wrapping him in a soft blanket.

Weakly, Ben opened his eyes. He stared in wonderment at the needle spire. The eagle had returned, and now hovered scarcely a hundred feet over it. It was nearly night again. But when Ben tried to move his hand, he found that he could do it. He turned to face the creek, and stared full into the kid's face.

The kid knelt beside him, cradling his head in a gentle arm. With his free hand he held a wet cloth to Ben's lips. Ben squeezed the water out, working his throat muscles as it trickled down his throat. The kid heaved a prodigious sigh of relief. Ben relaxed. The kid smiled broadly when Ben looked into his eyes again.

"Running Elk?" he whispered.

"It's all right," the kid assured him. "I did just what you told me. I forgot the name of the ranch, but to make sure I wouldn't forget the creek I kept sayin' over and over again—'creek named for animal that lives in creek.' When I got to the cavalry camp I told Tooker to hustle right up Mink Creek. We met Running Elk there this morning, and licked him plenty. Me and Tooker didn't lose a man, but we did have one wounded one."

BEN shook his head, but the smile would not come off his face. The kid and his blunders! The kid and his mistakes! The blessed kid and his fool fumbling! Beaver Run—Mink Creek! "Animal that lives in the creek!" It was fantastic, the blunder of the century. . . .

"How did you find me?" he whispered.

The kid assumed an exaggerated stance that he probably thought marked him as a professional scout. "I thought something must be wrong when you didn't show up," he said. "Tooker said you could take care of yourself, but I was worried. So I rode back."

He waved a blasé hand at the eagle. "Remember how we found the Indian kill? Well, I found you the same way. I rode to the top of a hill now and then, and as soon as I saw that buzzard up there I suspected you must be under it."

The kid made another broad gesture and nodded complacently.

Ben lay silent, dumbfounded. If the frontier lasted another thousand years it couldn't happen again. Then, suddenly, the kid gripped his hand. His air of hard-boiled professionalism drifted from him like a puff of smoke. He was again a kid, all bound up in the romance of frontier life. He would never be anything else.

"Ben," he said, "I'm going to tell you somethin'. Tooker didn't send me out. I—I just sort of come on my own hook. But if you think I done all right, couldn't you, couldn't you just sort of take me along on your next trip? I can learn, honest! Show me more and I'll try to do better, Ben."

The kid was silent then for some time; he stared at the prone man, his eyes anxious and pleading.

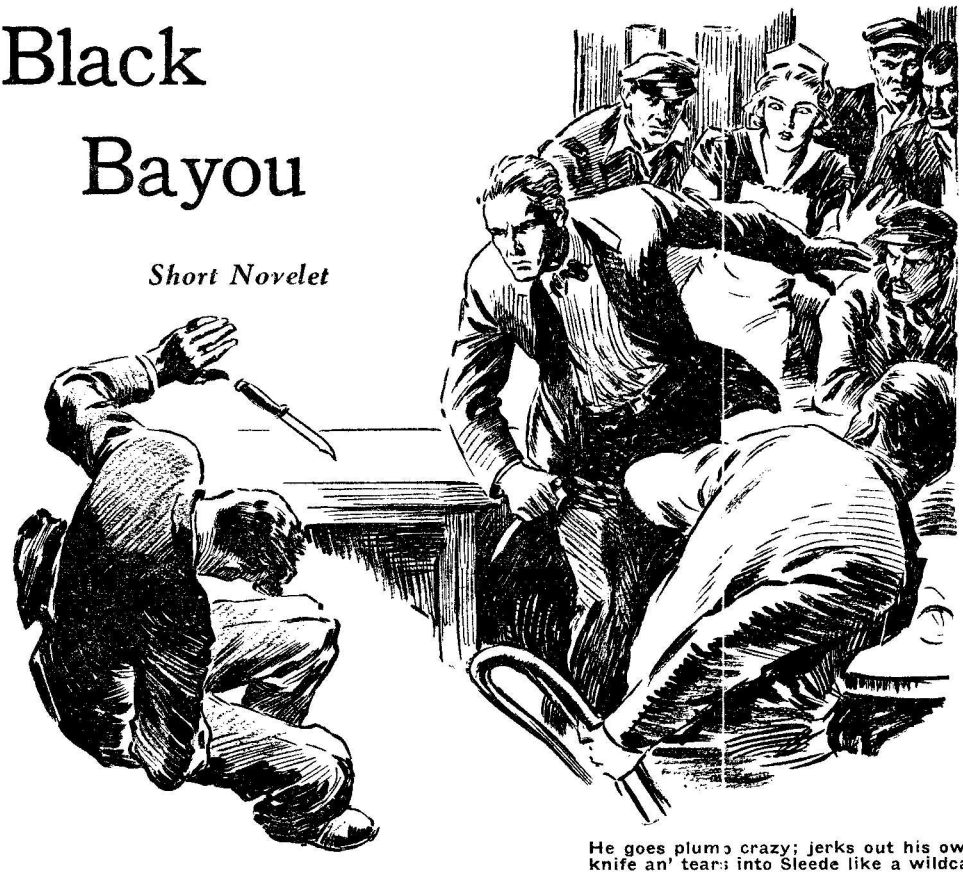
Ben's smile grew softer on his face as he drifted into slumber—dreamless this time. He saw the kid, amiable and blundering, doing everything wrong — but watched over by some lucky star or under the wing of some mysterious providence. There weren't enough Indians in the West to lift his hair.

Ben squeezed his hand.

"I wouldn't dream of taking anybody else," he murmured.

Black Bayou

Short Novelet



He goes plumb crazy; jerks out his own knife an' tears into Sleede like a wildcat

You've killed a man. You're sick and afraid, and you take to the swamps like a hunted animal. Then you wake to the sound of a girl's voice singing. And you set your course with a shotgun . . .

By ALEXANDER KEY

Author of "Saltwater Scramble," "Luck on the Ladybird," etc.

i

SOME o' this I got from young Ranny himself, though I'll not say how. An' some come from Dad Hunter an' Bonnie Fox, an' others I'll not mention.

A lot of it, sure, is plain fancy spun from fact. It couldn't be no other way.

Now, I'm not tryin' to excuse anyone, but you know how it is when a man comes ashore after a hard trip on the snapper banks. For a couple weeks it's been wind an' squalls an' heavin' blue water, with sharks an' fouled lines to worry him, an' a hot Gulf sun fit to burn him down.

Out there he gits to feelin' that life is a heap too short, so when he unloads the catch he wants to collect his money an' spend it. He's bone tired, but he's all strung up tighter'n a weather lanyard, an' rarin' to bust loose an' do something.

He wants a lot o' likker an' music, an' for a little while he ain't got no more sense than a fool puppy dog.

That's the way it is with young Ranny Beale when the *Flying Fish* comes in.

Ranny, he can't hardly wait to dress up in his good clothes an' head for Dad Hunter's place. He don't aim to git in no trouble. It's just that he's needin' a drink bad to make the ground stop rollin' under him, an' he's crazy to kick up his heels an' have some fun.

An' in his pocket he's got a present for that little redhead who waits on tables.

He's done forgot all about Sleede Purdy. He goes up to the bar an' slaps down a buck for a bottle o' likker, an' he don't even notice Sleede. It's a warm spring night an' the place is crowded, an' everybody is havin' a good time. The radio is playin' something hot from Cuba, an' over in one corner there's a bunch o' Greeks off a sponger, high as hoot owls.

Ranny he stows a long drink an' stands by to watch 'em, for there ain't nothin' funnier than a bunch o' Greeks with too much down the hatch. The hairiest one has climbed the table an' is gettin' ready for a dive. He thinks he's still out on the Gulf after sponges.

Ranny is lookin' for his cute little redhead when the Greek waves his arms an' sails head-first off the table. He lands with a big crash that shakes the whole place. Everybody howls, an' Ranny digs his elbow into the feller next to him an' busts out laughin'.

"Jest look at 'im!" says Ranny. "Now he thinks he's fightin' sharks!"

The feller next to Ranny don't say nothin'. He just turns around slow an' grabs Ranny by the shoulder, an' for the first time Ranny sees it's Sleede Purdy.

SLEEDE he's a sight bigger'n Ranny, lean an' dark complected an' quite a hand with the wemmin. At the moment he's had mebbe a couple drinks, which is a heap too much for a Purdy.

Ranny never had no use for the breed. Them Purdys got Indian blood, an' it don't take much likker to make 'em ornery.

"You hit me," Sleede says real soft. "What'd you hit me for?"

"Why," says Ranny, "I never hit you. I was jest tickled at that Greek."

"You did too hit me," says Sleede.

"You tryin' to start somethin'?"

"You started plenty when you stole my berth on the *Flyin' Fish.*"

"I never stole nobody's berth. You was too drunk to go, an' Cap'n Joe needed a man. Take yo' hand off'n me!"

Sleede digs his fingers in tighter. A lot like his brother Jug, is Sleede. Jug kilt a man recent an' skipped town. Sleede says: "You hit me a minnit ago. Now you're callin' me a liar an' givin' me orders. What's more—"

"Shut up!" Ranny busts out. "You're jest tryin' to make a shark out a mullet. I ain't aimin' to git in no scrape tonight, but if you keep a-pressin' me—"

"I'm a-pressin' you," says Sleede. "An' I'm a-tellin' you I don't like the sight o' yo' sheep's face an' yo ugly yeller hair. An I'm a-tellin' you to git out o' here an' keep a-goin', an' never come back."

"Oh yeah?" says Ranny, an' he knocks Sleede's arm away. He's all on edge an' there's a devil risin' in him; he knows something's comin' now an' he wants to git away from it. But he's like a man caught in a strong tide current an' bein' carried where he don't want to go.

They stand there lookin' hard at each other without sayin' a word, an' you can feel something gittin' tighter an' tighter between 'em. The funny thing is that there's hardly a soul in the place even noticed 'em yet. Everybody's still laughin' an' watchin' them Greeks.

All but the little redhead who waits on tables. She's right there big-eyed an' takin' it all in. She looks at Ranny an' suddenly Ranny sees her, but she just wrinkles her nose at Ranny an' smiles at Sleede. An' she says, "Fer Pete's sake, Sleede, why don't you hurry an' hit 'im?"

"I'll do more'n hit 'im," says Sleede. "I'm gonna scale 'im, an' trim 'im down." An' Sleede's hand goes quick to his pocket an' comes up with a knife in it.

Ranny stares at that redhead an' he

just can't believe his ears. For a couple weeks he's been thinkin' about her an' dreamin' about her, like a man always does at sea, an' all evenin' he's been just itchin' to give her the present he's got in his pocket. Now it's just like she'd stabbed him in the heart an' twisted the blade around.

All at once there's a red-hot thing a-stingin' his arm. It's Sleede's knife. An' Ranny lets out a hoarse cry an' leaps back, an' something snaps loose in him like tight riggin' in a blow.

FOR about a half minute he goes plumb crazy. He jerks out his own knife an' tears into Sleede like a wildcat, an' Sleede don't hardly have time for another lick. Ranny gives it to him hard an' fast an' deep, an' Sleede hollers an' drops his knife an' goes down.

It happens just like that, quick, an' then it's over. An' there's Sleede Purdy sprawled on the floor, one foot jerkin' like he's tryin' to git up. Only he ain't never goin' to git up.

Somebody screams, an' for a second afterward the place is dead quiet save for that fool radio up on the bar. It's still playin' the same Cuban piece. It was sweet music when Ranny first come in, but now it's just a noise an' he can't stand it. He smashes it with his fist an' starts for the door, an' then all hell breaks loose in Dad Hunter's place.

The redhead gits in Ranny's way; he sees only a nasty little scut with a beer bottle, an' he slaps her down. He runs out into the night, an' he keeps a-runnin' till he begins to realize what he's got himself into.

The whole thing makes him sick to the marrow. His knees don't work right, an' he's tremblin' all over. He happens to look down an' sees he's still holdin' his knife. It's something a feller always carries when he goes to sea, an' ashore he don't feel right without it. He never cut a man with it before.

Now he's done gone an' done it, an' the thing he's done is a low, ornery thing—an' the law calls it murder.

He throws that ugly knife away an' runs fast to his room. He ain't got no idea what to do now; an' with his paw dead an' gone these six months, he can't think o' nobody to go to for advice.

An' he keeps a-sayin' out loud, "Oh Lordy, I never aimed to do it! 'Tain't right I should die for it. But if they ketch me—"

It's not till he reaches his room an' strikes a light that he sees how bad he's hurt. He tears off his shirt an' wraps some handkerchiefs around his arm, an' he's tryin' to button on another shirt when he hears voices, an' people comin' in a hurry along the street.

It frightens him, for all at once he realizes that he's no longer as he was; that he's stepped out o' the light into the darkness, an' that now he's shut off forever from his kind. All because a devil got loose in him that he couldn't hold back.

He gives a low cry like his heart is broke, an' suddenly turns an' spreads a tarpaulin on the floor an' begins dumpin' things into it. Then he grabs up the corners an' slips out to the alley.

It seems like all the world must be watchin' an' followin', but when he reaches the water front there's not a soul seen him.

He ain't got no plans, but he remembers there's a feller up the river a way who is known as Chicken, an' that people often go an' see this Chicken when they git in trouble. An' beyond Chicken there are the swamps.

So Ranny crawls down under the pilings an' steals a bateau an' motor he knows about; an' after paddlin' quiet 'way out to the middle o' the harbor, starts the motor an' heads upstream. He ain't got no use for a sneakin' boat thief, but he aims to send the owner of it some money when he's able.

The river is like a sheet o' pale silver under the stars; he looks back once an' sees the lights o' the town dancing like jewels in the water. He near breaks down

an' cries, for it's there that he was born an' raised, an' now he knows he can't ever go back to it.

ii

CHICKEN'S place is up on a creek where the salt marsh meets the swamp. The gas runs out as Ranny nears the creek, an' he has to paddle. His left arm is nigh useless; an' though it's slick tide, it's all he can do to keep the bateau movin'.

He's mighty near all in when he reaches a little pier an' sees, dim against the swamp, the outline of a shack built high on pilings.

He tries to crawl out on the pier but he's too weak to make it. A hound dog starts barkin', an' up above him a screen door creaks an' a light flashes down.

"Yeah?" says Chicken's voice. "What is it?"

"You alone?" Ranny asks.

"Mebbe," says Chicken.

"I gotta see you," Ranny tells him. "I'm hurt a little."

Chicken grunts something an' comes down on the pier an' helps Ranny up to the house. He's a round, stumpy feller with a bald head an' a flat face, an' little slate eyes sorta like a shark's. The Lord only knows why they call him Chicken. He deals in likker an' 'gator hides, an' he takes care o' boats durin' the hurricane season.

He don't ask Ranny no questions. He takes one look at the bad arm an' puts on water to boil, an' when it's hot he cleans the wound an' sews it up with an ordinary needle an' thread, good as a doctor would.

Ranny is takin' a drink when he happens to look up an' he sees there's somebody watchin' him from the door o' the back room. It gives Ranny a terrible jolt, 'cause it's almost like seein' a ghost.

But it ain't no ghost. It's Jug Purdy. Jug looks a heap like his brother Sleede. About the only difference is that Jug's older, an' mebbe a little more ornery.

It never even occurred to Ranny that Jug might be hidin' up here near Chicken.

Jug comes in the room. "Who cut you, Ranny?" he says.

"I ain't askin' you no questions," says Ranny.

Jug chews on a match; he spits it out an' starts chewin' on another. He spits the second one out an' says: "Sleede come up to see me last week. He says you stole his berth on the *Flyin' Fish.*"

"Yeah?" says Ranny.

"Yeah," says Jug. He chews on a third match an' spits it out. "He also tole me you been playin' around with that little redhead o' his'n."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Jug starts worryin' the fourth match. He spits it out an' says: "You done hurt somebody or you wouldn't be up here. You been fightin' Sleede?"

"Never mind who I been fightin'. I ain't askin' you no questions."

"Damn you, I know you been fightin' Sleede! If'n you've kilt him—"

Chicken looks hard at Jug. "Don't start nothin' up here."

JUG'S long fingers keep openin' an' closin'. "No, not here. But when I find out—" Suddenly he turns an' slides out the room. Ranny hears him run down the steps to the pier, an' a minute later a big motor comes to life an' whines away in the night.

"Was it Sleede?" says Chicken.

"Yeah."

"News travels pretty fast along the water," Chicken says slowly. "How you feelin'?"

"Tolerable."

"Then you better start movin'."

Ranny is thinkin' the same. "But first I gotta have gas an' grub."

"Okay. Gas is a dollar a gallon. Oil is a dollar, an' beans is fo' bits a can. The sewin' I done on you is ten bucks." Chicken don't even blink when he says it.

"Okay," says Ranny. He's got to pay it or paddle, an' he sure can't paddle.

He gits a can o' gas mixed with oil for the outboard, an' a couple cans o' beans. It takes near all the money he's got. As he hands it to Chicken something hard falls to the floor. It's the present he was goin' to give that redhead. He picks it up quick an' puts it back in his pocket.

"That looked like a pearl," says Chicken. "If it's a pearl—"

"It's jest a slug," says Ranny. It's really a pearl, an' he got it out a big broad-lipped conch he caught. Mebbe it's worth a heap an' mebbe it ain't, but it's better for Chicken not to know it.

Chicken helps him into the bateau. "You got any place to go?" he asks.

Ranny shakes his head.

"Then you're in a hell of a spot," says Chicken. "You got to go some place, fast. Ever hear about them people up in the Dead Lakes country?"

"Yeah, I know about 'em."

"Ever hear of a feller called Snakebird?"

"Yeah, he used to load cypress on my paw's river boat. He's a bad 'un."

"No he ain't. Jest funny like the others. You go up to a section called Black Bayou an' look for Snakebird. He owes me a favor."

Ranny winds up the motor an' heads full speed back to the river.

A MAN called Snakebird. A place known as Black Bayou. Lost people livin' in a lost place, 'way back in the swamp's core.

Once, maybe, they were a Creek tribe; but that was a long time ago. The Spanish come, an' then the Scotch, an' each left their blood an' their mark.

Yet they live on where they always did, in a water whirl where a thousand creeks an' sloughs an' bayous lie in tangled green lanes under the gray moss. Where the Chattahoochee spreads seaward in a great flood, an' six rivers lose themselves in nine hundred square miles o' darkness before they reach tidewater.

Oh, it's not like the Glades or the Okefinoke. It's nearly all black jungle.

An' Black Bayou? Not really a bayou —just a name that you'll have to find by compass. Ranny's heard his paw mention it, an' that's about all.

As he nears the river Ranny throttles down the outboard, then shuts it off. While he listens he takes his shotgun out the tarpaulin, loads it, an' lays it across the seat. Over in the sawgrass the frogs are jingling an' the 'gators are bellowin' like bulls. He can't hear Jug's motor yet.

Ranny hurries on, keeping in midstream an' runnin' the outboard fast for awhile an' then stopping it quick to listen. He's far up in the swamp before he hears another motor comin'. Now he eases the bateau under a tangle an' stretches out on the bottom, tryin' to sleep.

His arm bothers him so that he can't sleep, an' all night it seems he can hear motors whinin' up an' down in the sawgrass lanes an' racing on the river. In the quiet o' dawn he starts out again.

There's a fever burnin' in him now, an' his arm feels like it was afire. When he stops to make a sling for it with some handkerchiefs, he thinks he hears Jug Purdy's motor behind him, comin' fast. But it's only the locusts whinin' up in the cypress trees. He curses the sound an' goes on, but the whinin' stays in his ears.

The gas runs out late that afternoon an' he tries to paddle. It's hard to paddle with only one arm, an' with the weight o' the outboard on the stern. He unfastens the motor an' tries to put it over the seat; only his strength has left him an' the motor slips away an' splashes out o' sight in the black water. It makes him sick to lose it, but it's no good without gas.

With the paddle at the stern he's able to scull an' keep the bateau movin'. North an' west toward the Lakes, followin' the lubber's line of the old box compass that belonged to his paw.

Around him now is a deep green twilight, with bottle-necked trees everywhere an' long moss overhead. Just where he is Ranny don't know, an' he's past carin'.

But the course is north an' west, an' all that matters is to keep a-movin'. To git some place where he can't hear that whinin' sound of a motor.

There comes a night an' another day; an' once Ranny tries to open a can o' beans, but he has nothin' to open it with, not even a knife.

But it don't make no difference, for he don't feel hungry. Just hot an' full o' pain, an' there's that dreadful whinin' in his ears. Maybe it's only the insects an' the way he's feelin', but it could be Jug Purdy, followin'.

The sound grows louder an' louder till it seems to fill all the swamp's darkness, an' before Ranny's eyes there floats the dead face o' Sleede; an' all around it more faces rise, an' each o' them is the grim an' accusing face o' Jug.

An' Ranny cries out in a great fear, an' he curses them an' drops his paddle an' snatches up his gun. Then everything fades in a monstrous blackness.

iii

THERE are times when this blackness is broken, when it seems like someone is feedin' him with a spoon, an' when he thinks he sees people an hears voices, an' sometimes a woman singin'.

She is singin' when Ranny wakes. It's a cool sweet mornin' an' the air is heavy with the smell o' tupelo an' magnolia an' bay. An' Ranny finds he's a-layin' in a hammock under a cedar tree; an' sittin' on a log nearby is a great lean man with long black hair, dressed in faded overalls that has a thousand patches; an' on the man's head is a big black hat with a rattlesnake band.

The man is cleanin' a 'gator hide. "Hmp," he says, lookin' over at Ranny. "Ye done come around. How ye feelin'?"

"Tolerable," says Ranny, an' he manages to sit up. He's terrible weak, but there's no whinin' in his head now—only the singin', which he ain't sure about yet—an' he feels real hungry.

