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Illustrating Maker of Shadows

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Maker of Shadows

By JACK MANN
Author of "The Ninth Life"

In a remote corner of Scotland presides a spirit of evil more ancient than time, of mysteries more subtle than the secret of life and death. Shadows throb with the whispers of the undead and the fog calls in an unknown voice. And in their midst is Gamel MacMorn, who spins archaic webs to trap the souls of the living. . . .

CHAPTER I

SHADOWS SURROUND US

IT WAS noon, but the twisting road that led beyond the Clyde was greasy with an almost impenetrable mist. The big gray Rolls-Bentley poked its way northward into the Highlands at a snail's uncertain, dragging pace. Its unwonted slowness seemed to match the instinctive reluctance of its driver to proceed.

Gees — his real name was Gregory George Gordon Green—could almost feel a danger in the gloomy air that thickened as he drove, as if wishing to bar his way. He regarded the winding, bumpy road with distaste, and struggled manfully to overcome a keen desire to turn back.

He shifted his position at the wheel, and as he did, the letter in the side-pocket of his well-cut tweeds crackled almost pleadingly.

It was written in a delicate, well-bred hand; and its tone was one of courtesy and gentleness, but it spoke in accents of carefully repressed fear. It was signed, *Margaret Aylener;* and contained a simple request that Gees visit her at The Rowans. She had enclosed the two guineas that was Gees' customary charge for an initial consultation, but she had neither made any inquiry as to the fees for his services nor hinted at what she wanted him to do for her.

The whole thing was tantalizingly mysterious, more for what it hinted than for the usual details it omitted; and Gees, with the clammy moistness of the fog thick on his tongue, discovered that the curiosity he had felt on first reading of the Aylener woman's note had now returned to shove his vague uneasiness out of the driver's seat.

May was half over. Behind him in England were blossoming chestnuts and hawthorns. But here, when the fog parted for a moment, only sullen, peaty desolation met his eye. Even the breeze was harsh and unfriendly.

The confidential agency—nobody had ever defined a limit as to what that term might cover, Gees least of all—which he had set up two or three years ago had kept him reasonably busy and moderately prosperous. The haphazard way in which it was run permitted him to pick only the cases that definitely intrigued his fancy.

Just as he was considering how entertaining his life had been since he had started on this harebrained career, the figure of a shepherd loomed up before him on the road. Gees braked sharply and stuck his long, homely face out the side-window.

"I want to get to Brachmornalachan," he said.

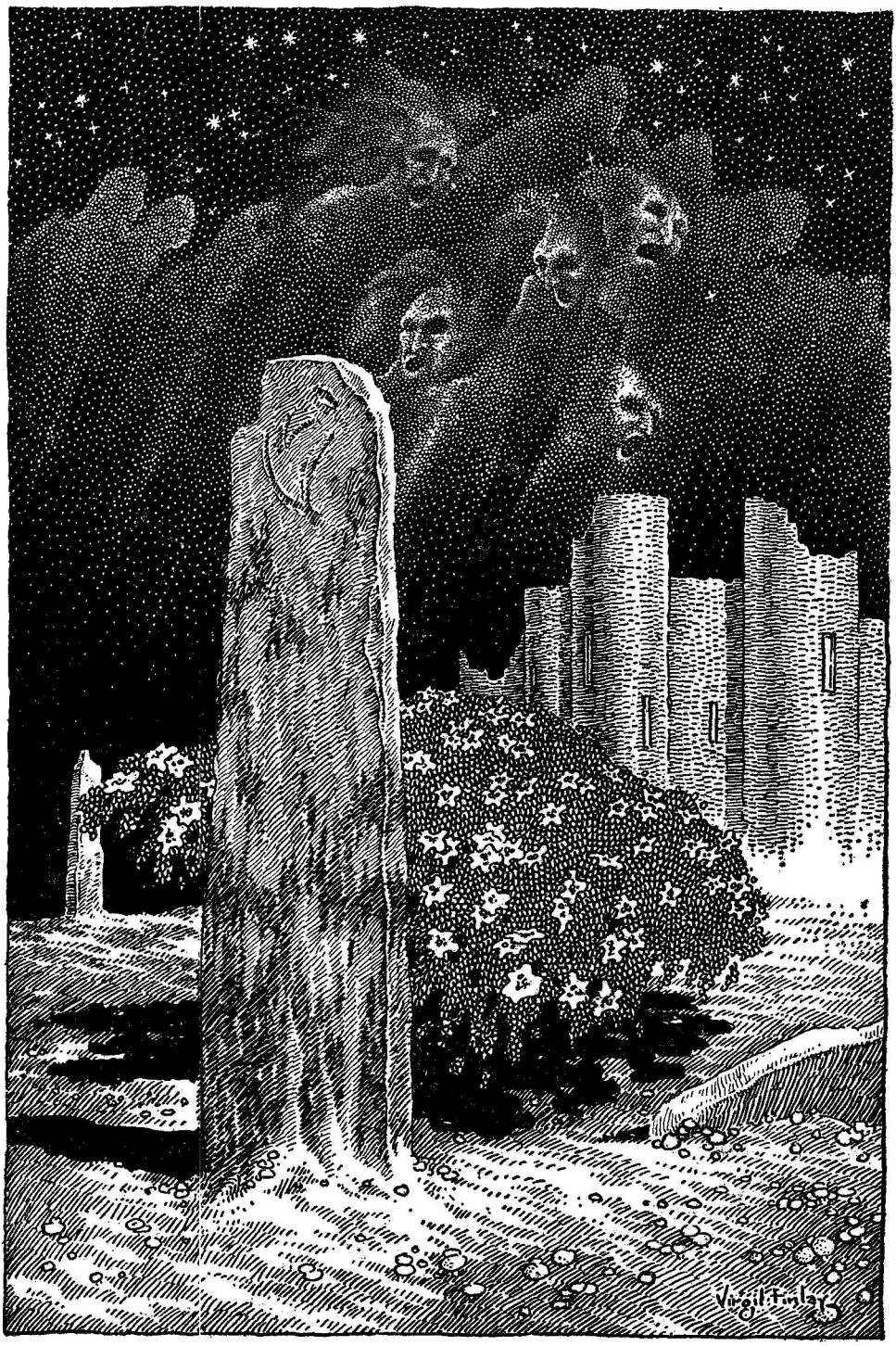
"Aye," said the shepherd.