Beyond him he sees a little cabin half hid under the water oaks, with gourds full o' flowers on the porch, an' 'gator hides stretched all over the wall.

The singin' is real, an' it's comin' from inside the cabin.

"My name hit's Bonnie Fox," says the man.

"An' mine's Ranny Beale," says Ranny. "I—I reckon I musta got lost. I sure thank you kindly for findin' me an' bringin' me here."

" 'Twas Junie Gal brung ye, couple days back. She's always a-findin' something an' bringin' it in. That's her a-doin' the singin'."

"Oh," says Ranny.

"Junie Gal!" the man calls. "He's done come around! Ye better fix him some vittles."

"All right, Paw."

The singin' stops an' in a little while a slim pretty barefoot girl comes out a-carryin' a big pewter plate. It's piled with more food than three well men could eat, an' on it there's grits an' bacon an' fish an' hot hoecakes an' jam, an' Lord knows what else.

She hands Ranny the plate shyly an' says, "Hit's little or nothin', but mebbe ye kin make out with it." An' she sits down on the log beside her paw.

Ranny he can't hardly eat for lookin' at her. After the way the redhead treated him, o' course, he's all done with wemmin. But this Junie Gal ain't like nothin' he's ever laid eyes on before.

SHE'S around seventeen, as tall an' slender as a young bay tree an' as pretty an' graceful as a doe. An' bein' a swamp woman, which means there's fine Indian an' Spanish blood in her that goes way back to the time o' the buckaroos, she's got skin like pale gold an' hair that's as black as midnight. Oh, she is a beauty!

An' Ranny gulps an' says, "It—it's a mighty fine dinner you fixed for me, an' all,"—though he's hardly touched a bite of it—"an—an' I sure wanna thank you for bringin' me here an' takin' care

o' me. I know I can't never repay you."

"Hmp," says Bonnie Fox. "She can't help what she does. The last time she brung somethin' to home, hit was an ole mud turtle with one leg missin'. She kept a-doctorin' it an' a-feedin' it till the pore thing up an' died."

Junie Gal she looks at Ranny quick, an' then down again, blushin'; an' Ranny sees her eyes are a deep gray-blue—like all the swamp people has, for some reason nobody knows—only Junie Gal's eyes are a heap deeper an' bluer than any he's ever seen. An' they remind him o' something, though he's too flustered to think what it is.

Then Ranny recalls that it's a lot safer to leave swamp wemmin alone, an' that he's done with wemmin anyhow. An' he remembers why he's here.

"I—I got to be gittin' along soon's I kin travel," he says. "Mebbe you all kin tell me where I kin find a feller named Snakebird?"

"That man—" says Junie Gal, an' gives a slight shudder.

"Hush," says Bonnie Fox, then looks hard at Ranny. "Snakebird, he ain't around no more. He a friend o' yourn?"

"No. I—I was jest told he'd help me. I'm from down the river, an'—an' there's people liable to come a-lookin' for me, an' I got to go some place where—"

"Shucks," says Bonnie. "If'n that's all, then ye needn't worry. Ain't nobody gonna find ye here. An' none o' the folks hereabouts is gonna bother ye. We kinda figgered ye wouldn't wanna be goin' back whar ye come from, so Junie Gal she passed the word around that ye was to be let alone."

"There's others livin' near?"

"Oh, not near; we-uns don't like things too cluttered. Reckon that's what's wrong with the people outside. Hit makes for a sight o' wickedness, livin' like that. Got so many laws they can't turn around 'out breakin' one. Man can't e'en make his own likker, or kill hisself a buck when he's hungray. Pshaw!"

"Well," says Ranny, "mebbe you're right. I dunno. All I know is I can't go back, an' I don't see how I kin make out with what little I got. I'm about out o' money, an—"

"Hmp!" snorts Bonnie Fox. "Ye sure got a heap to larn. What's a man want with money when there's fish for the catchin', an' turkey an' hawg an' deer for the shootin'?

"I declare! An' when ye need bought'n things, like mebbe clothes an' ca'tridges an' such like, all ye have to do is trap a few coon an' otter in the winter, or shoot 'gators in the summer. Then somebody takes the hides over to the settlemint an' trades 'em in."

"I was jest a-thinkin'," says Junie Gal. "Why couldn't he live in Gre-gran'pa's place over on the Bee Gum? Nobody's a-usin' hit now, an' hit's so well hid ye could paddle right by an' never know 'twas there."

"Hit ought to do," says Bonnie. "We could help 'im patch the roof an' fix up the garden fence to keep the varmints out. Them bears 'bout tore hit down. An' I reckon we could loan 'im some vittles an' things till he kinda gits a-goin'."

So that's how it comes about that Ranny Beale goes to live in a little cabin on the Bee Gum, which is a dark creek in the heart o' the Black Bayou land.

iv

IT'S plain terrible at first, this cabin on the Bee Gum. Ranny, he's a Gulf man, with the salt sea in his blood. An' he's used to space an' the wind's whip, an' the sound o' water that's never still.

Up on the Bee Gum he can't even hear nor smell the sea, an' he feels choked in the tangle. Oh, there's water enough—there's water near everywhere, an' no end to its windings. But it's black an' still, an' always in shadow.

It's at night when it's really bad. At night the limpkins sound like ghouls, an' a man's thoughts begin to crowd in on him. An' when a cat squalls or a panther screams, it's like the soul of a murdered

person cryin' out in hate an' torment. Like the ghost o' Sleede Purdy.

Ranny tries to keep himself busy. His arm is near healed now, an' there's plenty to do. There's the fireplace to be mended with sticks an' blue clay; fish traps to be made from split saplings; an' the high fence around the tiny garden spot built higher an' stronger to keep the varmints out.

Bonnie helps plant the garden an' loans him tools till Ranny can make or buy some; an' it's Bonnie that shows him how to trap wild hogs for his bacon, an' go 'gator huntin' at night with a fat pine torch. It's a sight to watch Bonnie shine a 'gator's eyes in the dark, an' sneak up an' catch the rascal with his bare hands an' kill 'im with a knife. It saves bullets that way.

An' so Ranny learns, an' manages to git along. An' there are times, especially when Junie Gal's around, when he almost forgets Sleede Purdy.

A man can forget near anything when Junie Gal sings. She's got a mockingbird beat, an' when Ranny hears her, things stop weighin' so heavy on his mind.

Maybe it's just for this reason that Ranny takes to spendin' a lot more time than he should over at Bonnie Fox's cabin. Hardly a day goes by now but Ranny paddles the three miles from Bee Gum, bringin' a choice mess o' bream or a brace o' summer ducks as an excuse to stop an' talk awhile.

It's seldom, though, that he has more than a word or two with Junie Gal, for Bonnie is always near.

An' if Bonnie Fox becomes more an' more thoughtful, an' says less an' less to Ranny each day, Ranny hardly notices it. Ranny can't notice anything else these days when he's looking into Junie Gal's eyes. Her eyes, he has discovered, are just the color o' the Gulf when the cloud shadows sweep the water.

THERE comes a mornin' when Ranny is sittin' on his steps, mendin' a fish trap; he looks up all of a sudden an' there's Junie Gal at the landin', a basket under her arm. It's the first time he's ever seen Junie Gal alone.

"I brung ye a berry pie," she says. "Paw, he's off a-huntin'."

"Golly!" says Ranny, "I'm that glad to see you, I could—"

"An' I come to tell ye," Junie Gal hurries on, "that mebbe ye'd better not come over no more."

"D—don't you want me to come an' see you?"

"Why—why sure I do, Ranny. It—it's jest that Paw—well, Paw's actin' like he did once before. Ye better stay away."

"But—but I don't see why—"

"Ye'd see why if'n ye knowed what happened to Snakebird. That man—I never had no use for 'im, but he kept a-comin' every day, an' makin' them snake eyes at me. An' Paw—oh, Ranny, I don't want nothin' to happen to ye!"

An' suddenly Junie Gal is cryin', an' before he knows it Ranny's arms are around her, tryin' to comfort her, an' he's sayin' all kinds o' things to her that he didn't know was in him.

Junie Gal looks up at him an' says, "Do—do ye really mean all them things ye're tellin' me?"

"Honey," says Ranny, dryin' her eyes with his sleeve, "there ain't words enough no place to tell you how much I like you. I—"

"Oh, Ranny!" An' her arms go around his neck an' hug him so tight it near chokes him.

Then all at once she breaks away with a little gasp. "Oh, Lordy!" she whispers. "Here—here comes Paw!"

Ranny turns around quick. His heart goes dead in him. It's Bonnie Fox, all right. Bonnie has a rifle, an' on his face is a strange quiet look.

"Junie Gal," says Bonnie. "Git in yo' boat an' start paddlin'."

Junie Gal puts her hand in Ranny's. "I'm stayin'," she says, so low she can hardly be heard. "I reckon I found 'im, an' I reckon I'm a-goin' to keep 'im."

"Not yet ye ain't," says Bonnie. "Do

like I tole ye. Don't stray far; jest paddle down to the bend an' wait till I come. Me an' him's got business."

"Ye won't hurt 'im, Paw?"

"Don't aim to at the moment."

Junie Gal gits in her bateau an' paddles off.

WHEN she's gone Bonnie Fox says, "I'm sorry to come a-pryin'; but 'twas fitten I should know which way the wind was blowin'."

"You know how it's blowin' now," says Ranny.

"So I do. An' 'tis fitten I should know some other things. There's mebbe a shootin' to be done, but whether 'tis my right or yourn—"

"A—a shootin'?"

"Yeah. But first I aim to know why ye're here, an' what ye're hidin' from."

"I reckon," says Ranny, "that I'm mostly hidin' from myself. I kilt a man."

"Tell me about it."

Ranny tells him, every word of it. Even to taking the bateau an' motor, an' goin' up to Chicken's place, an' seein' Jug. An' as Ranny talks, it seems that a great weight is lifted off his mind.

"Hm," says Bonnie, after listenin' quiet. "What's this feller Jug look like?"

Ranny describes him. Bonnie Fox sits quiet a minute, stroking his rifle. Then: "Ye'll have to figger some way to pay for that boat an' motor. Otherwise 'twould be stealin'."

"I'm savin' for it now. But—but about fightin' Sleede—"

"Oh, that," says Bonnie. "Hell, what's worryin' ye?"

"The knife part of it, I reckon. It's ornery to kill with a knife."

"I don't see hit makes no difference how ye kill a polecat, long as ye make a good job o' hit. Anyhow, them as lives by the knife ought to die that a'way. Around here we don't waste no time with sech varmints.

"O' course, I never liked doin' some things, but I ain't never shirked what I thought was my bounden duty. Now, as I was tellin' ye awhile ago, one o' us has got a little job to do."

"W—what's happened?" Ranny says.

"There's a feller come up from down the river," says Bonnie. "Been actin' mighty troublesome. I'm thinkin' mebbe ye know 'im."

"Who—who is he?"

"I reckon hit must be this Jug Purdy. I reckon he's come a-lookin' for ye."

RANNY swallows hard. "It couldn't be Jug," he argues. "Jug, he wouldn't know where I'd come. Not unless Chicken told him—an' Chicken don't talk."

"Mebbe there was a reason," says Bonnie. "Mebbe hit was worth something for Chicken to talk. Anyway, there's a strange feller here, an' he's a varmint. Asked folks where he could find Snakebird. That would point to Jug."

"Yeah," says Ranny. "It would."

"I don't like no varmint pryin' around," says Bonnie. "Hit makes me oneasy. 'Tain't that I'm a-blamin' him none for comin' after ye', that's a man's right.

"But the swamp ain't safe for Junie Gal with him around. He's been watchin' his chance. Been follerin' her about when she goes a-fishin'. She always carries her shotgun, sure, but a man varmint ain't like a swamp varmint."

Bonnie frowns before goin' on.

"Been keepin' my eye on things. The rascal always lights out when I git within gun range, but he don't stay away. Now I'm done foolin' with 'im. Would a-settled with 'im before, only hit takes a rifle an' I been out o' ca'tridges. Jest got the loan o' some this mornin'. I knowed ye didn't have ary rifle, so—"

"Lemme have it," Ranny interrupts, an' his voice has a bite to it. "Reckon it's my right better'n any man's.

"'Tain't yo' right yet," says Bonnie. "First I got to ask ye something. Raise yo' right hand."

Ranny raises it. "Now," says Bonnie. "Do ye aim to take Junie Gal to have an' to hold, an' never let no man put ye apart?"

"I aim to," Ranny says simply. "An' I'll never let no man nor nothin' ever put us apart."

Bonnie hands him the rifle. "She shoots a mite high," he says. "An' here's them three ca'tridges. One ought to be enough. I figger Jug's a-campin' somewhere in the tupelo back o' Little Heron. God bless ye, son, an' good luck."

An' with that Bonnie goes down to his bateau an' paddles quiet away.

v

FOR a space Ranny stands there, holding hard to the rifle. There's a hate in him, deep an' cold, but in his mind is a confusion o' questions.

Always the thought o' Jug has been with him, like some evil knowledge that casts its shadow over everything. *Some day Jug will come; there'll be no knowin' the hour, for Jug will come quiet an' lie in wait behind a cypress tree with a gun in his hands. That's Jug's way. That's the way men settle things in the swamps.*

An' now Jug has come.

"Chicken must have told him," Ranny says to himself. "An' Jug, he must have seen me by now. Couldn't help seein' me, watchin' Junie Gal. But why'd Chicken tell him—an' what's been keepin' Jug away from me?"

Maybe it's because Jug's eyes are too full o' Junie Gal.

At the thought Ranny snaps a cartridge into the rifle. It's a single-shot weapon, an' very old, but there's a comfort in the way it sets in the hands.

An' Ranny takes a deep breath an' looks about him; at the cabin that's all his own.

An' he smells the sweet smell o' magnolia an' bay—not like the salt smell o' the sea, but mighty near as good. An' on the steps, lyin' there like a promise, is Junie Gal's basket.

Ranny takes some food down to the bateau, an' then, thinkin' he might have to spend the night out in the cypress, goes back for a blanket. He's rollin' it in the tarpaulin when he hears a slight sound outside, a soft step on the cabin porch. He springs up quick, then stands there frozen.

Darkening the doorway is the lean figure of a man. The man is slowly chewin' on a match, an' in his hands is a carbine. The man is Jug Purdy.

Ranny is caught, an' he knows there's not a chance. His shotgun is in the far corner by the fireplace, the rifle out in the bateau. An' Jug's eyes are bright an' dangerous an' evil.

"You durned skunk," says Ranny. "How'd you git here?"

"Followed them swamp people," says Jug. He worries the match, then spits it out like he hates it. "Yeah, I seen yo' ugly face around; never could find where you was hidin' before."

"What difference does that make to you?"

"Aimed to have a little talk with you, mister."

RANNY stares at him. With his left hand Jug slides another match between his teeth; he rolls it slowly across his thin mouth and clamps down on it hard. "These swamps," he says, "they're hell to live in. I'm gittin' damn' tired of 'em."

"Ever try leavin' 'em?"

"Yeah. There's only one way to leave. That's through Chicken. Chicken kin git you out safe on a Cuban boat. But that takes dough."

"I ain't got no dough."

"You got the next thing to it. Chicken'll take anything on trade."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I know you got it. Everybody on the river knows it now. The boys on the *Flyin' Fish* seen it; they been talkin'. I asked Chicken if he'd seen it. He says he did."

"So that's it," says Ranny.

"That's it," says Jug. "It don't make no difference to Chicken; he don't give a damn as long as he gits paid for what he does. But he says he'll take the thing

in payment for a trip out on a Cuban boat."

"What kind o' deal you tryin' to make with me?"

Jug bites through his match an' spits it half across the room. "If'n I had the money," he says, "I wouldn't be foolin' with you. I'd a-done settled things long ago. But you hand over that conch pearl, an' mebbe I'll call it quits about Sleede."

"An' if I ain't got it?" says Ranny.

"If you ain't got it," Jug says real slow, "that's just too damn' bad."

"It—it's in that gourd," says Ranny, pointing at a round gourd on the wall.

Jug's eyes light up suddenly. "Git it for me," he says.

Ranny takes the gourd off the wall. It's fixed for keeping cornmeal in an' over the top there's a wooden cover tied on with string. Ranny lifts the cover an' digs his hand deep into the meal.

Jug watches him slyly. "I wasn't sure you still had it," he says. "You always was a fool about such things. Thought you might a' gived it to that damn' little swamp woman. Hell, a woman like that—"

"You shut up about her!"

Jug grins. "Sweet on her, eh?" He makes a cluckin' sound an' shakes his head. Then, shifting the carbine slightly, he reaches for another match.

LIKE a strikin' cottonmouth Ranny's hand flashes out o' the gourd, flingin' meal in Jug's face. An' at the same time he makes a flyin' jump for the carbine.

The carbine roars over his head, but in the next instant Ranny has his hands tight on the barrel, an' Jug is tumbling backward out the doorway, choking with hate an' tryin' to wipe the meal out his eyes.

Ranny pumps a fresh shell into the carbine. "Git up!" he snaps. "Git up an' run!"

Jug sways to his feet. "You ugly yeller-haired so-an'-so," he says through his teeth.

"I told you to run," says Ranny. "When I count ten I'm gonna start shootin'."

"You—you gotta give a feller a chance," pleads Jug.

"I'm a-givin' you a durned sight bigger chance than you was gonna give me. Yo' pussy-footin' wasn't foolin' me none."

"Wait—wait a minnit," says Jug. "Honest to Gawd, I got somethin' to tell you. I got a real deal to make with you this time."

"Yo' deals ain't worth a damn."

"You—you better listen to me," urges Jug. "I know somethin' you'd give yo' right arm to know."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"You promise you'll gimme a chance to reach my boat an' git a-goin'?"

"All right. You got my promise. But you'd better make it good."

"It's good," says Jug. "I got it from Chicken. Mebbe you don't know it, but Sleede's been in trouble before. He kilt a Greek down at Tarpon Springs."

"That ain't helpin' me none," says Ranny.

"Yeah, it does," says Jug, takin' a step backward. "The Tarpon sheriff sent word for 'em to hold Sleede, that night you fought him down at Dad Hunter's place. Next day the sheriff come to town, an' him an' Dad Hunter did a heap o' talkin' in front o' the coroner's jury. I reckon Dad Hunter seen it all, for he told plenty."

Jug pauses an' looks around. He's halfway down the steps now.

"Not so fast," says Ranny. "Let's have the rest of it."

"You kin guess the rest of it," says Jug. "Dad Hunter swore 'twas all self defense on yo' part—though I know damn' well it wasn't.

"But when the jury got through listenin' to him, an' listenin' to the Tarpon sheriff, they decided they might as well save the state some money an' let you go."

An' with that Jug hits the ground, movin' fast, an' disappears in the woods.

"Well I'll be damned!" says Ranny.

He stands there in a daze, starin' at the spot where Jug has gone. For a few seconds afterward he can hear Jug

movin' through the palmettoes along the creek. When the sound fades away he starts slowly down the steps.

All of a sudden he jerks up straight, listenin'. From down on the creek comes a shout, an' right afterward the roar of a shotgun.

IN TWO jumps Ranny is across the yard an' plungin' through the timber, but he's gone only a little way when he sees Bonnie Fox a-comin' on the run.

Bonnie stops dead in his tracks. He blinks hard at Ranny, then a shadow seems to lift off his face.

"Law', son," he says, shakin' his head, "when I hyeared that rifle shot awhile back, hit shure gave me a turn! Knowed 'twasn't my rifle. Didn't sound right. I come a-paddlin' back quick—an' then I seen that feller a-tearin' through the bushes. I jest knowed he'd got ye. So I didn't waste no time cuttin' loose on 'im—"

"You—you kill 'im?" asks Ranny.

Bonnie twists his mouth in high disgust.

"Naw!" he snorts. "Didn't have nothin' but my shotgun—an' hit loaded with birdshot. Hardly did more'n singe 'im a little. I hurried ashore, but before I could git in another crack at 'im he'd hopped in his boat what was hid down there in the slough, an' was paddlin' like hell off through the cypress. Didn't ye have no chance at 'im?"

"I did," says Ranny. "But I let 'im go."

"Eh? You—you let 'im go? How come ye to do that, son?"

Ranny tells him on the way to the cabin. They sit down on the steps an' Ranny says, "I couldn't shoot 'im after what he told me."

Bonnie nods slowly. "I reckon ye done right, son. I reckon hit warn't meant for the blood o' both o' them to be on ye."

He sits there silent for a space.

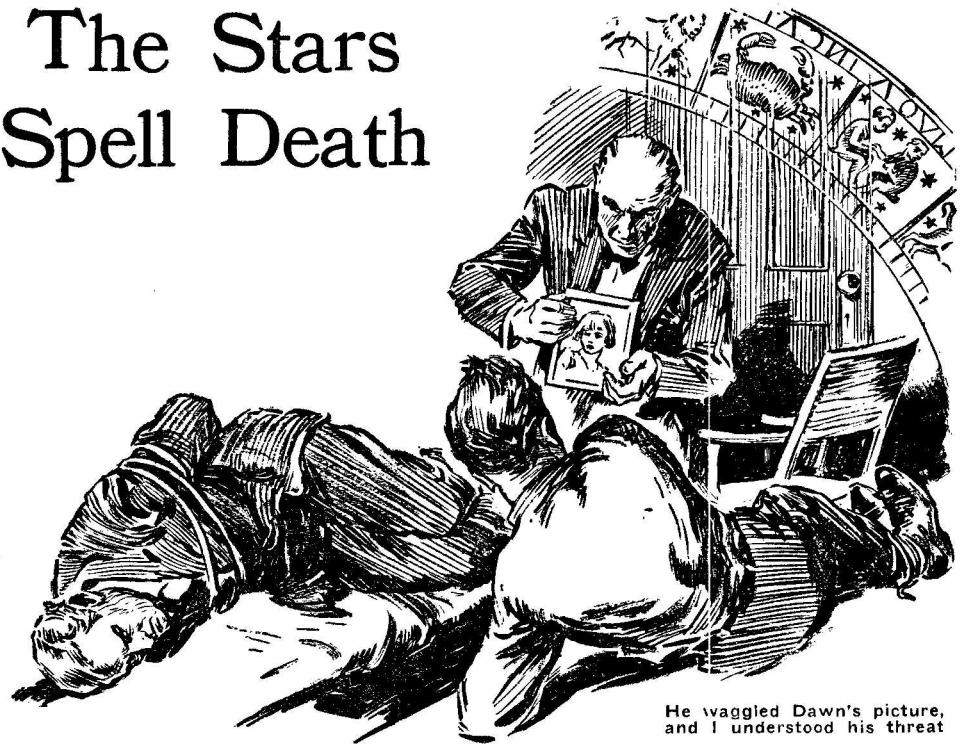
"I think I hear that kid o' mine a-hurryin' back," he says presently. "She must a-hyeared them shots, an' she'll be plum' scared to death about ye. Now, that makes me wonder; she's swamp bred an' this country's home to her. An' you, well, after what Jug tole ye—"

"That don't make no difference," says Ranny. "I thought it did for a minnit, but I see now it don't. I don't feel like Jug does about these swamps. I did at first, but I ain't like I was. Anyhow, I done laid my course, an' I'm a-holdin' to it. I got a heap here I never had before, an' I wouldn't give it up for nothin'."

"I hoped ye'd say that," Bonnie tells him. "I'm mighty glad to have somebody in the family I kin see eye-to-eye with. Mm. . . . Here she comes, so I'll be gittin' on. Reckon I'd better foller that varmint an' keep 'im headed down the river.

"Pshaw! If'n I'd only had somethin' better'n birdshot. . . ."

The Stars Spell Death



He waggled Dawn's picture, and I understood his threat

By JONATHAN STAGGE

DR. HUGH WESTLAKE soon forgets his puzzlement over certain mysterious strangers who have appeared in peaceful Kenmore—notably the benign Dr. Heller and his crippled son, Brian. When Westlake's cousin, the brilliant young chemist, Robin Barker, suddenly disappears, the prophecy of Robin's horoscope—that he will die within a short time of his twenty-first birthday—seems to have been fulfilled. There is sinister fact to support that prophecy: Dr. Westlake knows now that agents of a foreign power seek to steal from Robin the formula for a lethal gas; Westlake knows, too, that the formula is written on the horoscope manuscript, which he possesses, hidden in a framed picture.

One evening Hugh Westlake is driving to an emergency case, accompanied by the beautiful Greta Barker, Robin's stepmother. A man stumbles before the car—and the doctor recognizes it to be Robin Barker, whom he had thought dead. Westlake leaps to meet him—only to be seized by Robin Barker and swiftly handcuffed. Before Westlake can comprehend this incredible attack, he is knocked unconscious. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIV

STAR IN BONDAGE

I HAVE no way of knowing how long unconsciousness lasted. Once, vaguely, I was aware of an uncomfortable jolting motion as though a car were carrying me over very rough ground. But how far we had traveled or to what destination I could not tell.

After that there was complete oblivion again.

Return from that was slow.

My first real consciousness was of a dull, throbbing headache. I had no body, no sensation other than that all-pervading ache.

I tried to open my eyes, but the lids

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weighed them down like coins laid on the eyes of the dead.

I transferred what little energy I possessed to an attempt to move my hands which were uncomfortably crushed behind my back. The effort brought no results. Neither did a similar effort to change the position of my feet.

In a dim, hazy way it dawned on me that my wrists and ankles were bound.

I lay there motionless trying to ignore the shooting pain in my head, trying to take in the impossible fact that I was lying on my back, presumably on a bed, with my arms and legs securely tied.

A voice, distant and unfamiliar, said: "He's coming round."

I felt a sudden, insistent thirst. With difficulty I forced my dry lips to say: "Water."

"Get water, Carl. I'll give him a hypo for the pain."

I was conscious of a tiny prick somewhere near my shoulder. Miraculously, almost instantaneously, the pain in my head seemed to ease, receding like the waters of an ebb tide. I felt the rim of a glass pressed against my mouth . . . then cool, soothing water on my tongue.

I drank.

"That's better. Much better," said the voice. "Too bad we had to hurt you, Dr. Westlake. But you will soon be all right."

I opened my eyes then. A man was standing at my side, gazing down at me. I could see his face plainly.

And it was the face I could have wanted to see less than any face in the world.

The head was slightly domed and bald in the center; the eyes were a bright, unwinking blue; and, splayed across the left cheek in that weird, crablike design, was a long purple birthmark.

I SHUT my eyes again with the futile optimism of a newly awakened dreamer who hopes that the image in front of him may vanish with a complete return to consciousness.

But the glimpse of that face, familiar and only too real, had brought memory flooding back. I had been called to the Grovestown Hospital for Mrs. Cobb. I had miraculously recovered the horoscope. In a picture frame.

I had been driving in the car with Greta, and my cousin, Robin Barker, had appeared by the roadside . . . Robin whom I had thought of as dead . . . whose body we had supposed at the bottom of the Quarry Pool. For those few moments everything had seemed exhilaratingly victorious. Robin was alive and I had the horoscope.

And then I had gone to Robin, to try to help him. And he had changed—had become an inhuman, implacable force overpowering me. There had been Greta's voice. "Don't hurt him." Then nothingness . . .

That was the past.

And this was the present—this lying bound in an unknown room with the man with the purple birthmark looming over me.

There was nothing exhilarating about the present.

My voice said feebly, "Where's Greta?"

"I'm here, Hugh." Greta's answering voice was cool and refreshing as the water they had just given me.

I opened my eyes again. The man with the birthmark was no longer visible. Gradually blurring into focus, I saw a fair-sized, indeterminate sort of room, closely curtained and with little furniture except the couch on which I lay, and the table and chair standing near it. Vaguely in the far end of the room I was conscious of a woman and a man.

The woman moved toward me and I saw it was Greta. Her fingers slipped soothingly across my forehead; her face bent over me, smiling its faint, inscrutable smile.

"Where are we? What on earth has happened?" I asked, trying vainly to push myself into a sitting position.

"You mustn't worry—mustn't worry about anything," said Greta. "Not even about Mrs. Cobb." Her lips curved wryly. "Mrs. Cobb was just our little ruse to get you here."

Our little ruse . . . I stared at her dumbfounded.

"Greta, you can't—you don't mean that you—!"

"I am afraid so, Hugh." She was still smiling. But for a moment I thought I traced a hint of regret behind the smooth, untroubled surface of her eyes. "Do you mind dreadfully? Do you feel too terribly—taken in?"

I WAS too dazed really to feel anything. I just lay there, staring at her, struggling with this revelation in the most elementary way. Greta, I had trusted implicitly from the start; Greta, I had thought of as the closest of my few allies; Greta, I had come dangerously near to loving in my cautious, youngish-oldish, widower way.

And now Greta was standing beside me, looking at me with a kind of casual affection while, thanks to her, I was bound and helpless, completely at the mercy of the people who were my enemies and who all the time had been her associates.

"Yes," she was saying, "I arranged for that call about Mrs. Cobb. It seemed the most efficient way of getting you into the car without arousing your suspicions. I saw to it also that I came with you. I had to be sure you'd notice Robin at the side of the road and—"

"But I can't believe it," I cut in. "You can't be in on this, Greta. Robin would have known. He would have told me."

"He probably would, my dear," agreed Greta serenely. "But you see, Robin Barker never had the chance to tell you anything because, apart from anything else, he never saw you. At least he may have seen you once when he was a little boy. But never since he's grown up."

She made a slight, amused grimace. "I know this sounds rather like amateur charades, but the man who stopped at your house with me was not your cousin, Robin Barker, at all." She half turned away. "Carl, come over and tell Dr. Westlake how sorry you are you had to hit him so hard."

The young man came forward. I recognized him, of course, as the man whom I had thought of as Robin Barker, the man I had thought was dead, the man who had reappeared so startlingly at the roadside.

"I am sorry that any of this was necessary, sir," he said with a solemn bow. "Particularly since you have been such a charming host to me."

"Very pretty, Carl," said Greta. "You had better go to Max now. I have to talk to Dr. Westlake alone."

As the man I had known as Robin Barker turned away, I noticed the breadth of his shoulders, his athletic physique. I remembered the strength of the arms that had gripped me when we wrestled by the side of the road. I remembered Sydney Train's description of the two men in the Chicago Hotel—one with a purple birthmark, the other with a wrestler's build. All the time Cobb and I had concentrated on the man with the birthmark.

There was a certain grim humor in the thought that the second man had been under my own roof all the time—masquerading as my cousin.

I was alone with Greta now. She was still staring at me, the smile lingering at the corners of her beautiful mouth.

I STRUGGLED to deny even to myself the hurt, forlorn feeling around my heart. I said, "Since everyone seems to be someone they're not, I suppose you aren't even Greta Barker."

"Oh, yes. I am Greta Barker. I could hardly have been substituted because you had already met me. And this time when we met again, you paid me the compliment of remembering me."

"And yet without turning a hair, you could give your own husband's son over into the hands of a bunch of spies?"

"You can call us spies if you want to," she said quietly. "That word always seems rather melodramatic to me. I think of myself as a patriot. I love my country and am not ashamed to serve it in whichever way I can be most useful."

There was an odd note of defiance in her voice. "For my country I have often betrayed friendship, even love before this, Hugh, and I shall again. I married your cousin, Matthew Barker, not because I loved him but because my country needed his brains and his services. To you that is appalling perhaps. Not to me because for me there is a higher loyalty."

She gestured with her hand. "It has not been easy. But once you have taken the first step, you cannot turn back. For a moment the other day at your house where it was so peaceful and beautiful and you were so charming and—and domestic, I felt I would give anything in the world to be able to go on that way with you and Dawn and—"

That seemed to me to be taking a distinctly unfair advantage. Rather savagely I said, "It's very interesting to hear the soul life of the glamorous Operator 13, but at the moment I'd prefer to be a little more factual. I want to know two things. Why am I lying tied up here on this bed? And what have you done to my cousin, Robin Barker?"

"Robin Barker is not harmed. No more than you will be harmed if you do what we want you to do." Her voice had become harder, more business-like. "And you've got to do it, Hugh, for your own sake. We represent a very powerful European nation. We have money, influence—and we can afford to stop at nothing. Now we are desperate. And when we are desperate, a human life here or there cannot be permitted to stand in our way."

"I'd more or less gathered that," I said. "The comfort of an individual here and there doesn't seem to worry you, either. I've got pins and needles in my left leg."

Of all the madness of the past weeks, this situation seemed to me to hit the very high-water mark of fantasy. Several hours before, Greta and I had been two ordinary people, a country doctor and his house guest from Chicago, living, if not exactly a normal life, at least a life punctuated by three meals a day, the routine of business and the necessity of taking care of a twelve-year-old girl.

Now suddenly we had been magnified and dehumanized into characters from some lurid romance—an international agent and a bound, helpless victim.

For Greta the transformation seemed to come naturally. But it was harder for me. I realized, of course, just how great was the danger for me. But, somehow, it didn't seem like real danger. I couldn't quite take it seriously—this beautiful woman with her set, intent face and her high-sounding talk of patriotism and greater loyalities.

An odd quirk of memory brought back to me some of Inspector Cobb's words:

"You read about these things in the papers, but you never stop to think: this may happen to me."

It was happening to me all right!

CHAPTER XXXV

PATRIOT'S STAR

GRETA had sat down on the chair by my couch. Her eyes, despite the surface of casual amusement, were very humorless.

"I am sorry if you are suffering, Hugh, but the individual has so often to suffer for a cause. My country has suffered, is suffering now in its efforts to rebuild a nation and to recover territories taken from it by force.

"It was to help my country that I was sent over here with Carl and his father and mother to obtain from Robin Barker the facts of Professor Barker's discovery.

"When I was married to Matthew Barker, I knew nothing of it. Even now I have not the slightest idea what it is. It is not my part to question. I only know that we need it in our struggle for freedom." She paused. "That is why, whatever happens, I shall be on their side—against you."

I looked at her curiously. "Just why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I am fond of you, Hugh. And

I don't want you to hate me more than you can help. I am going to tell you a great deal more too." She paused. "I have had instructions to tell you. We want you to know what steps have been taken already so that you will realize how impossible it would be for us to retrace them—how impossible it would be for you to keep us from getting what we must have."

In a slow, deliberate voice, she began the story of their quest for the formula of Matthew Barker's discovery. In spite of the circumstances, there was a certain satisfaction in at least hearing the truth of what had so long been baffling to us.

In the initial stages, things seemed to have happened exactly as Inspector Cobb had reconstructed them. Greta had gone to stay with Robin in her capacity as his stepmother. The others had approached him to try to buy the formula and had failed. They had got onto the will, read the codicil about the horoscope and transferred their attentions to me.

Every detail of the first plot fitted with the pattern we had already worked out. They had stolen my clothes, letters and license plates; they had made use of the convenient corpse of a would-be stool pigeon to establish my fake death in a car accident; they had planned to lure me on that false call, hold me, make me tell where I kept the horoscope, and later to use me as a hostage to persuade my cousin to interpret whatever might need interpreting in the horoscope.

What was to have happened to me after all that, Greta omitted to mention.

Greta was watching my face intently as she continued, "It wasn't our fault that plan failed."

"It wasn't," I agreed. "Even as professional a bunch of mind-readers as you people couldn't foresee that my daughter would drain the gas out of my tank." I added with a certain amount of relish, "A little child shall fool them."

SHE looked a little perplexed as if levity from someone in my predicament was something she had not anticipated. But she was quick to change her mood. The militant patriot was effaced; and in its place appeared the humorous, sophisticated woman of the world.

"Since this seems to amuse you, Hugh, it might interest you to know that it was you who gave us the idea for our second plan. It was not until you wrote to Robin inviting him to Kenmore that I saw what an ideal opening we had.

"I persuaded him to accept and I'm afraid I was rude enough to invite myself too. It was simple to see that Robin was—er—delayed on the way and Carl substituted in his place. You had only seen Robin once when he was a boy; you would never have guessed anything was wrong."

"Now you tell me," I assured her, "it does sound simple—ingeniously simple."

"And we hoped the whole thing would be simple and civilized." Greta gave a little rueful smile. "We were going to stay with you like harmless relatives until the time came for you to settle the estate. If things had gone right, you would have given Carl all the papers, including the horoscope, on Robin's twenty-first birthday and we would have slipped uneventfully out of your life." She added, "There would have been no trouble for you."

Once again I tried to shift my position to ease the discomfort of my crushed hands. "It would have been much more pleasant if everything had gone right."

"I'm afraid it would. But from the start we realized the situation was far more complicated than we had imagined. The Train girl had put you onto the track of us; you and your inspector had more or less guessed the real motive behind that car accident; you were expecting something to happen at any minute; you even had a policeman fishing in the creek, keeping an eye on the house."

She paused. "We were terrified of that fisherman, particularly when he sent around those lake bass. We thought they must be some sort of a sign and that we were walking into a trap."

IT WAS ironical that these people, of infinite resource and intuition, should have received their major setbacks from the most unimportant characters in the drama—first Dawn and then Dan Leaf.

As I listened, absorbed, seeing how every little thing fitted, I wondered with a vague uneasiness whether I should ever have the pleasure of passing this extraordinary tale on to Inspector Cobb.

"And then," Greta was saying, "we made a terrible blunder after we'd been hardly half an hour in the house. When you told Carl that Sydney Train had telephoned from Cleveland, you took him completely off his guard.

"You see, I had tried to coach him as carefully as possible in Robin's affairs; I'd told him all about Robin's fiancée; but I thought of her as Annabe Scruggs; I never knew she called herself Sydney Train. Later we tried to explain it away by pretending Sydney Train was just a wild, half-crazy girl who'd been chasing Robin.

"In fact, we did our best, when you were frank enough to tell us all your suspicions, to convince you that the whole business was just an invention of Sydney Train's."

"And you almost succeeded," I admitted. "You would have done so if your boy-friend with the birthmark hadn't let me see him peering through the window after you'd gone to bed. That was a bad slip-up."

"No, Hugh. That was intentional. We knew you'd heard about Max—he's Carl's father who has the birthmark. We knew you'd never be really convinced he didn't exist. We thought that if he appeared at the window, we could deflect all suspicion on him and keep you from ever suspecting Carl and me, the people around you."

That, of course, had been very subtle. But, from an unimpassioned point of view, it struck me as a little too subtle. In fact, I was beginning to feel that Greta and her friends had lost the first two rounds largely because they had tried to do too thorough a job. They had me now but that was only because someone had bashed me over the head.

But even so, the setup was becoming all too plain to me. So many things which should have struck me as odd at the time but which hadn't, now rounded themselves off perfectly—the false Robin's too naïve astonishment when I woke him up and told him about the face at the window, and later his too surly refusal to leave his room and talk to the Ralstons.

Of course he hadn't dared let the Ralstons see him. They knew the real Robin. They would have pricked the bubble in a trice.

"In spite of everything," Greta was saying, "we still hoped to get away with the original plan until the day before the actual birthday when you got that telegram saying that Sydney Train was going to arrive. Immediately we saw the situation was hopeless.

"Carl couldn't possibly pose as Robin with the Train girl in the house. The whole scheme had to be abandoned. Somehow we had to have Carl disappear without arousing your suspicions."

I had realized that for some moments then, of course. "So all that talk about his receiving a telephone call saying I was stranded was phony? You wanted to make it look as if he'd been lured away unwittingly."

Greta nodded and negligently pushed at her blond hair. "We had to think and act fast there. While Carl made his getaway, I kept you occupied in the summerhouse. Until then we'd never dared mention the horoscope. It was too risky.

"But I was desperate at that stage. I brought the matter up; I tried to persuade you to give it to me." She shrugged. "It wasn't until then that you told me the shattering news that you didn't have the horoscope anyway. Sydney Train had taken it and had had it with her all the time in Cleveland."

She laughed almost like a child. "It was terribly tiresome of you, Hugh, not to have told us that before. If only we'd known, we could have concentrated on Sydney Train from the beginning. You need never have come into it at all."

I said, "So the false Robin's disappearance was a hoax. You just wanted us to think he was murdered."

"It was the only thing to do. If he left all of a sudden without any explanation, it would have given the whole thing away. We hoped you'd think he had been murdered by the man with the purple birthmark.

"Carl did it all himself, of course. He parked his car on Mill Lane where he knew you would find it; he kicked the earth around and trampled on the bushes to make it seem as if he'd had a life and death struggle; he was thorough enough to sprinkle blood about the place. He cut his hand to get it.

"After that he started off through the woods, being careful to leave clues behind him. He ended up at the Quarry Pool.

"There he left the blood-stained handkerchief on the barbed-wire fence; scuffled the earth again at the edge of the cliff, fired a bullet through his hat, threw it into the pool and doubled back on his tracks. We hoped that by the time the police had finished dragging for his body, we would all be at the other end of the earth."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THEY JUGGLE THE STARS

IT WAS only then, as I heard the real facts behind the faked murder, that the sensation of fear which strangely enough, even though I was bound and helpless, had been completely absent until then, gradually seeped through me.

I thought of all we had gone through on that harrowing cross-country hunt; I thought of Sydney Train's despair and heartbreak as she stood at the edge of the cliff and looked down into the pool where she was certain Robin was drowned.

To us that had been one of the major events of our lives.

But to these people, it had been nothing —a mere detail of thoroughness to permit one of their members to leave a house without arousing suspicion.

No act of violence had been performed; there had been no murder at all. But this almost superhuman ability to play God with so many different people's lives was even more terrifying.

Two plans, more intricate than anything I could ever have conceived, had been tried out and abandoned in an attempt to get what they wanted. Now, when they were at the end of their tether, they had me at their mercy and presumably they wanted something out of me.

It would not be hard for people of this caliber to get it.

Greta had risen from the chair and was staring down at me, her face composed into a beautiful, rather cruel mask. As if reading my thoughts, she said:

"Well, you have heard everything now. I felt you should know just what has happened so that you will be reasonable about what is going to happen."

"It'll be hard for me to be anything but reasonable under the circumstances," I said. "What do you want from me?"

Her eyes flickered suddenly, and I had the impression that there was something almost akin to suffering behind her careful expression of unconcern. It was as if I had glimpsed into the complex labyrinth of her real feelings and detected there something very different from the hard, brittle exterior.

That revealing moment debunked for me the glamorous, unscrupulous spy. I saw that it was all just an act, a part she had been forced to play, a part which slashed savagely across her basic instincts.

It was an odd place and an odd time, but I found myself suddenly sorry for Greta Barker.

Once again, I asked: "What is it you want from me?"

She had half turned away from me and was gazing unseeingly at my overcoat which was thrown over a chair. Before answering she moved to the coat and pulled something from its pocket. She held it absently in her hands.

"You must know what we want, Hugh —what we have wanted from the very be-

ginning. Yesterday, when you were all out hunting as you thought for Robin, I went through Sydney Train's suitcase. I knew she was bringing the horoscope back and I thought it might be in there. I didn't find it. Later, as you may or may not know, Max, the man with the birthmark, came and searched the bag too. He didn't find it, either."

She paused, adding very slowly: "We realized then that she had taken it with her on the hunt. We realized that she must have given it to you at some later time, the way she promised.