"Could you tell me the road?"

"Aye," said the shepherd, again.

"Well then, would you please?"

"Aye," said the shepherd. "Tak' the second on the left and you'll come to a fork o' three ways. Tak' the middle and ye'll come to Brachmornalachan. It's aboot nine mile."



Gamel MacMorn is weaving a web to add another life to his, to add one more shadow to those already driven out

GEES thanked him dazedly, and drove on. The directions were less hazy than they sounded, and Gees found the middle fork without difficulty. He paused a moment, drew a deep breath, then tramped down hard on the gas and sent the big car shooting down the road.

He found the puddled town with the unpronounceable name, got his directions for The Rowans, and soon he saw, set some fifty yards or more back from the bumpy track, an old granite house, two-storied, and a mansion by comparison with all else in the neighborhood. A low stone wall took in an acre or so of the peaty plain about this dwelling, and some twenty yards distant from the frontage, from each side, and from the back of the house, reared up a noble mountain ash, just coming into flower.

All the deeply-sunken windows that showed were lace-curtained, and, gray and old though it was, the house looked cheerful. A gate in the stone wall stood open, and beyond it a well-kept drive of fine granite chips contrasted with the badly-kept track by which Gees had approached.

He turned in, and found width enough to draw up abreast the front door, which, he saw, was composed of two wide planks of great age, bound together by a pair of great hinges of iron scrollwork. Beside it he saw as he got out from the car, a black chain confined by two eyelets hung down, terminating in an iron handle, and a pull at this set a bell clanging somewhere inside until the noise was abruptly stilled, as if somebody had grasped the tongue of the bell.

Then the door swung open slowly, heavily, silently, and a woman looked out.

She lacked only an inch or so of Gees' own height, and he was just over six feet. She might have been forty, or sixty. High cheekboned, freckle-faced, hard-mouthed, and with deep-blue, glassy eyes, she surveyed him with as little interest as the shepherd on the road. A big-boned, long-armed, strong woman, she waited for him to speak.

"Miss Aylener?"

"Aye, she's expectin' ye," the woman said. "And the luggage?" She glanced past him at the car before the door.

"I'll get it." The woman took it from him when he had fetched it and her way of handling it suggested that the weight was nothing to her. "And is this all?" she asked.

"It is," he answered.

"Then ye'd better come in," she told him. "Ye can put the wee car away after ye've seen Miss Margaret, mayhap."

Still carrying his case, she took his hat and raincoat and opened a door on the right of the wide hallway, and, without having asked his name, announced him.

"Mr. Green, Miss Margaret."

He saw a big room, with two windows giving on to the front of the house, and another on the side. He saw a glowing peat fire on a wide hearth, and had an impression that the room was beautifully furnished.