"We want you now to tell us where the horoscope is. Wherever you've put it, we are going to get it. Even if it's in the courthouse at Grovestown locked in a police safe, we will and we can get it."

As she finished speaking, she turned toward me, staring straight at me. But I was not staring back. My eyes were fixed with a sort of stunned attention on the thing she was holding so absentmindedly in her hand.

It was the silver-framed photograph of Dawn.

FOR one moment I was completely unable to cope with this sudden, immensely unexpected situation. I felt it must be just another of their elaborate ruses. But gradually, as my mind worked, I realized that it could, it must be the truth.

By the merest accident of tact, neither Sydney nor I had told Greta that the horoscope had been missing. Greta had been in the car with me that evening when I had picked up the photograph of Dawn at the hardware store.

But, of course, she could have had no means of telling that, pushed in the back of the frame, was hidden the horoscope.

This surely was the most sublime of all ironical moments. Greta was asking me where the horoscope was hidden when she was holding it in her own very hands.

She was saying, "I didn't tell you about this photograph frame, did I? Yesterday when I went upstairs to look through Sydney Train's suitcase, I found Dawn already there, starting to unpack. She'd pulled out a photograph of Robin and I saw right away I'd have to destroy it otherwise you and Sydney would compare notes and it would all come out about Carl.

"I couldn't very well steal it while Dawn was there so I arranged to have her step on it and break it. I made her think she'd spoiled the photograph, tore it up and suggested she get it fixed with her own photograph in place of the damaged one."

She propped the photograph of my daughter up on the table at my side. Her eyes once more met mine. "Well, Hugh, you know what we want now. Are you prepared to tell us where to find that horoscope? If you tell us and if we get it, there'll be no danger for you. But . . ."

A faint shrug which was only too expressive finished the sentence.

At that moment the door behind her opened. I could move my head enough to see that the man Greta called Max, the man with the birthmark on his left cheek, was standing on the threshold.

"Well, Greta," he said in a soft, smooth voice, "Dr. Westlake has given you the information we require?"

Greta shook her head.

He moved a little closer to me. In spite of the completeness with which he had dominated my thoughts, this was the first time I had ever really seen the man with the purple birthmark. My first impression was one of insignificance. When the birthmark was not visible, he seemed just a smallish, oldish, baldish individual whose only outstanding quality was his unobtrusiveness.

And yet there was something about him, some obscure emanation of power which made him instantly the central point in that room.

His eyes, blue and unwinking, were fixed on my face. "You are not going to be difficult, I trust, Dr. Westlake. I'm sure Greta has explained to you just how important it is for us to obtain that document."

"Greta has made everything seem extremely important," I said, trying by a

feeble movement to ease the cramped constriction of my legs.

"That is good. Then, Dr. Westlake, please, you will tell us where we may obtain the horoscope belonging by his father's will to Robin Barker."

FOR several minutes now I had realized that the time would come where I would have to make some sort of answer to that request.

My first impulse had been to deny any knowledge of the horoscope's whereabouts. But common sense made me abandon that tack. I was in these people's power and their only interest in keeping me alive was to extract certain information from me. If I pretended not to have that information, I would be no further use to them—a mere incumbrance to be tactfully eliminated.

My only hope, as I saw it, was to try to play them at their own game—a game of cat and mouse in which my life was almost certainly the forfeit.

The man had moved a little nearer. "You do know where that horoscope is, don't you, Dr. Westlake?"

I said, "And what if I do?"

"If you do"—he shrugged—"why, of course, you will be kind enough to tell us."

"And if I don't tell you?"

He did not reply immediately. Leisurely he walked to the table at the side of the couch and picked up the photograph of Dawn.

In those few seconds, while he held it in his hand, I felt a wild, almost hysterical desire to laugh. It struck me as funny, so desperately, appallingly funny that they should be doing their utmost to force me into telling them the whereabouts of something which was right under their very noses.

I thought of an old parlor game I had played as a kid where an object was hidden in the room and a searcher was guided toward it by cries of "cold" when he moved away from it and "warm" when he drew near.

I wanted to shout to the man with the birthmark, "Warm. Very warm indeed. Hot!"

He still had not answered my question. To steady myself, I repeated it. I said, "And if I don't tell you where the horoscope is, what would you do?"

He did glance at me then—over his shoulder. But his gaze returned reflectively to the photograph of Dawn.

"A delightful child," he said, "a very delightful child.' Then in a quiet, inflexible voice, he added: "I understand she is motherless. It would be most unfortunate for her if she were to lose her father too. . . ."

CHAPTER XXXVII

A STAR LONG SOUGHT

THERE was something distinctly theatrical in the words he used; but the menace, lurking behind them, was only too real.

I knew he meant exactly what he said.

If I didn't tell them where the horoscope was, they would most certainly kill me.

The decision ahead of me was not exactly pleasant. I knew enough of the nature of old Matthew Barker's discovery to realize what appalling destruction it could cause if ever it got into the wrong hands. And the hands of the man called Max were obviously the wrong ones. Even so, the noblest of us hesitates to make a martyr of himself for the abstract good of humanity.

And I, I'm afraid, am no more noble than any other man-in-the-street.

Max was looking at me intently, waiting for me to speak.

In a rather desperate attempt to temporize, I said: "Supposing I do know where the horoscope is, I have no right to tell you. Today is my cousin's twenty-first birthday. The horoscope is entirely his. I—I can't make any decision until I've talked to him."

"I see," said Max.

Pressing the point, I asked: "You do have him here, don't you? I could talk to him?"

"Yes. Robin Barker is here." Max seemed to consider for a moment. "And I feel your suggestion is an excellent one, Dr. Westlake. I will give you half an hour to talk alone with your cousin. After that, I shall expect your definite decision." He paused.

"And in the meantime you might use your influence to persuade your cousin into a more reasonable state of mind. I'm afraid Robin Barker is an obstinate young man—very obstinate indeed."

He said something to Greta in a foreign language, and the two of them left the room. The man, Carl, whom I had known as Robin, appeared, pushed a second couch close to mine and went out. In a minute or so he was back again, carrying another man in his strong, athlete's arms. He laid his burden down on the couch next to mine.

"This is Robin Barker, Dr. Westlake. Max says you are to have half an hour—and half an hour only."

He went away.

By twisting myself around forcibly onto my left side, I could see the young man on the next couch. The beam from the lamp shone full on his face.

IT WAS an arresting rather than a handsome face with pale cheeks and intense eyes of burning gray. His fair hair was long and throwr carelessly back. In spite of his unshavenness and the gulf of time between us and our last meeting, I could catch distinct traces of the polite schoolboy who'd once called me "sir".

His legs, like mine, seemed to be tied, but his hands were free. He had them folded comfortably behind his head.

He turned to me with a boyish, spontaneous grin. "I can think of more attractive places to meet. But how are you, Cousin Hugh?"

"I'm swell. Couldn't be better," I said. "And, by the way, many happy returns of the day."

"The day? So today's my birthday, is it? I've kind of lost track of time." He was still grinning but there was a certain steely grimness in his eyes. "Nice of them to let me have a visitor. Do you suppose they'll make it a party with a birthday cake and twenty-one candles?"

"I hardly think so."

"Neither do I," said my cousin solemnly. "Greta's too busy trying to be a Walt Disney wicked stepmother. I can't quite picture her whipping up a birthday cake in the kitchen."

There was something rather splendid about his ability to keep up that act of frivolity when he must have known exactly how precarious his position was. He found a packet of cigarettes on the table between the couches, lit two, leaned over and stuck one between my lips.

While I took long, grateful pulls at it, he said: "At least they've given me one break. I'm awake and conscious and allowed to talk. They've had me doped until today. At least I suppose it was dope."

"Then you don't remember much?"

"Not a darn thing. I remember starting out from Chicago with Greta to drive to your place for the grand settling of the estate. I thought Greta was a swell person then, I had no ideas about this Mata-Hari complex of hers.

"On the second or third day of the trip, she claimed we were in Kenmore. Not too truthfully, I'm afraid, she said she knew the way to your house and took the wheel.

"I remember her saying: 'Here we are' and we jumped out with our faces wreathed in the sort of uneasy smiles one reserves for distant relatives."

He laughed. "After that I don't remember a thing. Guess someone must have bashed me over the head. I have sort of dreamy memories of half waking and seeing a woman who looked like a nurse. But when I asked where I was, she'd say I wasn't to worry. Then she'd stick me again and off to sleep I'd go."

"Then they haven't been working on

you—trying to get anything out of you?"

"I guess they gave that up as a bad job after all the time they put in on me in Chicago." He paused, inhaling cigarette smoke and letting it trail out of his nostrils. "But that man, Max, is a persistent cuss. I rather have the feeling he's going to put on the pressure again soon—and this time he probably won't be any too gentle."

He shrugged. "But that doesn't bother me. You know, Cousin Hugh, I've been thinking of something a girl used to say to me. A swell girl. We sort of thought of getting married, matter of fact. She's bugs about astrology the way Dad was. And she used to say our destinies were all written out in the stars."

HE SHIFTED his position slightly, staring up at the ceiling. "I kidded her about it at the time. But now—well, it's rather a comfort to think the whole works is planned out for you by those guys up there in the Zodiac and that there's nothing you can or need do about it yourself."

I said, "I'm beginning to feel that way too. I laughed at Sydney to begin with. But she's stuck to the stars from the start and she's had much more sense than any of the rest of us."

"You know Sydney Train?" he asked sharply.

"Sure, I know her. She's at my house at the moment."

"Tell me, Hugh, how is she? Does she still have that funny, stubborn way of looking at you? Does her nose still tilt up at that crazy angle; do her eyes . . . ?

"And, is she still mad with me? Tell me that. Is she still furious because I tried to keep her out of all this when it started, and went and locked myself up in the hotel and—"

"Sydney Train is certainly not mad with you," I cut in. There was something almost tragic in his quick, vivid anxiety. "She's very much in love with you. The only snag is that she thinks you're dead."

"She thinks I'm dead, does she?" Robin Barker's voice went suddenly quiet. His face pale and set, he added: "That's just as well. Because I haven't a dog's chance of ever seeing her again. To all intents and purposes I have been dead for several days."

He swung round, propping himself on an elbow, staring at me intently. "You must know something of what all this is about, Hugh. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. You know they're trying to get me to tell them the formula of one of —of Dad's chemical discoveries?"

"Sure, I know," I said dryly. "They're trying to get the same thing out of me."

"Out of you!" He stared. "But you—surely you don't know it!"

"No. But your father left a record of it and I know where that record is."

I told him about the codicil in the will and the formula in the horoscope. He had known absolutely nothing about it.

And the news seemed to shake him terribly.

"Hugh, you know where this horoscope is?"

"I do."

"But you're not going to tell them where to find it? You can't. I tell you —you can't."

I said quietly, "They've put a little proposition up to me. If I tell them where the horoscope is—goody, goody. If I don't, I meet the firing squad at dawn. That's what I'm here talking to you about. I have to give my decision in half an hour Or rather, I guess it's about twenty minutes by now."

He was still staring at me, his jaw very grim. "And what are you going to decide?"

"I don't know. I told them the horoscope didn't belong to me anyway. That you were the one to make the decision. I passed the buck to you."

"You shouldn't have done that," he said softly. "Not if you're interested in living, that is. You see, I know the formula. And I made up my mind days ago. I've made up my mind that I'll never let them know. Not if they cut

off my fingers one by one, I'll never let them know."

I had rather guessed he would say that.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE STARS BLACK OUT

HE SAID, "I guess you think I'm a crank about pacificism the way father was. I'm not, although I hate war and destruction as much as anyone. If it were anything else I'd probably have given it to the United States Government for use in a national emergency.

"But this"—a flicker of remembered horror slid over his eyes—"this ghastly thing, I'd cheerfully die a thousand times myself if I felt my death could prevent it ever being let loose on the world. I rather think that if you knew something about it you'd feel the same way."

I nodded him to go on.

"I suppose you know that its discovery was accidental. Father was working at the time to synthesize a para derivative of—"

"Skip the chemistry," I said. "I'm only a humble country doctor."

"All right. But you've got to understand that the products involved were perfectly harmless commercial drugs and he was working with test-tube amounts—very small quantities of two compounds, when the explosion occurred.

"You know of course that it was quite an explosion and father was blinded in one eye. It was a miracle I wasn't hurt and it was darn lucky we were working at night and no one else was in the building. I assure you father had hit upon a most efficient explosive."

He broke off with a harsh laugh.

"But that was the least of its charming properties. It gave off a gas or gasses which were so poisonous that all the experimental rats in the laboratory next door were killed. They belonged to a fellow called Ralston and he found them next morning in the most horrible condition with their faces half eaten away. It was he who started all the trouble later on at Scruggs and Dodge."

"I know," I said, "and I suppose that's how he got the idea you might modify it in some way for a commercial fumigator."

"Yes, but there's one thing he didn't know; nobody knew except myself and one other fellow. He was a man called Wolf and he had a bunch of dogs and cats in the Department of Pharmacology which was in quite another part of the building from where the explosion occurred.

"Do you know, Hugh, that within the next few days every one of those animals went—stone blind!"

He laughed again, a trifle unsteadily this time.

"Of course no one guessed that a gas from so comparatively small an explosion could have permeated through the walls of the entire building to blind those animals. That is—no one except Wolf.

"He was decent about it at the time. Agreed to hush the matter up and let me replace the animals without reporting to the authorities. But he didn't forget about it. And when the nation he represents became aggressive and tried to snatch half Europe, he remembered the effects of that gas—and me.

"He came all the way to Chicago to contact me. Now the contact is quite a close one! Wolf is boss of this merry little gang. He's the one they call Max. And their merry little scheme is further to exalt their noble government by procuring the formula of that compound for them."

I HAD been listening to Robin's narration with growing horror. It was horrible enough to think of a gas which could kill and blind living creatures with such efficiency. It was even more horrible to think of the ruthlessness which could make any human being desire to own or to exploit such an appalling force of destruction.

But, with that queer, personal quirk

which makes a certain detail that strikes home to one far more important than the really major issue, my mind had turned to Greta.

I had almost loved Greta; I had thought of her as a person with a rare quality of sympathy and tenderness. It was a staggering blow to have to believe that she, like the rest of these people, was a heartless fanatic.

I said, "And I suppose Greta knows all this? She knows exactly what the properties of that compound are?"

"Greta?" echoed Robin. "Oh, no. She doesn't know a thing. Poor Greta, I know thousands of women in Europe who were potential Gretas. She's just one of those simple, not very intellectual women with a fervent love of her country who listened to too many inflammatory speeches and got the idea she was a sort of Joan of Arc destined to liberate her fatherland from the crushing yoke of alien tyranny.

"They just use her for what they can get out of her; they don't have to tell her a thing about what they're after." He smiled with some of his old dry humor. "For all I know, she thinks they're chasing a formula for synthetic toothbrush bristles!"

Oddly enough, in spite of the place and the time, that comforted me.

Robin was going on now: "After he'd realized just what he'd discovered, father went almost nuts. Destroyed every notebook, every work-sheet—every bottle that might give a clue to the nature of the compound.

"I think, actually, that's what killed him. But before he died, he did some more work in secret on the stuff, using minute quantities. Without going into technicalities, I'll tell you what he found."

He shifted restlessly on his couch. "First of all, the stuff is more highly explosive than any known substance. It gives off decomposition products that make it explode at a temperature of 102 which is nice and handy. That's not particularly important, though.

"The gas is the real monkey wrench. It's colorless, odorless and it's given off in vast quantities. It mixes with the air and expands rapidly. It can permeate anywhere that air can go. There's not a respirator I know of that can keep it out.

"It has a special affinity for mucous surfaces, attacking the eyes and mouth and causing agonizing pain. Father figured that one airplane could carry enough bombs of it to kill or blind almost a million people in a crowded city like New York."

He broke off and there was a long moment of silence.

"Think what would happen if it got into the hands of unscrupulous people. Hugh. Think of the future of humanity. God, if you'd seen those rats of Ralston's with their faces half eaten and . . . Now maybe you understand why I've decided they can shoot me to hell before I'd ever let them know the formula."

AS I looked at his haggard but determined young face, I felt a sudden pride in my kinship with this boy who had been put into so tragically critical a situation and had been able with such magnificent contempt for his own life to make what was, of course, the only decision for him to make.

And somehow Robin Barker's uncompromising courage had its effect upon me. How I would have acted if I had been in that particular spot alone, I have no means of telling. But buoyed up by my cousin's bravery I felt an almost lightheaded indifference to our danger.

If I had to die, I would at least be dying for one of the few causes I could entirely respect.

He was still staring at me urgently. "Well, Hugh, you know the setup now. What is your decision?"

"I'm ready to stand by you," I said. "But there's one thing I've got to know first because I'm not particularly keen on making a martyr of myself unless it's strictly necessary.

"Your father stumbled on this com-

pound purely by accident—well, why shouldn't someone else stumble on it, too? I'd hate to die for a cause and then have them discover the same compound in their labs a few weeks later."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Robin solemnly. "And you must take my word for it. Father was a very, very great chemist and could predict almost any predictable chemical reaction. And yet this thing took him absolutely by surprise. He never dreamed the products he was working with would combine in that way. And he said that the combination of two such complicated chemical compounds might never occur again in a thousand years."

His eyes were shining. "I swear to you, Hugh, that there isn't one chance in a million of that stuff being stumbled on again in our generation. With the destruction of myself and that—that darn horoscope, all possibilities of that particular substance will be destroyed also."

For a moment I lay there on my couch feeling not much of anything except the numbness of my hands and the pain in my ankles where the rope had frayed the skin. An odd sensation of resignation had crept over me, as if what was happening was obscurely right—that Robin and his nearest male relative were working out a destiny which, in its way, had been worth recording in the stars.

And it seemed particularly ironical that Dawn should have referred to me as Robin's "executioner"—now that Robin had turned out to be mine.

Out of that haze of reflections, I said to my cousin: "By the way, while we're on the subject of destruction, would you like me to tell you where the horoscope is so that you could destroy it?"

"Destroy it?" His voice was sharp with incredulity. "You can't mean you have it with you here!"

"Sure. That's the only comic relief in the whole melodrama. It would give me a great deal of quiet fun to have you destroy the damn thing right under their noses."

"But where is it? Tell me!"

"You really want to know?"

"Of course."

"Well, since my hands are tied, I can't exactly point. But just reach twelve or so inches to your left and pick up that photograph of my daughter. Open the back of the frame—and see what you will see."

HIS face a complete blank, Robin snatched up the photograph and pushed open the back of the frame.

"My God, it is here!" With fingers that trembled, he pulled out the yellowing, parchment-like pages of that document which had played so elusive and sinister a role in both our lives.

As he feverishly leafed through the sheets, I watched him.

"Sydney said there were some penciled notes in the margin," I said. "That must be it."

"Sure—sure. It's here all right."

"It always seemed crazy to me that, when he'd gone to such trouble to destroy all his notes, he should have scribbled the formula there on the horoscope."

"It wasn't so crazy." Robin looked up quickly. "I'm beginning to understand. You see, he did more work on the compound than I ever knew. He says so here. He worked on it until he'd found a sort of antidote, something that could neutralize the effects of the poison."

I exclaimed, "You don't mean it's only the formula of the antidote that's written there—that all the time—!"

"Oh, no. Both formulas are here. He had to put them both to show how they react on each other. He felt I had to know all he knew just in case there was any emergency where the antidote would be vital. That's why he made this record in the horoscope where I would see it when I was of age.

"He says it's up to me, once I've really understood it and committed it to memory, to destroy all written records."

"Then go on!" I exclaimed, feeling a kind of savage satisfaction. "Destroy it; tear it up; burn it; do anything—"

I broke off suddenly. Robin had stiffened. Then with lightning speed, he pushed the horoscope into the frame and put the photograph of Dawn back on the table.

The sound of footsteps outside had warned us just in time. We were both of us lying back on our couches when the door opened and the man with the birthmark, the man they called Max and whom Robin knew as Dr. Wolf, stood on the threshold.

He moved to my side, looking down at me from blue, inscrutable eyes. "Well, Dr. Westlake, half an hour has elapsed."

CHAPTER XXXIX

ONLY THE STARS CREATE

NOW that the actual moment of crisis had come, I felt a curious shivery sensation, half excitement, half fear. That photograph of Dawn was so ludicrously close to the man's hand.

"Well?" asked the man quietly.

I said, "I am not going to tell you where that horoscope is."

He showed absolutely no change of expression. After a second's pause, he turned to Robin.

"And you, Mr. Barker, are equally obstinate about discussing the nature of the compound?"

Robin grinned. "Equally obstinate," he said.

"I see." Very slowly Max Wolf crossed to the table and picked up the photograph of Dawn. Without looking at me, he said: "You understand, Dr. Westlake, that Mrs. Barker is under absolutely no suspicion. No one knows she was in the car with you. In fact, as yet there is no reason for anyone to suspect that you have been—er—abducted. Mrs. Barker can still go and come in your house quite freely."

He did turn to me then, the faintest trace of a smile on his lips. "If you are unwilling to tell her where to find the document in question, I do not think she would have any difficulty in persuading your daughter to come back with her in its place. A night ride in your new car—"

Those few, casually spoken words had suddenly turned my blood to ice. Never, in my wildest moments of pessimism, had I imagined that they could do that to me; that they could be unscrupulous enough to use Dawn as a lever.

I began, "You couldn't—"

"Oh, yes, they could." It was Robin who cut in. "Kidnapping little girls is very much in their line."