Facing him as if just risen from one of the armchairs by the fire, stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

SHE was of middle height; slenderly, regally proportioned, with dainty hands and finely-moulded feet and ankles. Her face was perfectly-modeled, her eyes of the softest, most liquid deep blue, and the slight smile that parted her lips revealed even, perfect little teeth.

Her snow-white hair waved softly over her head and if any art went to the making of her perfect, rose-tinged white skin, it was imperceptible.

Sixty years of age, Gees would have said at that first sight of her. Later, he came to know that he had underestimated by nearly ten years, and then, knowing more of the soul of her, knew that he had underestimated her beauty fully as much as her age.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Green." She held out her hand. "But you will be very tired after the long drive. Elizabeth shall show you your room, and we can talk after you have rested awhile."

She pressed a bell push beside the fire-

place. "Callum — my manservant — has gone to get the necessaries that a guest involves, but Elizabeth"—she broke off as the door opened—"Elizabeth, show Mr. Green where to put his car, please."

"Aye, madam," said Elizabeth.

At the back of the house, she opened for him the double doors of an old stable from which the stalls had been removed. Obeying her gesture, he drew the car over to right of the entrance, leaving room for another beside it. Oil and petrol cans showed that the stable was already in use as a garage.

"And now, your room," said Elizabeth after they had re-entered the house. "I've taken the bag there."

After only a momentary hesitation he followed her. The stair-carpeting, old and faded though it appeared, was of heavy, costly pile, and the stone floor of the corridor to which he ascended was equally well carpeted. Elizabeth opened a door as massive as that in the front entrance, and revealed a large room, in which Gees saw a canopied double bed and heavy, old-fashioned furniture.

The woman pointed to a door in one corner. "Yon's the bath," she said, "and ye'll know the way doun." And, with that, she left him to himself.

As nearly as he could tell, the house faced east, and this room was at the south-east corner, with windows on opposite sides. Through either window he could see a mountain ash, though but dimly, because of the thickened reek that drove visibly from the west.

The silence was absolute, almost malignant. And the reek outside appeared to pass in waves, as if it carried shadows in its impalpable, driving mass.

Yes, that was it. Shadows, passing with the mist that made the trees appear unreal. Shadows, following each other from the west.

HE WENT down the carpeted stairway, and back to the room in which he had left Margaret Aylener. She pointed him to an armchair beside the fire and seated herself across from him. Through the window behind her he could see another of the four rowans, but the dusk and driving mist made it little more than a ghost tree.

"You are wondering," Margaret Aylener said with a slight smile, "what an old woman like me can want of a man like you, in a place like this."

"Not quite," and he too smiled. "Questioning, say, why you live in such a place as this. Its remoteness, I mean."

"I might question why you live in London," she countered.

"That's true."

She paused. "Will you tell me—you call yourself a confidential agent. What is that exactly?"

"For a time, until my father objected too much over it, I ran an advertisement in the personal columns of newspapers," he answered. "The chief line of it was—'Consult Gees for anything from mumps to murder.' You may take that literally as answer to your question, Miss Aylener."

"That is, from medicine to crime," she suggested. "Taking in every other form of anti-social activity by the way, I suppose?"

"Pretty much," he assented. "Your letter interested me so much that I drove here without writing to ask what is your particular need. Now I am here I'm not sorry, though I nearly was, back on the road."

She gave him a look of awakened interest. "Could you tell me how long ago?" she asked. "The time at which you felt that?"

"About three o'clock," he answered. "Or just before three—a few minutes before."

"Yes." She brooded over it, grave-eyed and still.

"And now—what do you want of me?" he asked.

She smiled again. "I am—forgive me for not answering directly—I am trying to sense you," she said. "To—to value you, estimate you, say. Whether, now you are here, to ask you how much I must pay you for the mere journey from London,

or—you see, Mr. Green, you are altogether different from what I imagined you. And I don't know—"

She broke off, no longer smiling, but with trouble clouding her lovely eyes.

"What I want done is so indefinite. Outside all normal beliefs. Mr. Green, my man Callum—I want you to talk to him. He and Elizabeth have been with me here a very long time, and this—my reason for writing to you, involves a far longer time. Goes almost out of Time, I might say. Callum has great knowledge, strange knowledge. Whether you are capable of believing—" Again she broke off, thoughtfully.

"Most things," he ended for her. "I have learned, especially since I established my agency, not to disbelieve—most things. I wonder—I want you to tell me something, Miss Aylener."

"And that is—?" She gazed full at him as she put the question.