"I'm glad you are sensible enough to realize we can afford to stop at nothing." Max Wolf had turned his attention once more to Robin. "I should also like to point out that it should not be difficult for Mrs. Barker to persuade Miss Train to come here, too. After all, she is an adventurous young lady. A hint that her fiancé was still alive . . ." He shrugged.

He was tapping impatiently on the top of the table. He said, "Well?"

THAT was probably the worst moment of my life. But, even then, while my mind seethed with speculations of what could happen to my daughter if that threat were carried out, I held back from speech, instinctively realizing that the decision was more for Robin to make than for me.

My cousin's face was gray and haggard. It seemed as if the almost superhuman courage which had carried him through the last days, had suddenly deserted him.

I could see then how Max Wolf had cunningly pierced Robin Barker's heel of Achilles. My young cousin was ready to sacrifice his own life for an ideal; he was even ready for me to sacrifice mine.

But now, it had become a question of Sydney, too.

His eyes, blazing with impotent fury, were fixed on the other man's face. Very softly, he said: "If I did tell you where the horoscope was, if I did tell you everything I know about that compound, would you swear not to harm Sydney and—Westlake's daughter?"

"But, of course." Max Wolf gestured

with his hands. "There would be no necessity to harm them."

"Would you swear to let Westlake go free, too?"

"Well, Mr. Barker, that would be hardly practical at the moment, would it? It is our present intention, as soon as you have told us what we want to know, to make up a small amount of this substance here in the house to assure ourselves of its—efficacy

"We have a fairly well equipped laboratory upstairs and my wife is a distinguished chemist. With your assistance, it should not take us long to find out all we need to know. As soon as our work is done, we have transportation arranged to take us out of the country."

He paused. "Should all turn out well, I can assure you that we shall communicate with the authorities and tell them of your whereabouts. Dr. Westlake would almost certainly be found not too long from now. And in the meantime he would not be uncomfortable."

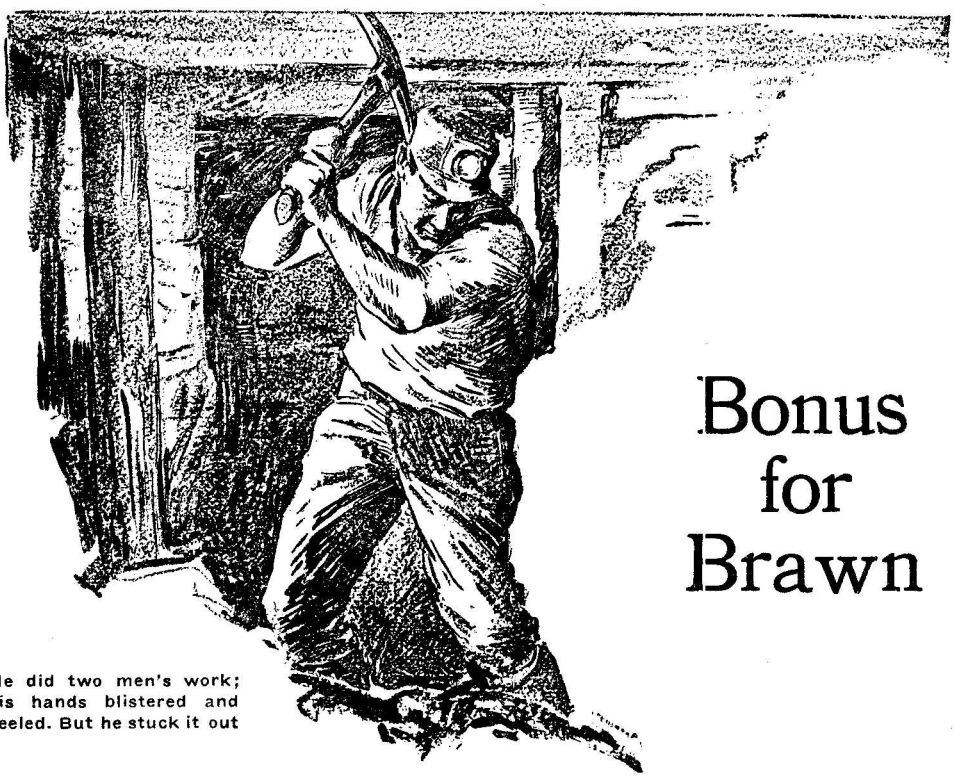
It all sounded most uncomfortable to me, but there was something in me that made me cling even to that slender hope of preservation.

Robin's face still had the ghastly pallor of a man struggling desperately with two antagonistic and equally strong emotions. Something, I knew, would have to die inside him at that moment—either his passionate idealism or else his respect for himself as a man who loved a woman.

Gradually his eyes took on a hard, granite gleam; his lips tightened until they seemed carved out of stone.

"All right," he said. "I'll tell you where to find the horoscope; and I'll do all I can to help you make up the compound. There's only one thing I hope for now. I hope to God there is a hell somewhere, where you can writhe in torment for this!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK



He did two men's work; his hands blistered and peeled. But he stuck it out

Bonus for Brawn

By ROBERT W. COCHRAN

Author of "A Tower of Strength," "Tonight We March," etc.

The spreading chestnut tree blossomed out in nice yellow gold-bricks, then curled up and died. But the smith, a happy man is he . . .

I WAS sorry, that day when Big Joe Bush stepped off the noon train, that my grandfather had not lived to see his return. I recognized him, in spite of the fact that he was older and bigger in a flabby sort of way.

Even the ten years that had passed since he had driven away in his own car with Coral beside him hadn't been able to make much else of him than he had always been —Big Joe Bush the blacksmith.

I spoke to him, half expecting to see Coral appear from behind the wrinkled coat that covered his beefy shoulders; and he said, "Hello, Tommy." He acted as if he couldn't forget that I was the grandson of a man who had made fun of him.

I threw the mail bag into the car and got behind the wheel. He was still standing on the station platform. I felt sorry for him; he seemed almost frightened. The train chugged slowly forward, and when the sound of it had died I asked, "Going uptown, Mr. Bush?"

"Thanks, Tommy." He put an imitation leather suitcase that didn't look as if it had been used much in the back seat and got in beside me.

It seemed funny to have Big Joe Bush riding uptown with me. "How's Coral?" I asked, as we took the long, steep hill above the station.

"Coral? Oh, she's fine, Tommy. Getting married soon. Quite a young lady, Coral

is." He was proud of his daughter. I didn't blame him either; she had been a swell kid when I had carried her books to the company school on the hill.

"Things are pretty dead around here," I said.

He seemed to sink lower in the seat beside me. "No work?" he asked, looking straight ahead through the windshield.

"Almost none," I said. "They send a yard engine in from the Junction once a week and take it in one trip."

"How about the shops?" I tried not to see how eagerly he waited for me to answer.

"No shops," I said. "We get our power from K. U. Repair and maintenance shops are down at Huddlestone."

He didn't say anything else. I drove past the long battery of ovens, crumbling with decay, and started through the town. I knew what he was thinking; he was remembering Crescent as it had been during the war. But the war was twelve years behind us.

I let him out at the company office and went on another hundred yards and carried the half-empty mail sack into the post office.

Effie Gates said, "I see you had a passenger. Who was it?"

"Didn't you recognize him?" Effie Gates had been postmistress ever since I could remember; she knew everybody.

"It wasn't him?" she said. "It wasn't Big Joe Bush?"

I nodded, and she said, "Well . . ." and looked for a place to sit down. "I never thought he'd come back to this dump. Was he friendly?" She remembered, too, that my grandfather had made fun of Big Joe.

"He was friendly enough," I said, and followed Effie's glance out through the murky window. Joe Bush had come from the company office and was standing on the sidewalk looking like some kind of a big dog that has lost its owner.

"You don't suppose," she said, "that he wants a job."

"Big Joe?" I laughed, because I thought she meant it for a joke. "Why, he's rich. He has two cars and a chauffeur, and a house in Richmond with seventeen rooms."

"I wonder," Effie said slowly; and I remembered my grandfather's slurring remark that Big Joe had a strong back and a weak brain.

THAT had been a long time before; and my grandfather had died and Big Joe had sold patent rights to an invention he had been working on for two hundred thousand dollars cash.

It seemed to prove my grandfather wrong; and I remember thinking at the time that it was just as well he wasn't there to see Big Joe's triumphal exit from the town in his new car, with Coral sitting beside him dressed in pink silk, with a big pink hat that completely hid her face.

"I don't believe it," I said to Effie, and left her to sort the mail as I went out to where the big man still stood.

"You're right, Tommy," Big Joe said. "Things are pretty dead." He wet his lips and straightened his shoulders. "I'm looking for a job, Tommy." He didn't look at me when he said it.

"You're kidding, Mr. Bush," I said; but I felt a queer prickling on the back of my neck, as if I had suddenly seen something very unpleasant, maybe a dead person.

"I wish I was," he said. "I'm clean, Tommy. I don't know nothing in the world but blacksmithing, and I've got to get a little stake in a hurry.

"I know what you're thinking," he went on. "You're remembering what your grandfather said about me. He's right. He was right then, but I couldn't see it. Strong back and weak brain. Golly, I wish the old man was here now. I'd like to tell him that he was right."

"That's too bad." I really meant it. Joe Bush was the only rich man Crescent had ever produced.

"I ain't old, Tommy. Forty-eight's not old. All I need's a little stake to keep—well, to keep me going, and I'll be back where I was."

"You try any place else?" I said.

"I've tried every place. You don't think I'd come back here only on a last hope, do you?"

"What'd they say?" I nodded in the direction of the office.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not blaming them. They can't make work if it isn't here, and I'm a stranger to them, too."

"Come on over to the house," I said. "Mom runs a sort of boarding house; that and what I get for carrying the mail and clerking in the store lets us get by. I passed the Civil Service, but I've got to wait for an appointment."

"Well . . ." He hesitated, and his big, broad face looked like the face of a Saint Bernard dog.

"Come on," I said, picking up his bag. "You don't have to have money to stay at our house."

"That's decent of you, Tommy. I wish I'd listened to your grandfather." The old wooden sidewalk creaked under his heavy footsteps.

"Trout is still the general manager. You might write him; he'll remember you."

"I talked to him last week," Big Joe said. "He would do something if he could; but shucks, they can't lay off a steady man just to find a place for me."

My mother seemed to get the drift without my saying anything in front of Big Joe. Women always seem to be a jump ahead when it comes to figuring things out.

"How's Coral?" she said. "I hope you're going to stay a while; there's only forty families in the town. My, that's a handsome bag you've got."

I could have told her that it felt as if there wasn't anything in it, but I didn't. The woman in her would probably find that out soon enough.

I think the other thirty-nine families dropped in on us that night to see Big Joe. It pleased him no end. "Golly," he kept saying, "you folks haven't any idea how good it is to be back with friends." I judged from that and other things he let fall in the following days that he hadn't been any too happy up there in the big house in Richmond.

I never asked him about his money, but he told us one night when my mother and I sat with him in the gathering darkness on the front porch.

"Strong back," he said, and laughed. It was good to hear him laugh; he had been so serious the first few days. "I thought I had the world in my lap. I sent Coral to one of those expensive schools. She was a good kid; she didn't want to go, but I wanted her to know the right people.

"I guess she knows them now. But I saw it was going to take more than I had to keep her knowing them, so I bought some stock through a Richmond firm. You folks see the papers; you know what happened to the stock market last year."

"And Coral," I said. "Does she know?"

"Golly, no. She's engaged to marry a big shot in Baltimore, when she comes back from Scotland. She's visiting in Scotland now."

"And she doesn't know. She still thinks you have plenty of money."

"She ain't going to know," Big Joe said. "She thinks I'm on a nine months' cruise. I sold the house, even my clothes, everything. It made enough to get her through till fall. She's to be married this fall."

My mother said, "She won't like that. You're not playing fair with her."

"I guess she'll like it," he said. "I guess she'll have to like it. Once she's married, it won't make no difference about me. The man she's going to marry has plenty of money. I know what I'm doing."

My mother didn't say anything; but she might as well have spoken, for I know what she was thinking. She was remembering that thing her father had said of Joe, "Strong back and weak brain."

I DON'T know whether it was because the superintendent was sorry for Big Joe or whether he actually needed a man; but the second week he was there, Big Joe got an order to report for work. It wasn't work like he had been used to; it wasn't the kind of work he had ever done before

I don't suppose he realized what it would be to go down in the mines. Ten years is a long time for a man to be idle. If the other miners hadn't liked him so much they would have been down on him for the way he worked.

Strong back, that was it. He did two men's work, and he came into the house at night so tired he could hardly stay awake at the supper table. His hands blistered and peeled, leaving bare, raw flesh before they began to toughen. But he stuck it out, begged for more cars so that he could earn more money.

Then he began tinkering at the work bench in the cellar when he came home evenings. He lost weight, he lost plenty of weight, but he had it to lose, and after he had been there a few weeks his clothes hung on him like a tent on a camel.

He wasn't a coal miner, he was a smith; and being a smith means more than just taking a piece of hot iron out of the forge and pounding it. He had proved once before that he could do things with a piece of metal. He had proved it to the tune of two hundred thousand dollars when he had invented that can opener gadget.

But Effie Gates expressed the sentiment of most of us when she said, "Lightning never strikes twice in the same place." He never wrote any letters, never received any either. But he salted away that pay envelope each pay-day and put in every minute he wasn't working or sleeping at the bench in the cellar.

It was only about two weeks before the Fourth of July and we were all making plans to go down to Huddlestone for the big celebration. We didn't have a team, hadn't had in two or three years, but we went down just the same and watched the teams from the other towns compete for the prizes.

There were all kinds of contests—rope pulling, hammer throwing, weight lifting—but there weren't more than twenty men in town who could have been any help in a thing like that and the other towns would have beaten us hands down, so we had dropped out entirely. Things were different this year; Big Joe Bush was back.

A lot of people remembered Big Joe from other years. I remembered him when my grandfather had taken me to Huddlestone as a boy. He had been young enough then to go in for wrestling and had won that along with the other things that took downright strength.

He wasn't keen on going this year; he was forty-eight years old, he reminded those who asked him. But they insisted, and the superintendent came over and talked to him, so in the end he agreed.

Well, we won just about everything that Big Joe had a hand in, and he enjoyed it more than anyone. I don't think it was only the cash prizes either; I think he got a big kick out of seeing he was a better man than he had thought he was, or that a great many of his friends had thought he was either.

There were newspaper reporters and at least one photographer, though no one thought anything of it at the time. I guess it was a couple of days later that Effie Gates showed me a copy of the Lynchburg paper, and there was Big Joe Bush on the first inside page, and a big write-up about how he had made so much money and lost it all in the market crash.

I could see now perhaps this was going to upset Joe's plans if it got to certain parties in Baltimore. Effie didn't know, of course, about Coral's marriage due for the fall, so I didn't say anything to her; but I got a copy of the paper and when Big Joe came in that night I showed it to him.

I had never seen Big Joe mad until then. He was mad at himself, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. "Strong back!" he said. "If I'd had a lick of sense I'd of known better than to go down there just to show off and win twenty dollars."

My mother and I tried to tell him that perhaps nothing would come of it, but he wouldn't see the bright side. "You don't know these high-flying snobs," he said. "If they thought Coral's old man was a

coal miner they'd drop her so quick she'd never know what happened."

"Then let them drop her," my mother said. "People like that aren't worth knowing anyway."

He studied over this a while, but he wasn't convinced. "They're the big shots," he said. "They can do a lot more for her than I can."

THE wedding was set for September. Big Joe expected to go up to Baltimore for it and then do a final disappearance stunt. As he planned it all out at different times, I began to believe that my grandfather had been right. It didn't seem possible that anyone except a man with a weak mind would expect to get by with such a fantastic hoax.

Whether he would have been able to get away with it or not we never knew, for one day in August when I stood in front of the mail car on the noon train I saw a girl get off the coach ahead. No one had to tell me who she was, and for just a minute I envied that man in Baltimore; then I was too busy feeling sorry for Joe to think of anything else.

She walked over to the platform and the train heaved forward. I flipped the mail sack into the car and went over to her. "You remember me?" I said.

"Of course not, Tommy." Her hair was low in one of those new-fangled bobs, and she jerked it back with a quick shake of her head. The hat she wore this time didn't hide her face. I guess I stared pretty hard at her, for she began to blush. "Is Dad here?" she asked.

"I suppose you saw the paper," I said, wondering if stalling for time would let me think of anything to say.

"Right," she said. "Where's Dad?"

I motioned to the car. "You can't delay the Government mail," I said. "Let's talk as we go."

She had a bag—not as new-looking as Big Joe's, but it felt a lot heavier when I picked it up. "I thought you were in Scotland," I said.

" 'Were' is right. I came back in time for Dad's debut." She didn't seem much concerned about it.

I said, "Well, you've got to give the old boy credit for trying."

"Is he all right, Tommy? He isn't—I mean, he isn't despondent?"

"He will be," I said, "when he sees you. What does the man in Baltimore think about all this?"

"I suppose Dad's given you the whole story."

"Most of it," I said, "and I can piece in here and there. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"He doesn't know, or he didn't know yesterday."

"Joe'll be glad to know that," I said. "If he doesn't know now, he's not liable to find it out. So the wedding can come off as planned."

She didn't say anything to that, and I stopped in front of the post office. I could see Effie Gates' nose pressed against the window, and I carried the limp bag inside to keep her from breaking the glass.

"That—" she said. "That—"

I said, "Yes, that's Coral Bush," and went back to the car.

. . . My mother said, "Coral, honey, you're prettier than you were ten years ago, and I didn't think that was possible."

Coral said, "Where is everybody? The town looks dead."

I told her what had happened to the town, while Mom got a lunch together.

"Will he be glad to see me—Dad, I mean?"

I said, "You bet he will," but I wasn't too sure. "I don't suppose you'll know him," I said. "He's lost thirty pounds and —well, you know how it is when you work in the mines; your skin gets white and the coal dust makes rims around your eyes and fingernails."

"I remember," she said. "Couldn't they find anything for him outside? He never was a miner."

"It was that or nothing." I had almost forgotten the hours he had spent at the bench in the cellar. "Listen, Coral, he's working on an invention, some sort of

hydraulic automobile jack . . . Well, don't let him down. He expects to make another fortune out of this thing."

"You mean it's no good."

"I don't know," I said, "but it's only natural, having had the breaks once, he would try to repeat. He made up some kind of outline and blueprints and sent it to the firm that handled his other patent. If it had been anything, he would have heard before this."

"Thanks, Tommy." Her eyes glistened as she said it, then she looked away. Mom brought in the lunch and Coral sat down. "I hope he won't mind," she said; "I've missed him terribly."

HE MINDED all right, but when Coral told him that she was the only one who knew, he seemed to be satisfied. And he was as glad to see her as a baby girl with a first doll.

She was going to stay two weeks, she said; "Maybe longer," she added. It was then that I got the idea that this wedding Big Joe had planned was perhaps more his idea than it was hers.

She was supposed to be visiting a friend in Crescent. Every day or two she got a letter from this chap in Baltimore, and she wrote herself about two or three times the first week.

The townspeople, many of them who had known her when she was a kid, thought that she was high-hat. Big Joe's money, they said, had ruined her. I didn't think so. I took her in once to the movies at Huddlestone, and several evenings we coaxed the old car over the rough mountain roads. "How does this compare with Scotland?" I asked her once.

"Oh, it doesn't," she said. "No comparison."

I was beginning to think I would be glad when the two weeks were up. It's impossible to see a girl like that day after day and not fall for her, even though she is engaged to marry someone else.

I tried to talk to Big Joe about it once.

"Tommy," he said, "I like you fine; I'd even rather have you for a son-in-law than that stuffed shirt up in Baltimore. But this is one time Big Joe is doing something he doesn't want to do. Strong back and weak brain doesn't go this time. Coral marries that man up there because he can take her away from the hell of coal and dirt and sweat, and getting water from a pump on the back porch, and wading through snow in wintertime to get to an outhouse."

"Maybe," I said, "she doesn't want to get away from all that. She doesn't seem to me like a girl who would marry a man just because he had a fat bank account."

He glared at me for a minute and I thought he was even capable of hitting me. A man wouldn't want more than one blow from a fist like his. "Shut up," he said. "You're just like your grandfather; you think all my brains are in my back. Well, maybe they are, but this is going through as planned."

Even Effie Gates caught on to how I was feeling about Coral and began to get in little remarks about it. I could stand kidding from Effie—she was fifteen years older than I—but at the end of the second week, when Coral still said nothing about going back, I decided to put my cards on the table.

I made a date to take her to a dance at Huddlestone Saturday night, but on the noon train Big Joe got the long-expected letter from the Washington firm he had written to about patenting his automobile jack.

Saturday was a half-day, and he was home when I took the letter over to him. I would have liked to wait until after Coral went back to give it to him, but that meant an indefinite delay, so I called him down cellar and handed him the letter; then I went on back upstairs. When a man has counted on anything as much as Big Joe had on that patent, it wasn't going to be nice to see him turned down cold.

He stayed down in that cellar a long time. I had to get back to the store and left at last with him still there. That evening he was quiet as a clam, and I

didn't feel like prying into his business.

I took Coral to the dance, and on the way home I pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the motor.

"Tommy," she said, "you think of the most romantic things. Hadn't we better get along?"

"Yes," I said, "in about five minutes. Are you or aren't you in love with this Chester Straub?"

There was enough of a moon to see that she hadn't liked that a little bit. "I don't know," she said, "that that comes under your jurisdiction."

"MAYBE not," I said, "but this does"; and I had my arms around her. For a minute she struggled, then with something like a sigh she lay still and I gave her the kisses I had been wanting to give her since she had stepped off that train.

"If you're through," she said at last in a weak little voice, "perhaps you'll let me get out and walk home."