"Looking past you, through the window behind you—it's nearly dark now, so the illusion I get is not so strong. But I got it from the window of my room. As if there were an intermittent darkening of the mist outside, not so much thickening as darkening—shadows. As if, in the mist, shadows are passing, one after another. Is it an illusion?"

Yet again she smiled.

"Your question answers mine, Mr. Green," she said. "It completes my estimate, and I know now I was right to send for you. But I think, if I could answer your question fully, you would not be here to ask it."

CHAPTER II

THE SERVANT OF SHADOWS

FOUR candle-stemmed electric bulbs on the dining table left the upper part of the room in shadow. Callum, the manservant who waited on them, was staid and middle-aged and quite noiseless, a smallish, tight-lipped man, and somehow not like a servant.

"So far, Mr. Green, I have told you nothing," Margaret Aylener said when the meal was nearing its end. "How long can you stay?"

"At the risk of being rude, I must say first that I set a value on my time," he answered. "So far, we have ignored that side."

"You may set what value you will, if you can do what I ask of you," she told him. "Mr. Green, I want you to absorb, for the present—as you are absorbing. To grow into this atmosphere, as I believe more and more that you can. For tonight, say. So that you may not set too small a value on the service I shall ask of you."

"It sounds like wisdom—from my point of view," he said. "If I might ask about something that rather interests me—how do you get electric light in such a place as this, Miss Aylener?"

"Water power," she answered. "My father installed it. Quite a small stream flowing down from the hills to the loch drives a wheel—I do not understand the mechanism, but Callum does."

"There is a real loch, then?" he asked.

"Yes—didn't you see it? But the mist—of course! You can have seen very little."

"The four rowans," he said. "Are they very old?"

"They were as high as the roof when I was a child," she said. "Before them were four others, and after them, if an Aylener is left, will be four more. Always planted in a square, with the sides diagonal to the walls of the house, enclosing it in their limits."

"And the shadows in the mist are kept outside those limits," he said.

Margaret Aylener betrayed no surprise at the remark.

"I hope you are not merely guessing."

"The rowan is the world ash," he answered. "In Cumberland I have seen how it can be a guard against—perhaps against shadows even. Those four trees mark a boundary as effective as a magician's circle, perhaps. Ygdrasil, the world ash—its powers go back through Norse mythology to the beginnings of things. But you said—if an Aylener is left."

"There is only one, a girl, to follow me," she explained.

"Then—forgive me if I trespass where I ought not—if she marries and carries on the succession, the name will pass," he suggested.

"No," she dissented. "If she marries, her husband will take her name. That is understood. You will see her tomorrow. My niece, Helen Aylener. And that is why—"

SHE did not end the sentence, nor did he ask what she would have said. The four trees had told him much, and he was growing into the atmosphere of this place. Almost, now, he could define her need, though what or who had caused it was beyond his knowing. Sight of the niece, perhaps, would bring enlightenment.

And there was Callum, too. One could tell he was a Scot, but an educated one, not like a gillie or a crofter. Black-haired, dark-eyed, he appeared pure Celt, a totally different type from big-boned, Gaelic Elizabeth. Gees divined that Miss Aylener trusted him completely.

"A phrase of yours—the beginning of things," she remarked after a silence. "I wonder—what, to you, that means."

"Science has carried a long way back in recent years," he said. "We know now that history is only a very small part."

"But you do not rely only on modern science?" she asked.

He shook his head. "There are other sources—as I think you know yourself," he answered. "No legend exists without foundation."

"Such as—?"

"Well, the legend of the Cro-Magnon men, for one," he said. "Their coming to western Europe was only a legend for centuries, and then their remains were discovered—enough remains to identify them as altogether different from man of today. A race that was utterly wiped off the face of the earth by the forerunners of our type of man, eighteen thousand years ago. They were—am I boring you though?"

"No—please go on."

"I was going to say they were big men, probably a fair-haired race, and with a reasonably large brain content, but not so big and brainy as to prevent the Azilian-Tardenois race, the ancestors of the dark little Picts, from overcoming and destroying them, when this island of Britain was still joined to the continent and a river ran southward through what is now the Strait of Dover, with the Thames a mere tributary to that main stream. All that was legend, till geology and ethnology proved it."

"The Azilian - Tardenois," Margaret Aylener repeated thoughtfully. She looked at the posed figure of Callum. "Your ancestors, Callum," she said.

"In part, madam," he agreed, and relaxed from his pose to refill Gees' glass. "Not so completely mine as Gamel MacMorn's."