"Damn it," I said, "are you an icicle or what? I love you, Coral. I've been in love with you since I was big enough to take your hand and lead you to Sunday school."

"You never did any such thing, and you know it. I had to drag you every step of the way. Your own grandfather would tell you so if he were here."

"All right," I said, "you dragged me, and even then I loved you. Are you going to marry some milk-fed, hand-raised prize rooster just because he happens to have money?"

"You— You—" She tugged herself free from my arms and hid her face in her hands. She was already crying before I got the motor started. She reached out and turned it off. "I've listened to you. Now you hear a thing or two, you conceited little—little ribbon clerk.

"I'm not marrying because I'm in love or because I want to or because I care whether I wear silk underwear or rayon. I'm marrying because it's the only thing in the world I've ever been able to do for Big Joe."

Carol's voice became accusing. "Do you think I want him to spend the rest of his days grubbing away in a black hole in the ground?

"Chester Straub's father died two years ago and left him five hundred thousand dollars. That's my price; that's why I'm marrying him. If you've got that much I'll marry you. If it will do you any good, I'll tell you I'd even rather marry you. Now please, Tommy, take me home."

I started the motor again, but I wasn't through yet. "I can put a spoke in that wheel," I said. "Big Joe won't stand for anything like this. I'll go to him and tell him just what you've told me."

"You wouldn't dare," she said. And then perhaps because she thought I would dare, she said, "Anyway, if you did, it still wouldn't do any good. I'd still go through with it. It was because of me Big Joe lost his money. I'm going to do what I can to repay him."

"It isn't fair, Coral." I tried to find her hand and she jerked it away. "It's too much of a sacrifice."

"Listen, Tommy, I've spent two summers in Europe. If I told you some of the marriages I've seen over there you wouldn't believe me. Old men and young girls still in their teens. Boys in their twenties married to women old enough to be their mothers. You're provincial, Tommy, and you can't hold my hand, so you may as well stop groping for it."

I took her home; what else was there to do? Then I went to my own room and went to bed. I heard the clock strike two as I got up and began to put my clothes on.

It's twenty-two miles to Huddlestone, and I was in the telegraph office there at ten minutes to three. That's driving. If you've ever taken a car over those Virginia mountain roads, you'll agree. I hadn't seen Effie Gates scanning the letters that went from and to Coral Bush for two weeks without knowing Chester Straub's address in Baltimore.

Nothing happened Sunday, nothing except Big Joe trying to pin Coral down to naming a definite time when she was

going back to Richmond to get ready for her wedding.

Her personal things were in an apartment there. She gave in finally and said that she would go on Tuesday.

BIG JOE left for the mines the next morning at seven, as usual. I went to the store at eight, but I kept one eye on the Huddlestone road, and about ten o'clock I saw this expensive car come slowly along.

He saw the sign *Post Office* and went across to confront Effie Gates. I was on the store porch when he came out, and I got a good look at him. He drove off without saying a word to me and stopped down in front of the house.

I hollered at Tracy, who manages the store, that I was going to run home for a minute, and left before he could say anything.

It was Chester Straub all right. Coral gave me a hard look as she introduced him.

He said to Mom, "I've come to take Coral back with me. We don't have to wait until September to be married. We can be married sooner—tomorrow, today."

Coral's face turned white and I watched her sway against the door casing. "I couldn't possibly get ready," she said. "Why, you've no idea, Chet, how many things I have to do."

He brushed these things all aside with a flirt of his hand. I used my head for the second time and went to the phone in the hall and put through a call to the mines. I asked the foreman, when I got him, to send Big Joe home immediately, that it was urgent.

Coral was beside me when I replaced the receiver. "Why did you do that?" she asked; and before I could answer, the whole truth came to her. "Why, you—you meddling—" She never finished the sentence, but ran into her room.

I heard my mother talking with the visitor, so I went out to the front porch and sat down to wait for Big Joe. After a few minutes I heard Coral's door open.

Big Joe came, grimy, unwashed, out of breath. He saw me on the porch and the big Saint Bernard face was taut as that of a hungry wolf. "Is it Coral?" he asked. "Is she all right?"

"Inside," I said, and pointed to the car. "The boy friend's here from Baltimore."

"Oh!" he said with relief, and I thought something like a smile went over his blackened features. "Come on inside," he said. "This ain't private."

I didn't want to go inside, but I went anyway. "Hello, Chet," Big Joe said. I watched the Adam's apple come up and down in Chester Straub's long neck.

He wet his lips and said almost in a whisper, "I thought you were cruising somewhere. Coral said—"

Coral interrupted, "He was. He came back. He's doing some highly technical experimental work here in the mines. It's supposed to be very secretive."

Big Joe cleared his throat, and Coral went on hastily, "I'm ready whenever you are, Chet. Joe, you really shouldn't leave your work like this."

Big Joe looked at me and then at the man from Baltimore.

"Aw, Chet, that's not exactly right, the way Coral puts it. You see, I took a little flyer in stocks last fall, and after I got everything straightened out there was about seven or eight thousand dollars left. Not very much, huh?"

The Adam's apple almost stayed up this time. "Then," Straub said, "you mean you're doing this because you have to."

"Put it this way, son," Big Joe said. "I'm one of those guys with a strong back and weak brain. Tommy's grandfather here gave me that handle a long time ago. So you see when I lost my little stack I had to start over. It took me several months to get to this point, but there didn't seem to be anything else I could do."

I SAW Straub's hand make a slow advance towards his hat. He really wasn't such a bad sort; his Adam's apple did

gymnastics for a full thirty seconds before he got the words out.

"I think there's been a mistake," he said. "You see, I lost my money in Wall Street, too. I—I—" He turned to Coral. "I'll still marry you, Coral, if—if—"

"She's marrying me," I said.

Coral looked at the floor. Big Joe was gazing with complete absorption out the open window. Mom was tying knots in her apron. I don't know what I was doing. I got the idea that someone had to see him to the door, so I went.

Coral said when I went back into the room, "Did this just happen or was it planned?"

I said, "If you want the truth, I drove back to Huddlestone Saturday night and sent him a wire."

"He told me he got a wire," Coral said, "but what—?"

"It was premature," I said, "but I told him the engagement was broken and signed your name."

Coral went across to Big Joe and smeared the coal grime on his face worse than it was. "Don't you care, Joe darling. I'm not going to have you slaving in an old mine the rest of your life. I'll get a job myself. I'll sell magazines or silk stockings."

"Honey," Joe said.

Mom was making little gaping sounds at the coal dust that was rubbing off on Coral's dress, but Joe didn't take his arm from around her waist. "Honey," he said again, "you can marry anyone you damn please. I got an offer of a quarter of a million dollars for my hydraulic jack. An out-right sale, no waiting on royalties or nothing."

"Strong back, weak brain," I could hear my grandfather's voice saying again. But this time he had certainly been wrong. Even Miss Effie was wrong; lightning does strike twice. Big Joe pulled himself to his feet and half pushed Coral in my direction.

"I got eleven empties waiting for me up there in the heading," he said. "Guess I'll get up and load 'em."

This time I was certain I heard a cackle of mirth from the armchair where my grandfather used to sit. "Strong back and weak brain." Joe must have heard it too, for he turned at the door and looked back.

"The old man was right," he said. "I ain't fit for nothing but to work. I ain't felt as good in ten years as I do now." He slapped his hands, and a little puff of coal dust hung in the air after the screen door had slammed behind him.

Mom went into the kitchen and made a lot of unnecessary noise banging around pots and pans. Coral said, "Tommy, I wouldn't marry you if you had a million."

"Well, I haven't," I said; and with my arms around her waist raised her feet from the floor. It was probably Mom pumping water on the back porch, but it sounded like a cracked voice saying, "Strong back—strong back."


MEN of DARING
by STOOKIE ALLEN
ROGUE OF THE RING
LOUIS FREG WAS THE IDOL OF SOUTH AMERICAN BULLFIGHT FANS BECAUSE, SCORNING THE CONVENTIONAL TECHNIQUE OF THE MATADORS, HE KILLED FROM HIS KNEES, WITH ONE ARM TIED BEHIND HIM, WITH ARMS AND LEGS SHACKLED AND IN OTHER UNUSUAL AND DANGEROUS WAYS.
LOUIS FREG
DRESSED AS CHARLIE CHAPLIN, WITH A RED PATCH ON THE SEAT OF HIS PANTS HE SAUNTERED ABOUT UNTIL THE BULL CHARGED, THEN HOPPED ASIDE A LA CHAPLIN. HE MADE THE KILL SITTING ON HIS DERBY!
HIS CLOSEST CALL CAME DURING HIS FIRST ATTEMPT TO KILL WHILE POLE VAULTING OVER A BULL. HE MISSED HIS THRUST AND LANDED ON HIS STOMACH. KNOWING A BULL WILL NOT TOUCH ANYTHING DEAD, HE FROZE, NOT MOVING A MUSCLE, WHILE THE ANIMAL SNIFFED AT HIM THEN STALKED AWAY. HIS SECOND TRY WAS A PERFECT KILL. FREG HAD MANY SCARS FROM ENCOUNTERS IN THE RING BUT WAS KILLED, IRONICALLY ENOUGH, IN A LAUNCH COLLISION.!

Don Renegade

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

CHAPTER XXI

A DISH OF DOVES

MARCOS ZAPPA spent the next two days loitering in the inn and resting. Occasionally he strolled around the plaza at the hour of promenade and received the nods of men and the flirtatious glances of the *señoritas*.

News of his encounter with Don Miguel had spread through the town and the countryside, and there were several versions of it. But all agreed that there would be a duel as soon as Don Marcos Zappa was mended enough.

On the third morning, Don Juan de Vasquez came to town with the *señorita*. Meanwhile, Marcos Zappa had received a package from Don Pedro Garcia, and in it he had found documents which amazed and amused him. But he knew they would be sufficient to impress the Vasquez.

He called at the *casa* at the proper time after the siesta hour, and Don Juan greeted him gravely and perused the documents Pedro Garcia had provided. As they sipped wine, they talked.

"I have heard about Miguel," Don Juan said.

"I regret that very much," Marcos Zappa was quick to say.

"I have talked to the boy, and his father has talked to him. He was not really in love with Manuela. But he had looked forward to marriage with her, and his pride was hurt when he learned she had given her heart to you."

"I can understand that," Zappa replied.

"I have explained to him that people will guess your trouble was over her. The boy realizes he has made an error. But his stubborn pride will not let him admit it. He went wild, drank too much wine, forgot himself utterly."

The first installment of this four-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for November 11

"We may find a solution to the situation with honor to us both," Zappa said.

Don Juan clapped his hands for a native servant, and sent for the *señorita.* She came down the staircase smiling, her *dueña* behind her. Don Juan took her hand and placed it in that of Marcos Zappa.

"We will have the banns announced at the chapel at San Gabriel on Sunday," Don Juan said. "And we will have the betrothal feast Monday. Make out your list of invitations, my daughter, and I'll send servants riding with the word."

Marcos Zappa and Manuela had a few minutes together, sitting some six feet apart on stiff chairs while the *dueña* watched from the near distance, smiling but vigilant.

"I imagine my arms around you and my lips on yours," Marcos Zappa whispered.

"It is the same with me, Marcos." Then, smiling impishly, she said: "Fray José begged me to tell you not to eat too much until your arm is mended."

"That reminds me. I shall require quantities of food when we are married."

"I'll see to it personally, *señor.* Meanwhile, I shall strive to think of new dishes to tempt you."

"In all the world, *señorita,* there is nothing as lovely as you!"

"You flatter me, *señor.*"

"'Tis impossible to flatter you. There are not enough words even to tell the truth."

Their eyes sought each other, their lips trembled. But the stern *dueña* broke the spell at the moment she knew it should be broken. Marcos Zappa touched the *señorita's* hand an instant in farewell, and left the house.

BACK at the inn, Bardoso accompanied him to his chamber. "So it is now all arranged, *amigo,*" Bardoso said. "You have the feast of betrothal on Monday, at which time Don Pedro Garcia will denounce you in front of the company for a renegade, and break the *señorita's* heart. After that, you will be a proper pirate again. Be sure you get your gold from him in advance."

"I'll complete my dealings with him," Zappa said.

"I have sent word for the schooner to put into the hidden cove. The men will land and work their way here from the coast carefully. Monday night, we strike. By daylight, we'll be in hiding half way back to the coast, and on the night following we will reach it with our loot."

"You have planned well," Zappa said.

"Attend me, *amigo!* I can see your heart is heavy. Let me abduct the *señorita* and put her aboard the schooner for you. You will both be glad afterward. If you insist, we can put in some place and get a *padre* to mumble his words for you."

"It cannot be that way," Marcos Zappa said. "But I thank you for being willing to do it."

"This affair of young Don Miguel—surely you can handle him when the time comes. Let him wave his blade through the air for a time, take a few steps here and there, then run him through the arm or thigh. So honor will be satisfied, and the lad not much hurt."

"Don Pedro has engaged me to slay him," Zappa said. "That was part of our bargain."

"Ha! 'Tis a pity. But what is a life, more or less? I presume I must leave you now. Should anybody question why a common merchant has so much of your time and conversation, I'll mention that I am contracting to obtain for you certain presents you wish to give your bride."

Bardoso departed. The dusk came, and a servant entered the chamber to light the candles. Carlos appeared to help Marcos Zappa change his attire for dinner. The landlord had promised something special.

"Carlos, what was your work before Don Pedro sent you to serve me?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"I was a house servant, *señor.*"

"Do you care to remain in my service after I am married?"

Carlos glanced up and grinned. "Per-

haps, *señor*—if you get married."

"So you think I may not? That remark was a mistake, rogue! It shows you know too much."

Fright came into the man's face. "I—I meant nothing, *señor.*"

"Suppose I tell Don Pedro you are not discreet?"

"Do not, *señor,* I beg of you. He can be terrible."

"And so can I," Marcos Zappa said. "I once had a man beside me who conspired with some enemies of mine. It was even planned to kill me. I discovered the plot in time. It would make you shudder to hear what I did to him."

Carlos looked uncomfortable. He spent considerable time with his back toward Marcos Zappa as he fussed around the packing cases, trying to regain his composure. And Zappa knew from his manner that Juan's wild tale had been the truth.

"I will need you no more tonight, if you wish to prowl around some adobe hut and sing for a girl," Marcos Zappa said, when Carlos was done.

"Thank you, *señor.*"

The man hurried away. Marcos Zappa had given him the chance to meet the other conspirators if he wished, and hoped possibly Juan would be watching and learn details.

HE WENT to the big main room and sat at the end of the table, with one of the native servants behind his chair instead of Carlos. The landlord hurried up to him.

"I understand, Don Marcos, that it will not be my pleasure to serve you much longer," he said. "There are whispers of coming marriage, and no doubt you will dine at the Vasquez *casa* afterward."

"I'll always remember your dinners, *señor.* What have you for me tonight?"

"A dish of doves, boiled and the bones removed, the meat laced with pepper strips and baked in a pasty."

"It should be delicious."

"A melon filled with the pulp of oranges in which cherries nestle."

"Excellent!"

"A baked fish stuffed with ground olives and nuts—"

"My mouth waters, *señor.* Have the food brought immediately. And your best wine to wash it down."

Marcos Zappa spent considerable time over his meal, for he was thinking, and that made him eat slowly. The big room was filling with the nightly roisterers by the time he was done. He wandered around the gambling tables, watching the play, but took no part in it.

The vision of Maruela was before him again. His heart ached for her when he remembered what Don Pedro Garcia intended to do. And rage flamed within him at the thought that Don Pedro planned to have him murdered after he had served his purpose.

Bardoso came in out of the night, bellowing in greeting as was his custom. He greeted Marcos Zappa humbly and was invited to have a glass of wine.

"Don Marcos, it has been a pleasure to know a real *caballero* like you," he said, loud enough for all to hear. "Perhaps this is the last I shall see of you."

"How is this, *señor?*"

"In the morning I leave Reina de Los Angeles, my business here being finished."

"May you be prosperous wherever you go," Marcos Zappa said.

He understood this scene. Bardoso was giving an excuse for disappearing to meet his men. If he was missing tomorrow, it would cause no comment. As he lifted his glass, Marcos Zappa whispered to him:

"Get into the patio and come to my chamber secretly a short time after I go there. I have word for you. Somebody may have betrayed your plans."

"What is this?" Bardoso looked alarmed.

"Careful, *amigo.* Others are watching. Perhaps you noticed Capitán Cervera greet me in the plaza during the hour of promenade today, and talk with me for some time?"

"That I did, *señor,* and it made me nervous. I always grow nervous when I

see that *capitán*. He appears to be giving me more attention than should be given an honest merchant. I'll slip to your chamber when it is safe."

After Bardoso had left the table, Marcos Zappa finished his goblet of wine, arose and yawned and stretched, then went into the patio and to his quarters.

The candles were burning, the brazier glowing and sending out its warmth, and on the couch beneath the coverings a human form was stretched.

"Ho, little bed-warmer!" Marcos Zappa greeted her. "It is time for you to get along home."

There was no answer from the couch, and Marcos Zappa chuckled to think that Rosa had fallen asleep. He strode across the room and pulled the covers off her head.

Two shining eyes regarded him, but they did not belong to Rosa. It was Anita Gonzales who smiled up at him.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LADY AND THE PIRATE

MARCOS ZAPPA sprang backward a step. For an instant he stared in amazement, and then he spoke, his voice hoarse with anger.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Warming your bed, *señor.*"

"Are you mad, girl? What trick is this?"

"You told my father you would not enter his house again, so I came to you."

"Get out!" Zappa thundered.

"Will you promise to take me with you when you go away?" she asked. "I know your plans, *señor.* I listened behind the door while you were talking to Don Pedro and that pirate. So I know you are not going to be married and remain here."

"You dared listen?" he cried. "And you dare speak of it? Don Pedro shall know of this. He will see that your father punishes you."

"Will you promise to take me with you, *señor?*"

"Certainly not!"

"Then here I remain. If you try to put me out, I'll start screaming, and people will come running. I'll say that I am here at your invitation, but that you turned cruel and began beating me. Then all your fine plans will be ruined because of the scandal, and Don Pedro's also, and he will settle with you for it."

"Have you no shame, girl? Do you not realize that such an act would make common talk of you?"

"And of you, *señor*—do not forget that."

Marcos Zappa wondered how he could handle this situation. He did not doubt that this mad girl would do as she threatened. And that certainly would wreck his plans. For if she screamed men would come running from the main room of the inn. They would hear her ranting, see her there unclothed in his chamber, and the story would sweep the town.

Marcos Zappa did not doubt for a moment that she could scream loudly enough to attract everybody in the place, before he could prevent her. She seemed on the verge of it. He always had outwitted this girl before in her tricks, but she seemed to hold the upper hand now.

"How much gold do you want?" he asked.

"I have not asked you for gold, *señor.*"

"How much? No doubt your father told you how much to ask."

"My father knows nothing of this. He thinks I am in my room at home. I said I had a headache and would retire."

"Get you gone! We'll speak of this tomorrow."

"But it is a thing to be decided now, *señor,*" she said. "Give me your word that you will take me with you, and I'll get up and leave."

"Why should you wish to go with me knowing that I care nothing for you?"

"I can make you care, *señor.*"

"*Señorita,* I have had quite enough of your madness," Marcos Zappa said. "Since you will not leave my chamber willingly, I shall throw you out of it exactly as you are. My plans may be ruined, but you will

be ruined also. And your precious father will be ruined, too, for Don Pedro will no longer furnish him protection and support."

The expression in his face as he approached the couch no doubt frightened her. Perhaps she thought he would do as he had said. Her mouth opened, and she screamed.

THAT scream seemed to cut through the night. It rang in Marcos Zappa's ears and echoed back from the walls, and he knew it had gone through the open barred window to sound along the patio and into the inn.

He recoiled, dumbfounded. But at that instant the door was hurled open, and Bardoso charged into the room.

"I heard," he said. "I'll handle this, *amigo*. Do you stand aside."

The *señorita* screamed again as Bardoso grasped her arm and jerked her from the bed, and half hurled her to the chair in a semi-dark corner of the room, where she had put her clothes.

"Get dressed!" Bardoso snarled at her. "Quickly! Men are coming."

Half crazed with fright, her bravado gone, she got quickly into a loose garment and clutched another. Bardoso gripped her wrist and pulled her to the door. Men were running along the patio beneath the arches, shouting to know what was happening. As Marcos Zappa stood back against the wall, Bardoso jerked the girl out of the room, and began a gust of wild laughter.

"Brainless girl!" he shouted, as his laughter stopped and some of the men rushed up to them. "Can you do nothing right? Now our little affair is known."

"What is this?" the landlord demanded, coming up to them.

"This girl was to come to my room, *señor*, to spend a part of the evening," Bardoso said. "And the silly little fool got into Don Marcos Zappa's room by mistake. How she screamed when Don Marcos entered and she saw it was not the man she expected! Out with you, baggage! Get along home! I want none of you. You have exposed yourself and made me a laughing-stock."

"It is a lie!" she screeched.

But the laughter of the men who had rushed into the patio drowned what she said. She saw their knowing grins. And she turned and fled to the patio gate and out into the night.

The landlord went to the door of the chamber, and Marcos Zappa stepped out.

"It is nothing," Zappa said. "It startled me for a moment, that is all. Hereafter, the honest merchant should give his girls better directions as how to go to his room."

The laughing men turned to stroll back into the main room and resume their roistering. Bardoso pretended to go angrily to his own room. Marcos Zappa entered his chamber and sank weakly into a chair, chuckling now that the ordeal was over.

He heard a soft sob, and glanced up quickly to see Rosa in the doorway.