"An odd sounding name, that," Gees observed.

"It is curious that you should refer to the subject which is connected with my asking you to come here, Mr. Green."

"Is it so very curious?"

She shook her head slightly. "Though that, the first great change, is only a very small part of the whole," she said. "And now, before you and I talk fully about what I mean to ask of you, I wish you to talk to Callum, if you will."

"Certainly," he agreed. "Tonight, you mean?"

"If you take your coffee in here, and then join me in the other room. There is not much time, you see."

THEY finished their meal almost in silence, and then he held the door for her and returned to his seat at the table. As he waited, the stillness gathered round him again; the granite walls of the house were thick, he knew, but this utter, oppressive silence was unnatural.

Callum entered with coffee, his dark, still face utterly expressionless.

"We are to talk," Gees said, after a long pause.

"Why, yes," Callum said. "Since it is her wish."

"Not exactly a servant, are you, Callum?" Gees suggested abruptly.

"You see more than most people," Callum retorted.

"Enough to want to see more." Gees took a cigarette from his case and lighted it. "I suggest you sit down and talk as Miss Aylener wishes you to talk. What, exactly, are you?" Gees asked bluntly.

"My family have served Ayleners for a very long time," Callum answered. "Served and guarded them. My father intended me for the medical profession, but the year I passed my finals in Edinburgh my brother died, and so I came to my place here. Happier in it than there."

His sincerity was obvious.

"A fully qualified medical man, eh?" Gees reflected.

"It has its use," Callum pointed out. "But that is not what we were to talk about, I think. Miss Aylener wants you to understand—fully."

"Does Gamel MacMorn come into it?" Gees asked.

"He *is* it," Callum answered. "Spawn of the devil—he is it!"

Momentarily, he let fierce hatred gleam through his impassivity. Gees finished his coffee, and put the cup down.

"Suppose you explain?" he asked calmly.

"I—it goes so far back," Callum said. "Not quite so far as the time out of time you mentioned at dinner. When the first Aryans to overrun Europe drove the Azilian-Tardenois to out-of-the-way corners of the continent such as this, I think Britain was already an island. There were MacMorns then. They go back to the very dawn of things."

"Unpleasantly, I gather," Gees suggested.

"My feelings toward them are beside the point," Callum said. "They were chiefs—priests and kings—from the very first. And they preserved the old wisdom, know and practice it up to today."

"Ah!"

"You know, probably," Callum went on, "that this corner of the earth is still peopled by a branch of the Turanian race, to some extent. There is Gaelic admixture, but you can see Turanian in me, and it is stronger in Gamel MacMorn. Almost pure breed, there, no Gael blood showing. Ayleners are Brythonic—British, that is. They were a strong family, once, and now only two remain."

"And they have been here how long?" Gees asked.

"Since Agricola's wall was built," Callum answered. "There is Gaelic blood in the family, of course—Goidels and Brythons were one race, at first, and Brythons held as far north as the site of Agricola's wall before that wall was built. Ayleners were established here then, and how long before I do not know, and they held on here after the wall was built—held on after the Picts reoccupied Bernicia, and Hadrian's wall was built as the limit of Roman power."

"Where do your MacMorns come in?"

"MacMorns came near to establishing a Pictish kingdom," Callum answered. "If they had had better material to their hands, they might have put an end to Roman rule, even, but the very thing that gave them their power, the practice of the old wisdom, spoiled the cohesion of the Picts.

"It was too bloodthirsty—you cannot rule altogether by fear. And so the power of the MacMorns was not enough—Hadrian's wall held the Picts in spite of MacMorns, and the invasions of the Ulster Ivernians put an end to MacMorn supremacy.

"They dwindled, and Gamel MacMorn today is no more than a small laird here in Brachmornalachan—to the outside world, that is. One thing, Mr. Green. In talking of Picts, I mean true Picts by blood, though the Romans included all the unconquered British races under that name. I do not. The Gaels are not Picts."

Callum became silent.

"And now," Gees suggested, "suppose we ascend from the general to the particular. What have I to do with Gamel MacMorn?"

"I TOLD you," Callum said slowly, that I am a fully qualified medical man, and for that, as you will understand, one has to be sane, materialistic. Very few illusions can survive seven years of medical training, as you can realize.

"But now, coming to the particular, I want to talk of things that would make the average man smile at my credulity, or worse than credulity. Impossible things, in my Edinburgh or your London, because they go back out of time. It was you who credited the Cro-Magnon legend, apparently saw them as a race. And they had a wisdom."

"They had a wisdom," Gees echoed. "The wisdom of Hell."

"MacMorn has it to this day," Callum said.

"Your warrant for that statement?" Gees asked sharply.

"I would say—Miss Helen Aylener," Callum answered.

"Ah! Caught in a web of MacMorn's spinning."

"Now I wonder"—Callum stared hard at him—"was that a chance simile, or did you mean it exactly as you said it?"

"So." Gees spoke again after a long pause. "As I thought when I looked out from the windows. The shadow magic, old as time itself."

"Then you know?" Callum asked. "This is not impossible, to you?"

"I did not know it survived anywhere today," Gees answered. "Nor, as far as that goes, that anyone survived with either the knowledge or the hardihood to practice it. You go so far—do you?—as to allege that MacMorn traffics with shadows?"

"I said, as far as the outside world goes, he is only a small laird here," Callum reminded him. "But among the Daoine Shih he is still a king. And—as you expressed it—he spins webs."

"Orders the spinning," Gees amended, remembering how the shadows had driven across from west to east in the hazy reek.

"You know, then," Callum said thoughtfully.

"Very little," Gees confessed. "There is a clay tablet from the site of Nineveh, which was one of the most evil cities on earth in its time. A papyrus from the Thebaid, and that is no more than a monkish palimpsest which scores out and overlays most of what had been written about the shadow magic—it is no more than a fragment of knowledge.

"A possible picturization on one of the stones near Concarneau, but without the palimpsest and the clay tablet one would attach no importance to it. A few other scraps like these, and taking them all together the average student would call it no more than pretence at a cult, not enough to justify belief in the cult as a thing of any power."

"But you believe—at least you think it may have power?"

"How much do you know?" Gees asked abruptly.

"Less than you, I think," Callum answered frankly. "But I believe."

"He—this MacMorn—he would never dare," Gees said.

"His shadows that you saw—most of them—they are not of today nor of yesterday," Callum declared. "Only, I think, two. He lives nearly halfway round the loch from here, in a bigger house than this. One not so old. But it is built in one of the circles, a very large circle, like the one at Avebury, and three of the stones are standing to this day.

"The others are sunk in the peat, but they are there, and you know how they were erected, with living men buried round them to keep them from falling. And each stone lowered on a living man's chest."

"Thirteen lives to each stone," Gees added.

"And MacMorns built that circle, before there was a Druid ritual," Callum added yet again. "This one, Gamel MacMorn, he dares."

"They call it murder these days."

"Yes," he assented, "but only when they have proof."

"How old is this MacMorn?"

"He was about forty, when I was born."

"Yes, but how old is he now?" Gees persisted.

"About forty, as you see him."

"Which is manifestly impossible," Gees pointed out.

"HE WENT away for a time, and came back as his own son," Callum said. "That, I believe, was the second of the two shadows he added to the old ones. The first was in my father's time. They were both—disappearances, and in both cases he wove a web. There was no proof, nothing to connect him with the disappearances. And each time he went away, and came back as his own son. Which is a monstrous impossibility, as you said. It is all impossible, of course."

"Only those two?" Gees asked thoughtfully.

"I do not know. Nobody knows. Nobody here will speak of it, and away from here it would be no more than a madman's dream. Forty—eighty years ago, for the first of them.

"If there were one before that, it would be about a hundred and twenty years ago, and since they will not talk, who would know? Fear of him would have been stronger then, and their silence about it more complete.

"For all I know, or anyone else knows, this Gamel MacMorn may be the one who took back Bernicia when the Romans built Hadrian's wall. May be the one who raised the standing stones, thirteen lives to a stone, round the site of the house where he lives today. A life for a lifetime, on and on."

"Still a king among the Men of Peace, you said," Gees observed.

"When I think of Them—the general view of Them as pretty little things running about the glens with gauzy wings and all the fairy trickery, I could laugh," Callum said. "That is, if it were not for the nightmare of the reality. Yes, MacMorn is still king among Them."

"By what right—what kinship with Them has he?"

"There was a woman—she may have been of the Azilian-Tardenois people, or later, and all Turanian-Ivernian, even," Callum said slowly. "She was caught and taken among the Men of Peace, and by some one of them bore a daughter who was half of earth and half of middle earth—only half human.

"When Bron or Brun MacMorn—he would be a Brian in these days—when he wanted aid in some one of his attempts at power, that daughter gave it, but only on condition that a son of theirs should succeed him in his place.

"And that son was born and came to Bron's place, and through his mother he kept an ascendancy among the Daoine Shih. Whether he is Gamel, or an ancestor of Gamel's, nobody knows."