"Oh, *señor!*" she cried. "She came here and drove me out. She told me that you had invited her. But I could not believe that, so I waited outside the wall."

"There's no harm done, little one. Get you along home," Zappa said.

"Juan said to tell you, *señor*, that he has been listening to those men again, and may have news for you soon."

"Have him let me know at once if he learns anything. My life may depend on his report."

She darted away, and Marcos Zappa closed the door. Laboriously, he got out of his boots and slipped off his jacket and put his arm back into the sling again. He would wait for Bardoso to return, he decided, before retiring.

It was some time before Bardoso returned.

"I got to the Gonzales house ahead of the girl," he reported, 'and told her father everything that happened here. Don Pedro was there, and he was furious. He said the fool girl might ruin all our plans, and ordered Gonzales to lock her in her room and keep her there until our business is

over. So we have nothing to fear from that one."

"Something has gone amiss," Marcos Zappa said. "Possibly the Gonzales girl has let out a hint. From the questions the *capitán* asked me today, I know he thinks pirates are in the vicinity. He suspects everybody who is not well known to him."

"Possibly even you, *amigo?*"

"Even that is possible. I'll cultivate the *capitán* and get him to talk freely. What I learn, I'll let you know. Perhaps it would be well, Bardoso, for you to meet me late Sunday night."

"I'll do that, *señor*. I'll slip into town after dark and watch for a chance to meet you here."

Bardoso left the chamber, and Marcos Zappa barred the door and prepared for bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

SMALL MATTER OF REVENGE

LOCKED in her own room on the upper floor of the house of pleasure, Anita Gonzales beat her fists against the walls in futile rage. Don Pedro and her father had berated her for the better part of an hour, and she smarted yet from their words.

Particularly was she enraged at some of the things Don Pedro Garcia had said. Now she sat on the edge of her couch and recalled them, and her anger grew. She began thinking.

Revenge would be easy for her. She could destroy Don Pedro, whom she now hated. She could destroy Marcos Zappa who had spurned her and Bardoso who had outwitted her. And her father, she was keen enough to see, could be connected with nothing except the operation of the house of pleasure, which was not outside the law. The few men who had been swindled by means of the drugged wine certainly would not talk.

She listened at the door, which her father had barred on the outside, and heard a din below. She knew that her father would not visit her room again during the night. He would think she had gone to sleep.

Señorita Anita snuffed the candles and thrust back the draperies at a window. Beside the window was a heavy vine. Clinging to it, she had made her descent to the ground once before this night, but her father did not know that. He had believed she had slipped down the rear staircase and left the house by the back door.

Swiftly, the *señorita* removed her night robe and put on a dress of dark material. She brushed and arranged her hair, touched it with perfume, and put perfume on her ears and lips. Then she let herself through the window and climbed swiftly down to the ground.

There was nobody in the rear patio. Keeping to the deep shadows, she dodged to the gate and got through it. Then, as silently as a shadow, she drifted away from the house and to the corner of the plaza.

It was some minutes later when she appeared suddenly before the half-asleep guard at the door of the *presidio*. He straightened and his eyes bulged when he saw his visitor.

"I must see the *capitán* at once," she said.

The guard came to life rapidly, bowed in admiration.

"*Sí, señorita!* Be kind enough to wait here."

Capitán Cervera had retired, but he dressed quickly and went to his office room. The guard conducted the *señorita* there, then resumed his post.

"Is it something important, Señorita Gonzales?" Cervera asked.

"Can we be overheard, *Señor el Capitán?*"

"No. You may speak freely."

"I bring you intelligence which you may use to gain you promotion and reward, *capitán,*" she said. "I ask but one thing—that you will do all in your power to save my father from trouble. He really is guilty of nothing."

"I'll do all I can, *señorita,* in the light of my duty."

SHE bent toward him and spoke rapidly in low tones, telling what she knew of the affairs of Don Pedro Garcia, Marcos Zappa and Bardoso. She explained details of the proposed pirate raid, told how Señorita de Vasquez was to be shamed. The *capitán* listened with an inscrutable face.

"It is almost beyond belief," he said.

"I have told you where you may obtain proof, *capitán.*"

"Wait a moment."

Capitán Cervera drew a sheet of paper toward him, dipped quill in inkpot, and wrote swiftly, covering several pages with his scrawl.

"Read this, *señorita,*" he said, when he had finished. "Is it substantially correct?"

"*Sí, mia capitán,*" she replied, after she had read.

"Sign it, please."

"But I do not wish to become involved," she protested.

"You are already involved, *señorita.* You wish me to do all that I can for your father, do you not? Then, sign. And let me tell you something interesting—your statements merely confirm what I already know."

"You know, *señor?*" she asked, aghast.

"We soldiers are not entirely asleep, *señorita.* I know everything. We are only waiting for the proper moment before striking. Sign the statement, and I'll do everything I can to save your father. He has no part in the activities of the pirates, beyond a guilty knowledge, nor in the Marcos Zappa affair."

Señorita Anita signed.

"Thank you, *señorita.* Please remember that you are not to mention this to anyone else, or even to hint that you know anything. If you do, you may cause grave trouble for both your father and yourself. Now, may I assign a man to escort you home?"

"I prefer to go alone, *Señor el Capitán.* I can slip in as I slipped out."

"Would you care to tell me why you came to me with the story?"

"Perhaps it is a matter of revenge."

"Ha! I would dislike to have you at sword's point with me."

She smiled at him and arched her shoulder. "Perhaps I like you too well to ever fight with you, *mia capitán,*" she said. "You look so distinguished in your uniform."

"You are wasting your blandishments on me, *señorita,*" he told her, smiling also. "Why not save them for Bardoso, the pirate who apes the honest merchant? I have heard what happened at the inn earlier in the evening."

" 'Twas a lie!" she raged. "Do you not understand? I went there hoping to meet Marcos Zappa in the patio as though by accident, talk to him and perhaps learn more of their plotting. And this Bardoso thought I was trying to trick him into a compromising position to get gold, and told that tale. I could kill him for it! That was why I came here, *capitán*—to have revenge on them both."

"*Señorita,* when it comes to plotting, all the Garcias, Zappas and Bardosos are mere babes compared to you," Capitán Cervera said. "I'll see you now to the door."

She walked close beside him along the semi-dark corridor, brushing against him frequently, leaning toward him so he would sense the perfume in her hair. But Capitán Cervera did not succumb.

"If you fear for my safety, *capitán,* why not walk home with me yourself?" she asked.

"I'd fear for my own safety, if I did so," he replied. "The night holds many dangers, and you are one of them, *señorita.* Shall I send a guard with you?"

She tossed her head angrily. "I do not care to walk home with a common soldier," she said. "*Buenas noches, mia capitán.*"

Cervera laughed softly as she disappeared among the shadows.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DAGGER FOR THE GROOM

EARLY Sunday morning, while the dew was still on the growing things, Marcos Zappa started for Mission San Gabriel,

riding his horse beside the Vasquez carriage.

The little señorita was smiling shyly as she sat between her father and her *dueña*, and her eye encountered that of Marcos Zappa often enough.

Fray José met them at the door of the chapel, and spoke privately with Marcos Zappa for a time. Zappa and Señorita Manuela attended the mass, sitting side by side under the eye of the *dueña*, and the banns were read.

Outside the chapel, there were congratulations, and then the carriage went on to the hacienda, with Marcos Zappa riding beside it again.

A special dinner had been prepared by the servants at the hacienda, and during the meal Marcos Zappa and the *señorita* smiled under the gentle banter of Don Juan. Then Marcos Zappa went alone into the patio with Don Juan, and they discussed details of the betrothal feast the day following, and of the wedding ceremony.

Marcos Zappa was to return to Reina de Los Angeles alone. The others were to come to the town in the morning early, and remain there until after the wedding. Plans for the honeymoon were to be made later.

Mounted again, Marcos Zappa went slowly along the highway to the mission, where Carlos was waiting on his mule to accompany him to town. There was a scattering of horsemen, vehicles and people afoot along the highway, and men and women saluted Marcos Zappa, and some called good wishes after him.

He rode in a dark mood, thinking of what was to come. He thought principally of the shock to the *señorita*, but he knew it could not be avoided. Abruptly he recalled that he had not seen Don Miguel de Gandara at the chapel.

At a bend in the road, Don Pedro Garcia rode from behind a hedge and pulled up beside him.

"A fair day to you, Don Marcos Zappa!" he said. "Word has reached me that your happiness has been published to all the world."

"The banns were read," Marcos Zappa said.

Don Pedro Garcia urged his horse closer and continued to speak in low tones:

"I'll appear at the betrothal feast, and there denounce you according to our agreement. Despite the fact that I am not liked by the Vasquez, I received an invitation to the affair."

"Don Pedro, can I not urge you to stop this thing?" Marcos Zappa asked.

"I HAVE told you I will not. I have worked too long for my revenge. If I did not denounce you, would you proceed with this marriage?"

"Only after the *señorita* and her father knew the truth."

"Ha! If they knew, there would be small chance of a wedding," Don Pedro said. "Attend me! After the denunciation, you will want to escape the *casa*. It will be dark, for I shall delay until the feast has started. The way will be clear through the rear patio. A horse will be waiting for you just outside the patio gate."

Zappa's eyes narrowed. "And the gold, *señor?*" he asked.

"You have concluded only half our bargain. What of Don Miguel?"

"You know what happened at the inn. I have not seen nor heard of him since."

"Are you physically fit to slay him?"

"Strength has been returning to my body, but my left arm remains in a sling, as you see. That would bother me considerably. But no doubt I can hold a blade, and even win if I force the fighting and make an end of it quickly."

"Send word to him then that you call him to account for slapping your face at the inn."

"And when do I fight him, *señor?*" Marcos Zappa asked. "If I fight him before the feast of betrothal and your great moment when you denounce me, and kill him, the feast probably will not be held. You will lose your chance at revenge.

"If I wait until after you have denounced me, he will be in his rights if he

refuses to fight a renegade. Even did he insist on doing so, thinking to kill me for the wrong done the *señorita,* when and where would we fight, if I am to make my escape immediately?"

"Do not think to avoid the combat by ingenious reasoning," Don Pedro said. "It can be arranged that he slip away first from the feast and go to the pleasure house of Gonzales to await you there. As soon as he is gone, I'll denounce you. When you escape, go to Gonzales' place as if you had slipped away also, and fight him in the big room there. I'll see that Gonzales admits nobody tomorrow evening."

"Very well, Don Pedro," Marcos Zappa said. "Let it be that way."

"I'll give you the gold at Gonzales' house after you kill Don Miguel, and you can ride on and join your pirate friends. For I want to be there, *señor,* and watch him slain. Now, I'll ride on ahead. We must not be seen too much together. All is understood?"

"Everything," Marcos Zappa said.

Don Pedro Garcia galloped ahead, and Zappa rode leisurely the remainder of the way to the inn. Carlos took his horse.

"If it is in your mind to strum a guitar beneath some window again tonight, Carlos, I will have no need of you," Zappa told him.

"I thank you, *señor.*"

"Nor shall I need you at all after tomorrow evening."

"I understand that, Don Marcos." A smile flitted over Carlos' face. "I'll help you dress for the betrothal feast, and then you are done with me."

"Perhaps," Marcos Zappa muttered, so Carlos did not hear as he went away.

HE DINED in state that evening, watched the gambling in the inn for a time, and then retired to his chamber. He had told Rosa that she need not come to warm his bed tonight, for he expected Bardoso to pay him the secret visit they had arranged.

Sprawled in an easy chair with a goblet of good wine at his elbow, Marcos Zappa mused and waited. In time, there came a cautious tapping at the door, and he called permission to enter. Bardoso opened the door, darted inside, and put up the heavy bar.

"Ho, honest merchant!" Marcos Zappa said. "How are your business affairs?"

"Everything is in readiness, *amigo.* The schooner has landed our men, and they are drifting toward Reina de Los Angeles to meet at a certain place not far from the town. We will raid tomorrow night, first the hacienda of Don Juan de Vasquez—where there will be only servants, since the family will be here in town—and then that of the Gandaras."

"Your plans are complete?"

"*Si.* We fall back upon the town, and as the soldiers are sent chasing shadows up in the hills, we do as we please here. Then we retreat to the sea with our loot, taking a couple of days to do it. But, what have you heard, *amigo?*"

"There is activity among the soldiery," Marcos Zappa said. "How much they know of your plans, I am not sure. At any rate, you are guilty of nothing until you commit a crime. They will not touch you before you strike. I have a plan."

"I am all ears, Marcos Zappa."

"My feast of betrothal is tomorrow evening at the Vasquez *casa* here. You will be there as a guest."

"I, *señor?*"

"There will be a jam of people, and if you do not thrust yourself forward too much, you will not be noticed. At the feast, you may learn the latest news. Perhaps I will be able to whisper a warning if all is not well. If everything is all right, you can go from the feast to meet the men."

"Ha! It will be something to talk about afterward," Bardoso declared.

"Be open, *señor.* Go in and engage a room, and say you have simply returned to transact more business."

"That is an excellent idea."

"I'll be looking for you in the throng tomorrow evening. I will slap my friend,

the honest merchant, on his back and whisper into his ear anything I think will interest him."

Bardoso nodded gravely.

"For the last time, *amigo*—do you not want me to abduct the *señorita* for you?"

Marcos Zappa laughed and shook his head. "That would not work out well," he said.

Bardoso departed. Marcos Zappa got off his jacket, adjusted his arm in the sling again, and with some difficulty took off his boots. As he was about to finish undressing, there came another tap on the door.

He expected no other visitor, and was wary. Slipping his blade from its scabbard, he advanced to the door and pulled it open cautiously. Rosa and her Juan stood there.

"It is important, *señor,* else we would not have bothered you," the girl said.

Zappa beckoned them inside and closed the door. "Well?" he asked.

"I watched your man Carlos again this evening, *señor,* and saw him meet with the fishermen," Juan reported. "I got close enough to listen to their talk. They were drinking and were careless."

"And what occurred?"

"It is all arranged, *señor*—how they will attack and slay you. The wealthy man who is hiring them to do the deed planned it all. They will be in the darkness outside the rear patio of the Vasquez house. Their employer has told them that he will see you leave the house in that direction."

"As I suspected" Marcos Zappa said. "Juan, here is a piece of gold for you—and another for Rosa. I have spoken to old Fray José about you, and he will see you married. Talk to him about it when you wish."

"Oh, *señor!*" the girl cried.

"But what of you, *señor?*" Juan asked. "Will you not take precautions?"

Marcos Zappa smiled at him. "Do not worry, my boy. I'll not walk blindly into a trap. Get you gone, now! I feel the need of rest."

MARCOS ZAPPA slept later than usual the next morning. Carlos was waiting outside when he awoke, and called a servant to bring warm water for a bath. Marcos Zappa dressed carefully, then went to the main room of the inn for his breakfast.

"So, Don Marcos, there is to be a feast tonight in your honor," the landlord said. "You are a fortunate man, *señor.* The little *señorita* is adored by all who know her. May I express the hope that you will live to a ripe old age in this vicinity, and that before I die I may have the honor of serving your sons?"

"You already have expressed it," Marcos Zappa said, smiling. "Since I am going to a feast today, I'll have only a light repast now."

"Whatever you desire, Don Marcos."

"Fry me a couple of large tender steaks from a cow, but not too well done."

"I have some excellent ones, Don Marcos."

"A tender dove on a toasted tortilla. A paste of fruits and nuts. One dozen eggs stirred with milk and baked in an earthen dish."

"Immediately, Don Marcos."

"If you have any cool milk hanging in the well, bring me a jug of that. I'll have wine enough tonight."

"Don Marcos, I have heard that some sage once said that a man in love lost his appetite. The sage lied," the landlord declared.

Marcos Zappa chuckled, and the landlord hurried away. Then his face sobered as he began thinking. Manuela—the thought that he would soon hurt her, was a sharp pain in his mind. But things had gone so far now that there could be no retreat.

Bardoso passed through the room and saluted him from a distance. Some of the townsmen who entered the place nodded to him. They were a friendly people here in Reina de Los Angeles, he thought. The man who could make a home in this fair land was fortunate.

He returned to his chamber, where the

servants had set things to rights, rested for a time, then had Carlos help him change attire. It was suitable that he should wear his blade; but also he slipped a dagger into his sash, and that was not usual. He gave Carlos a couple of gold coins.

"You have served faithfully, though I am not quite sure whom you have been serving," Marcos Zappa said.

IT WAS almost sunset when he left the inn to walk the short distance alone to the Vasquez *casa*. The plaza was full of people, and the guests were hurrying toward the house. They had come in from their ranchos and haciendas, some from a distance of fifty miles or more.

One side of the plaza was choked with vehicles and horses. None who could get there had refused the invitation of Don Juan de Vasquez. It was an event when a daughter of that house gave betrothal.

Many were curious, too, to see the man who had won Señorita Manuela's heart. So, Marcos Zappa found himself much observed as he walked toward the house.

He passed slowly through the front patio, and Don Juan met him at the door and escorted him inside. He was presented to the more distinguished guests, and during this his manner held the proper amount of aloof dignity. Did he not know how to do it? Had he not been born to this?

Then the *señorita* came slowly down the stairs with her *dueña* behind her. Marcos Zappa went swiftly with Don Juan to the lowest step and reached up his right hand; he escorted her to a corner of the great main room of the *casa,* and there they stood with Don Juan and received the guests.

More guests arrived, and the common folk choked the rear patio, where tables had been set for them. In the big room were long tables dressed with choice napery, upon which crystal and silver gleamed in the light from the huge candelabra.

Don Juan led Marcos Zappa and Manuela to seats at the head of the main table. Fray José approached them and bowed, gave them his bleessing, poured and blessed wine for them. And then the feasting began.

Often the hand of the *señorita* slipped into Marcos Zappa's beneath the cover of the draped tablecloth, and each time her touch sent a wave of happiness through him.

As the feasting proceeded, musicians played and voices were raised in love songs out in the patio. Good wishes were shouted from the plaza in front of the house, where peons and natives had gathered, knowing well that Don Juan would send out food and drink to them before the banquet was done.

Marcos Zappa watched the guests, the crowd moving around the front patio continually. He saw Bardoso, clearly uncomfortable, sitting in a corner and watching him. There was no sign of Don Pedro Garcia; perhaps, Zappa thought, Don Pedro was busy stationing his assassins behind the rear patio wall.

Capitán Cervera was there, sitting at the principal table as representative of His Excellency the Governor. But Don Miguel de Gandara was missing.

Then, a while afterward, Marcos Zappa saw him. He realized that Don Miguel had been at a small table in a corner, eating with Fray José, who had declined a seat of honor. Many of the guests began rising now, and, Don Miguel arose also. With Fray José a step behind him, he approached.

Marcos Zappa eyed him, not knowing what to expect. Surely Don Miguel would not make a scene at such a time as this.

DON MIGUEL stopped near the head of the table. Don Juan sprang up and gripped his hand, and asked after the boy's father, who was too infirm to come to town for the feast. And then Marcos Zappa stood suddenly beside the *señorita's* chair, for Don Miguel had come on to them.

It grew quiet in the big room, for most of the persons there knew it had been

expected that Don Miguel would wed the *señorita* some day. Too, the report had spread that he had quarreled with Marcos Zappa when he had learned of the betrothal.

Marcos Zappa bowed stiffly, and Don Miguel returned his bow, then took the *señorita's* hand and bent over it.

"May happiness ever be thine, Manuela," he said, so that all in the room could hear. "We have known each other since we were children, and you are like a sister to me. I even hoped once that I might marry you. But that would have been a mistake, of course. One should wed only when the heart burns with love. If I have ever hurt you, *señorita,* I ask your forgiveness."

Manuela's eyes were misty as she looked up at him. "I thank you, Miguel, my brother," she said. "You could not hurt me, ever."

Then Don Miguel straightened, bowed to Marcos Zappa again, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Don Marcos, before these guests I want to crave your pardon," he said. "Some days since, I had a certain sickness of the brain, during which I did not know friends from foes. They say I struck you in public, at the inn. All my life, *señor,* I shall regret that blow. I ask your pardon for it now, and if you feel that your honor calls upon you to take me to task—"

"Don Miguel de Gandara, you err!" Marcos Zappa interrupted. "The blow never was struck."

He held out his hand, and Don Miguel grasped it. Beside them, the *señorita* whispered: "Now I am utterly happy."

It was at that moment the crowd parted, and Don Pedro Garcia, dressed resplendently, strode down the room.

CHAPTER XXV

THIS RENEGADE, SEÑORES . . .

MARCOS ZAPPA'S face was expressionless as he watched Don Pedro approach. But the latter did not look at him then. He went straight toward Don Juan de Vasquez, who bowed and held out his hand.

Pedro Garcia's eyes were glowing strangely, and his nostrils were dilated. He touched Don Juan's hand an instant, then took a step backward and lifted his head.

"I regret, *señor,* that I could not arrive earlier," Garcia said. "But I was busy gathering needed information in your interest."

"In my interest, *señor?*" Don Juan raised his eyebrows.

"Perhaps it is none of my affair, Don Juan. But our families have known each other for years, and we are both men of blood. When I received an inkling of a certain perfidy, I deemed it my duty to investigate and make sure before consulting you."

"Clarify your words, *señor,* if you please," Don Juan said.

"You are announcing the betrothal of your daughter, the Señorita Manuela, to this man who calls himself Marcos Zappa."

"That is true."

"Have you satisfied yourself, *señor,* as to Marcos Zappa's lineage, position in life, his character and estate?"

"That is the duty of the girl's father," Don Juan said, stiffly. "If it is any of your concern, I have satisfied myself."

"Then I fear, *señor,* that you have been fooled."

Pedro Garcia's voice rang around the room. Don Juan drew himself up.