"This tale is very old," Gees said thoughtfully.

"Miss Aylener will tell you the rest of it," Callum observed.

"One other thing I want you to tell me," Gees said. "Gamel MacMorn, I gather, is weaving a web to add another life to his, and add one more shadow to those already driven out. Is that the case?"

"Miss Helen Aylener's life," Callum said somberly, "and Miss Helen Aylener's shadow. That is why, as a last chance, Miss Margaret sent for you."

With that he stood up, as if to indicate that he had no more to say. While Gees stared at him, unbelievingly, he spoke again, and the words declared him once more the perfect serving man.

"What time do you wish to be called in the morning, sir?"

CHAPTER III

CAN MAN REFUSE?

ELIZABETH finished making up the peat fire in the drawing room, and went out. As, for a second, she glanced at Gees before passing him on her way to the door, he saw or imagined a relaxation of her features from the grim immobility of his earlier encounter with her, almost as if she had made up her mind to approve of him. The door closed on her, and

his hostess, facing him from the other side of the fireplace, spoke.

"Callum has told you, Mr. Green?"

"Enough," he answered. "I wonder—'Mac' means 'son of.' I wonder—who and when was Morn, the father of all the MacMorns?"

"That is beyond telling, now," she said. "Unless—but no. This must be a son. Even if Callum is right about those renewals of youth."

"What do you think of that, Miss Aylener?" he asked.

"I think—it is all so impossible. Mr. Green"—she spoke with tense earnestness—"I have read and studied—as you see, I am not young, and I have had time to study. The germ plasm in man, that tiny part transmitted from generation to generation to establish heredity. As, I think, you know it does."

"You mean, assuring that the children of man shall be men," he suggested. "Though at one stage the embryo even has gills like a fish, it develops to man before birth, inherits the likeness of its parents."

"More," she said. "In some cases—a few cases—inherits the memories of its parents, until so-called love destroys them. You remember that story of Kipling's—'The Greatest Story Ever Written,' I think he called it. And the story was never written, never told, because the man who might have told it fell in love, and that sorry little love destroyed all his memories of earlier lives, lest greater loves should spoil the little passion that filled his shrunken soul. Love kills memory."

"There is no evidence that the germ plasm carries memory," he said.

She smiled. "Call me evidence," she invited.

"I don't get that, Miss Aylener," he answered. "Unless—"

"What do you think of this place—The Rowans?"

"I think"—he chose his words with care—"it is a garden enclosed, containing one of the loveliest flowers that ever grew in any garden."

She laughed, softly, musically. "An old woman thanks you, Mr. Green. I have wealth, but I sit here, nearing the allotted span of life. Why, do you think? I might have chosen any man I liked, almost."

"Might have chosen one, and lost him."

"No. I am one of those in whom the germ plasm carries memory. I would not spoil that memory, would not lose it, and so I barred out the little loves that might have been for this span of life. What I had was better—is better. Immaterial, yes, but nothing came to displace it."

"Therefore, the end of the line of Ayleners."

"No!" It was a vehement protest. "Even if it had meant that—but no. All I am telling you is that memory *is* transmitted, in some cases, and Gamel MacMorn may be one of them. Or it may be that—forty years, and forty years, and forty years, endlessly."

"As I told Callum, they call that murder these days."

"Yes? Mr. Green, you cannot look back forty years—you are not old enough to look back much more than twenty. But I can. Just think, now. Forty years ago, all that it means. What Brachmornalachan was, then."

"Well?" he asked.

"Forty years ago," she said. "*I* can remember. I was old enough, then, for clear judgment. Ancestral memories, things that had happened to Ayleners long dead—long, long dead—were recreated in me.

"But of that time, forty years ago. As far as Brachmornalachan was concerned, the motor road on which you traveled had not been made, and you would have had to use tracks like the one outside my gate for eighty miles and more before you got here. The nearest railway station was thirty miles away, as it is today. We were a village out of the world. And if a girl—such a girl as my niece Helen—suddenly disappeared, and it was put about that she had a lover somewhere farther south, and had gone to him? Well?"

"I don't know," he said, impressed by her earnestness.

"She was not like my niece Helen," she went on. "She was the sister of the woman who is postmistress here now—her name was Margaret, like mine. Margaret Grallach. The elder sister of Bathsheba Grallach, who keeps the post office here in Brachmornalachan now."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I see. Now, Miss Aylener, if I am to get all this clear—what are *your* memories? What have you of yesterday to tell me?"

"Yesterday first?" She appeared reluctant over it, he thought.