"What mean you, Don Pedro?" he asked.

"I heard rumors; I have made investigation, and have proof. This man's name is not Marcos Zappa."

"But I saw credentials, letters—"

"Forged, no doubt."

"Do you mean to say this gentleman is an impostor?" Don Juan cried.

"I do not even admit he is a gentleman."

"Are you mad, *señor?* Don Marcos—"

"Let him speak on," Marcos Zappa said, his face as hard as stone.

Pedro Garcia drew in his breath deeply. His eyes were glittering as he looked at Don Juan and the *señorita.*

"THIS man's name is Felipe Hernandez. He once was close to the Viceroy. But he forgot his heritage, became enamored of a native wench, conspired with her people against the government—"

"You accuse him of being that man?" Don Juan demanded.

"I do, *señor.* Nor is that all. He was branded a renegade and exiled. He threw in his lot with pirates. He is a member of a pirate crew now, I understand. And this is the man to whom you have given the hand of your daughter, Don Juan de Vasquez."

There was silence in the big room, save for the sounds of heavy breathing. The *señorita* whimpered and clasped Don Marcos' hand with her own.

"Do not even answer such an absurd accusation," she said. "Don Pedro must be mad."

"You heard what he said, *señorita,*" Marcos Zappa replied. "If it were true—?"

"It could not be true, *señor.* I trust my own heart. I know you for an honorable gentleman. But, even if this terrible thing were true, Marcos Zappa, I still would love you. Were you proved a scoundrel, I'd love you. For I could not help myself."

Marcos Zappa's face glowed an instant. "I thank you for your trust, *señorita,*" he said.

She turned to face her father. "Have your servants whip this man Garcia from our house," she said. "He has come here in the hope that he can disturb us—"

"Your pardon, *señorita,*" Garcia interrupted. "I dislike to be the bearer of such news. But would it not be better to know the truth now than after marriage? I thought I was doing a great favor to your house in unmasking this man."

"Your word is not proof enough, *señor!*" Don Juan cried.

"You want proof, Don Juan? Why does this man wear his hair so long and in such a fashion? Why does he fasten it so with a band around his head? I'll tell you, *señor.* To conceal the brand of the renegade on his forehead!"

Marcos Zappa stood straight and rigid. His eyes were gleaming, but his face did not move. Don Juan turned toward him.

"Marcos, my son-to-be," he said, "no doubt this man is mad and what he has said must be a pack of lies. I do not doubt you. But it will be easy to show Pedro Garcia his mistake. Will you, of your free will, expose your forehead for us to see?"

Pedro Garcia's eyes were mocking. "It is the end for you, *señor,*" he told Marcos Zappa. "Take off your head-band and brush back your long hair and let us see the mark, *Señor el Renegado!*"

Marcos Zappa looked straight at him, at Don Juan and the *señorita;* then slowly he lifted his right hand. He seized the headband and tore it off. Those around him bent forward, tense and silent.

Marcos Zappa put up his hand again and seized the lock of hair over his forehead. "You say the brand of the renegade is on my forehead, Don Pedro Garcia?" he asked.

"I do!"

"If it is not there, I shall immediately call you to account."

"Ha! My blade is ready to cross yours, *señor,* if I err. Enough of this mockery! You can no longer delay the exposure, *señor.* We are waiting."

Then, Marcos Zappa smiled and brushed aside the long hair. And all close to him could see that his forehead was fair and smooth, without a blemish on it.

"Dios!" Pedro Garcia cried. "What trick is this?"

"Are you the one to speak of tricks, *señor?*" Marcos Zappa asked him. "Perhaps you have some explanation? You have accused a man of a thing unspeakable and caused a lady pain—"

"The brand was there! I saw it myself," Pedro Garcia raged. "Attend me, all! I say this man is Felipe Hernandez—"

"That is true."

"That he is a renegade—"

"And that is not true," Marcos Zappa said. "There is a renegade here, but I am not the man. You are, Pedro Garcia!"

IN HIS rage, Garcia started to hurl himself forward, his right hand darting to the dagger in his belt. But suddenly Capitán Cervera and one of his men seized his arms and held him. He struggled in vain to get free.

"Release me!" Garcia stormed.

"Be quiet, *señor*, else we use more force," Cervera warned.

"You dare speak so to me? I'll have you punished for your insolence!"

"Silence, *señor*. Fray José has something to say as to this."

The old *fray* had shuffled to the head of the table and had been patting the *señorita* reassuringly on her shoulder. Now he stepped forward and looked at Pedro Garcia, and then around at the company.

"My children, it is not a pretty story," he said. "But all of us who love truth, who admire sacrifice and nobility, are proud if this man who calls himself Marcos Zappa is our friend.

"He is Felipe Hernandez, known as a renegade, whose name has been held up to scorn. I have known of it for a long time."

"And did not warn us, *fray?*" Don Juan cried.

"He had work to do, and I could not ruin his plans," the *fray* replied. "Some three years ago, it became known that the pirates who preyed upon the coast of Alta California had an ally on the shore. That he was a man of high birth became apparent, but his name could not be learned.

"He informed the pirates where and when to strike, told them how to locate the riches of his friends, in the houses where he was a welcome guest because of his rank. The Viceroy became determined to rid the earth of such a man.

"Felipe Hernandez suggested a plan and volunteered for the duty. He pretended to fall in love with a native girl in Mexico. He declared her people were mistreated and seemingly headed an uprising. So he was caught; it was given out that the brand of the renegade had been stamped on his forehead and that he was exiled from the Mexican mainland.

"The branding was not done publicly. It was not a real branding. The mark was made with chemicals which dried and puckered the skin and made the mark look like a brand. Felipe Hernandez, scion of a noble house, allowed the world to believe him one who turned against his own kind. This he did in his king's service.

"News of his infamy was spread, and reached those he wished it to reach—the pirates. He contrived to fall in with them in Baja California, and became one of their crew. He lived their life and won their confidence, always seeking to ascertain the name of the man who was their ally on this coast.

"Gradually he gathered proof and submitted it to the officials at Monterey, who had intelligence from Mexico as to his real identity and what he was doing. When he came near this locality, I received the story from my superiors in Mexico. And they sent me chemicals and instructions how to bleach the brand off his forehead.

"I had a chance to do that when he was sorely broken in body after rescuing the *señorita* from the runaway. And I learned how this Pedro Garcia, thinking him to be a renegade, had made a deal with him.

"For a thousand pieces of gold, Marcos Zappa was to win the love of the *señorita*, so Pedro Garcia could shame her by exposing his identity, as he tried to do tonight. And he also was to quarrel with and slay Don Miguel de Gandara, whom this Garcia hates.

"This deal brought them together and gave Marcos Zappa an opportunity to gather the remaining evidence he needed. But it chanced that he fell deeply in love with the *señorita*, and she with him, hence this feast tonight. It was necessary to withhold knowledge of all this until now,

that Pedro Garcia might fall into the trap."

"What lies are these?" Garcia cried. "Has he made a fool of you also, *fray?* Or is this some trick of your own? You dared remove the renegade brand officials put on this man's forehead? There is friction between the Franciscans and the government—"

CAPITÁN CERVERA silenced him with a gesture and stepped toward him. Then it was seen that four of Cervera's men had appeared quietly and were standing around Pedro Garcia.

"Allow me to conclude this scene," Cervera said. "When this man you know as Marcos Zappa appeared here, he communicated with me. I sent word to Monterey and received from there by courier, straight from His Excellency the Governor, the truth as relayed from Mexico. I was told how to act.

"Pedro Garcia, I arrest you in the King's name and the name of his Viceroy for high treason. You are to be sent to Monterey in chains to stand trial."

There was a chorus of cries, and Marcos Zappa suddenly found the *señorita* clinging to his right hand and Don Juan patting him on the shoulder. But Capitán Cevera signaled for silence again.

"Pedro Garcia was the ally of the pirates," he said. "We have the proof. He engaged Marcos Zappa to do the perfidies of which the *fray* spoke. He is part owner of the pleasure house run by Esteban Gonzales, where gentlemen of his own station were tricked and robbed of gold. He planned to have Marcos Zappa escape from this house after being denounced—and had four men waiting to kill him as he escaped. My soldiers have the four.

"Esteban Gonzales and his daughter were informed a short time ago that they must quit this vicinity before the setting of another sun. Pirates even now are about us, for Pedro Garcia plotted with them to raid the haciendas of the Vasquez and the Gandaras late tonight. We have both places guarded.

"Because these pirates have actually made no move here, I shall not proceed against them, for Marcos Zappa, having been their comrade, wishes them a chance to escape present punishment."

At that moment Bardoso, standing back against the wall and weak from astonishment, made his way swiftly out of the house, through the front patio, and into the night, on the way to warn his men. They would be on the schooner and at sea as soon as they could manage.

Pedro Garcia, his lips curled, still stood at the side of the table with the eyes of all upon him. The soldiers pressed closer. Then Don Miguel de Gandara thrust his way forward.

"Though you are a renegade, Pedro Garcia, I will cross swords with you!" he cried. "Not because you plotted to have me foully slain, but because you tried to bring shame to Señorita Manuela and her house." He drew back his arm and slapped Pedro Garcia across the face, and the crack of the blow could be heard through all the room.

"I thank you, Don Miguel, my friend, but this is my affair," Marcos Zappa said. "My work is not finished until I have attended to this rogue. I owe him two years' absence from decency and many affronts."

"He is my prisoner—" Capitán Cervera began.

"Did you not have instructions, *capitán,* to allow me discretion in this matter?" Marcos Zappa asked, smiling. "Let the front patio be cleared. The torches in the wall give ample light. And post your soldiers, so this renegade cannot run away."

"*Dios!*" Pedro Garcia cried. "That is one thing I never will do."

"My love," the *señorita* was protesting, clinging to Marcos Zappa's arm. "You are weak—"

"*Sí!* You are but poorly mended in body, Don Marcos," Miguel cried. "And your left arm is still in splints. This Garcia is a noted swordsman. Let me attend to him for you."

"It is my duty—and my delight," Marcos Zappa said. "Let the patio be cleared."

Capitán Cervera gave orders, and Pedro Garcia was led into the patio. The soldiers began ordering the guests to go to other parts of the house.

Don Juan de Vasquez touched Marcos Zappa on the shoulder. "My son—" he began, and choked.

"It must be done, Don Juan."

"It must be done—*sí*. But I wish you were in better condition."

"The memories of the past two years will give strength to my arm."

Señorita Manuela clung to him. "Come back to me, beloved," she said. "I'll be waiting here at the head of the table."

CHAPTER XXVI

TORCHLIGHT ON STEEL

A HUSH had fallen over those in the feasting throng. They grouped around the tables, speaking only in whispers. They watched the *señorita* as she settled herself in the chair at the head of the table. Don Juan handed her a glass of wine, and she took a tiny sip. The hand which held the glass trembled.

Most of the men had gone outside to watch from beyond the patio wall and from the doorway. Fray José, oblivious of those around him, knelt quietly in a corner to pray.

Don Miguel de Gandara helped Marcos Zappa off with his jacket, removed his sword belt, tightened the sling which held the wounded arm. At Marcos Zappa's gesture, Don Miguel drew the blade and offered it, and Marcos Zappa grasped the hilt.

"If I could do this for you—" Miguel said.

"It is something I must do myself, *amigo*."

"Forgive me, if for a moment I held dislike for you," the boy begged. "Manuela was right to give you her love. A woman's intuition is to be trusted in such matters. If anything goes amiss, *señor*, she will not survive the shock. Take that thought with you, and may it give you strength and skill."

"I am sure it will, my friend."

"If anything does go amiss with you, I promise to slay the rogue even if I am compelled to do it foully. You are not forced to fight him, for he is a renegade. Why not see him hanged?"

"It is too late to change the affair, and I would not have it changed," Marcos Zappa said. "And, though Pedro Garcia is what he is, the fact remains that his lineage is a high one. Regardless of his perfidy, he should not die by the rope."

"That is true, *señor*."

"If you are ready, Don Miguel, we will go to the patio now."

In the patio, the others were waiting. Pedro Garcia had removed his jacket and rolled up his ruffled sleeves. He had drawn his blade, and held it ready. He stood back against the wall, while soldiers guarded the arches and men with strained faces watched on every side.

"You are slow to come to your death, *señor*," Pedro Garcia said, when Marcos Zappa stepped through the doorway.

"Are you so eager to rush to yours?" Marcos Zappa countered.

"I'll deal my repartee with my blade, *señor*, not with my tongue."

Capitán Cervera took up the position of judge.

"One last chance, *señores*," he called, according to the code of the day. "Is it not possible this conflict can be avoided?"

"It is not!" Pedro Garcia said.

"It is unavoidable," Marcos Zappa declared.

Cervera drew his own blade.

"Then I warn you, *señores*, that at the first foul move, with my own blade I'll cut down the man responsible. Is this engagement to the death?"

"To the death!" they both answered.

"The victor, having risked his own life, is absolved in advance of the crime of homicide. Prepare to engage, *señores*."

A moment later, steel clashed and rang.

PEDRO GARCIA'S onslaught was swift and terrific. He seemed expending his rage in the attack. Marcos Zappa fell back quickly, cautiously on guard. Garcia, too experienced to let his rage rob him of skill, controlled himself quickly and began a methodical battle.

Carefully, Marcos Zappa felt him out. In his present physical condition, he could not endure a long contest. Every move lessened his precious supply of strength. He would have to make a quick end of it if he was to emerge victor, yet could he not let a desire for haste lead him into carelessness.

For he knew, in the first minute of fighting, that Pedro Garcia was clever with a blade. The man had been well taught, and had had experience in duels before. But Marcos Zappa had lived with pirates for two years, men who fought on after defeat had put its stamp on them; and he had learned much from them.

The sputtering torches gave a treacherous light, and both men fought for the advantage of it. For an instant, Marcos Zappa had the flare of one in his eyes, and saw a dozen blades against him when there was but one. He felt the bite of Garcia's weapon in his left shoulder, heard the exclamations of the watchers.

Marcos Zappa remained cool. He was careful to keep a position where the light would not bother him. There was a swift exchange, and the point of his blade ripped Pedro Garcia's ruffled shirt and stained it with blood.

"Perhaps the brand is gone from your forehead, *señor,* but I'll carve one over your heart," Garcia cried.

"You bear your brand now, *señor,*" Marcos answered. "But I'll give you the opportunity to forget it—in death."

Garcia began another furious onslaught, driving Marcos Zappa back almost to the patio wall. The ringing steel sent a shower of echoes beating against the house. Marcos Zappa felt his strength ebbing rapidly. His vision was growing dim, and his breathing became labored. He realized that he was losing much blood from the shoulder wound.

He remembered the ordeal of the past two years, the work he had done, and told himself this renegade should not triumph now. He thought of the *señorita* waiting for him at the head of the table.

Pedro Garcia continued the onslaught. Marcos Zappa retreated before the furious attack. A sudden rage came to him, and he stood and fought, then pressed the attack himself.

This was his last chance, he knew. He felt the bite of Garcia's blade again, this time in his left thigh. Red flashes came before his eyes. The torches seemed to be dancing on the walls.

His vision was dimming again. Every breath he drew meant a pain in his chest. His blade felt like a weight of lead in his hand. His arm was growing weary. His legs were wobbling.

"This is the end, *señor!*" Pedro Garcia cried.

He laughed and pressed the fighting again. But he grew careless in his eagerness. Marcos Zappa got the feel of his adversary's blade, and he knew Pedro Garcia had overreached himself, that he could not recover in time. With his last strength, Marcos Zappa drove his own blade forward.

Pedro Garcia reeled aside and tossed wide his arms. Steel rang as his sword dropped to the flagstones of the patio floor. Then Pedro Garcia dropped also, his arms asprawl, his eyes rolling, great gasps coming from his lips, and his life's blood flowing into the ground.

Marcos Zappa did not see him die. For Marcos Zappa had lurched on past his fallen enemy, dropping his own blade and starting to fall headlong. Don Miguel and Capitán Cervera caught him as he fell.

WHEN he opened his eyes, he was in the *casa,* in a room on the second floor. He was stretched on a couch, and Fray José was working over him. The flow of blood had been stopped, his wounds were bandaged, and his nostrils tingled

from the sting of the salts which had brought him back to consciousness.

"You are with us again, my son," Fray José said. "Let us hope for many years."

"For many, many years," Marcos Zappa muttered, smiling. "I have so much living to do now."

His sight cleared, and he saw Don Juan and Miguel standing beside the couch.

"Do not let them stop the feast," he begged. "Though I am too weak just now to go down and dance, others may, and I can listen to the music. The *señorita—*"

"Cried herself almost sick with joy, but she is calm again now," her father said. "Cover his nakedness, Fray José, for here she comes—and all the *dueñas* in the world could not prevent her."

She came rushing into the room and knelt beside the couch, laughing and weeping at the same time. She kissed Marcos Zappa on the lips.

"I shall nurse you," she said. "You will soon be well. And Fray José shall not starve you this time, beloved. What meals you will have!"

"Broiled doves with a sauce of cherries," he said, his eyes twinkling.

"*Si, señor!*"

"Fish baked with the rinds of wild oranges—"

Smiling, she placed a finger over his lips. "Enough," she said. "I shall be your servant."

"Then I beg a service of you now, such as you gave me a moment ago."

She bent over him, and when she lifted her head again, her eyes were brilliant. Fray José touched her gently on the shoulder.

He knew, that good man.

"Let him sleep now, *señorita,*" the *fray* whispered. "Let him sleep . . . and dream."

THE END

MAKER OF SHADOWS

Before Time itself, they were—dancing their evil rigadoons in the living mist. They had died yet they were immortal, for each of them, dying, gave life to the Maker of Shadows, the Spinner of Webs. . . . Gees, that blithe young seeker-out of mysteries found *his* trace and knew that to save the life of a lovely young girl, he would have to kill this Master of Darkness. But Gees had sworn to uphold the law—not to break it. A gripping new novel of worlds beyond the world of man, by

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Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

YOU may remember that a few weeks ago a Mr. W. Wallace Llewellyn had the daring to list what he considered to be the ten worst stories published in ARGOSY this last year. For reasons of his own, Mr. Llewellyn put three Bennett Foster stories on his demerit list, and we thought at the time that he was being pretty tough on one of our ablest authors.

Well, Mr. Foster is inclined to feel the same way. He's not angry, you understand, but he is a little hurt. After all, Mr. Llewellyn did strike him rather heavily on the head and on the typewriter. Mr. Foster suspects, with some justification, that maybe Mr. Llewellyn doesn't like Westerns. But let the author speak for himself.

BENNETT FOSTER

From the last two Argonotes seems to me like I'm in bad. First one fellow comes along and says why not get some A-grade Westerns and takes a poke at Luke Short and me. Then in this week's Argonotes I get lined up for three out of the ten worst stories of the year by Mr. Llewellyn. That's what I'd call picking them. The only consolation I had there was that W. C. Tuttle got into the same group. Well, I guess everybody can't be suited.

Hope that I don't get any more jolts like that Mr. Llewellyn handed out. Seems to me that he doesn't like Westerns.

Springer, New Mexico

FOR a couple of days after we received Mr. Foster's letter we worried over the problem of cheering him up. Then the whole thing was suddenly solved by a postcard. There arrived in the mail a glowing tribute to Mr. Foster, guaranteed to heal his wounds.

IRVING JACOBS

After reading the contribution in this week's Argonotes of W. Wallace Llewellyn I rose from my chair and threw our grand piano out of the window. Llewellyn is positively the worst judge of fiction to ever poke his proboscis into Argonotes.

I was indignant over W. W. L.'s placing "Steamboat Gold" in the list of ten best stories —it was a pretty awful story in my estimation —but I positively blew up when I saw that he had placed "Riders of the Rifle Rock" at the head of the list of ten worst stories. Bennett Foster poured all his genius for writing Western stories into this simply swell serial yarn.

When I saw where W. W. L. had placed Woolrich's great "Eye of Doom" series, I slowly disintegrated. Standing on my head, I am typing this poke-in-the-nose to W. W. Llewellyn. Switching to bended knee, I pray you will print this so W. W. L. may suffer as I suffered when I read his disgraceful ratings.

Yours for fifty more years of ARGOSY

Jamaica, N. Y.

Now there's another request for the return of the old-time authors, most of whom are writing for the slicks, as we've explained before. Our correspondent was puzzled to discover "Karpen the Jew" in *Famous Fantastic*, and we hasten to explain that the story was reprinted from ARGOSY.

JOHN S. ALFRED

First off, I am a reader of ARGOSY from "Golden Fleece" days and have always thought your magazine one of the best. But, would like to know what has become of "Peter the Brazen," "Singapore Sammy," "Bellow Bill," "Gillian Hazeltine." Your magazine is still very good, but nevertheless I did enjoy them.

I came across a story of yours in *Fantastic*, "Karpen the Jew." Am sure I read it in ARGOSY.

Thanks a lot.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

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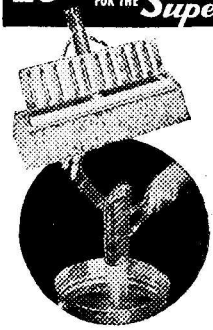

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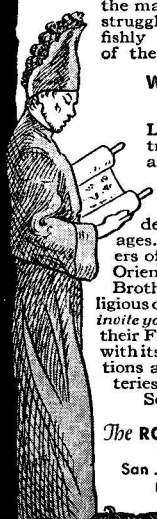

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Above, "VAN" waiting in the duck blinds for the "zero hour." Explorer, sportsman, author of the authoritative new "A Book on Duck Shooting," Heilner knows the waterfowl flyways from California to Maine, Alaska to Mexico.

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