"Decidedly," he assured her. "If I am going into this—if I am to accept the impossible as possible, I must have everything bearing on it."

"There is a doubt in that 'if' of yours," she objected.

"Naturally. In all the other cases I have undertaken, there has been something tangible, something on which I could take hold. Here, it appears, I have to deal with shadows, and no more."

"Shadows," she echoed thoughtfully.

"Forgive me for reminding you—I asked a question," he said.

"Of my yesterdays." She sat silent for a long time. "Of my—yes, my other lives. I feel that I lived them. It may be no more than the germ plasm in me, carrying memory, as it might in you, in anyone, if they had the sight to see. The Scots' second sight, going back instead of forward, and heritage of us Goidelic people who kept to the old ways instead of becoming clothed. Did you know that Briton, or Brython, merely means clothed?"

He nodded with a smile. "If you want to employ me, you must tell me all you know. In fact, all you are. I am doubtful, on what I have so far heard, of helping you at all. And so I want you to tell me—your yesterdays."

SHE shook her head. "If you know anything at all of these things," she said, "you must know that memories of that sort are too fluid, too uncertain, for me to recite them to you as a part of my life. Something of me—something transmitted from generation to generation—*was,* when the circle was raised where Gamel MacMorn's house is now, but I cannot tell you whether Morn himself or a MacMorn raised it. I know that even then I felt the horror of what was done—even in that primal, undeveloped state. Because that ritual was alien from our people—"

She broke off.

The Margaret Aylener of today was withdrawn, and it seemed that some other soul looked out through her beautiful eyes and dreaded the picture they registered in her brain.

Gees asked, "What people?" and with the question broke the spell. She looked at him normally, herself again.

"How can I tell? Except—they came in ships. A dark people, not like us. They brought evil, and fear."

"Masters of the shadow ritual," he suggested.

"Yes. Makers of shadows. A hundred and sixty-nine stones, and thirteen shadows to each stone. Earth-bound, while the stones endure."

"Thirteen times thirteen times thirteen," he reflected. "That number as only a beginning. Then Gamuel MacMorn must be very strong."

"Or what he serves is strong," she amended. "Except that they—the thirteen sacrificed to each stone—were our people, not his."

"It makes no difference—he can control them."

"It makes a great difference. They are forced to submit to the control, different altogether from willing servants. Later ones, like Margaret Grallach, may be willing, devoted—I do not know if they are. But they may be.

"And what he serves—his people created it, just as Koré-worship created Koré, who became Persephone of the Greeks, wife of the Unseen One, and survives to this day through the evil of such men as Gamel MacMorn.

"Mass thought created her, just as it created Odin and Thor and Tyr and

Freya, and all the gods of the Norse mythology who seemed to die when Christianity destroyed that older worship. It is part of the hidden purpose of God that He permits men to create their own devils by mass thought, mass belief in the power of evil. They *make* it powerful."

"To what end?"

"The devil took Him into a high place and showed Him all the kingdoms of the earth: Fall down and worship me, and they are yours," she said slowly. "MacMorn chose as his kingdom length of days, renewal of vitality again and again and yet again, paying a life for each renewal."

"Or did he?" Gees asked. "All this is the wildest fantasy. What proof have you of anything you have said about him?"

"None," she confessed. "I may be a mind-sick old woman, hating a quite normal man who lives on the other side of the loch. Do you think that of me?"

"I don't know what to think," he answered frankly. "I have been here just a few hours, and all I have seen has been mist driving in waves. There is a perfectly commonplace explanation for that, and I may have imagined that I saw shadows.

"Then you—your man Callum first, and then you—try to make me believe that a man lives today with not only the knowledge that was cursed before history began, but the Seventh-Hell evil and cruelty to practice what that knowledge makes possible—"

"*You* have the knowledge."

"No," he denied. "All I know—all I believed that any man knows—is that it existed. Gilles de Rais tried to re-discover it, voodoo-worshipers and modern followers of black magic try to unearth the ritual, just as the Druids soaked altars in blood in the attempt.

"Thousands on thousands of lives have been taken, and now you say a man lives in this out-of-the-way spot who knows enough to summon Koré—or even Typhon himself, perhaps. A maker of shadows, today?"

"But not *of* today," she said. "Either in himself, or by transmitted memory, old and old and old. Of the beginning of things."

"And you want—?"

"Your help to save my niece from Gamel MacMorn," she answered.

"And how do you know she needs saving? She is not even here."

"I WILL tell you. Her mother—my sister—was named Helen too. She came here for this Helen to be born, and died at the child's birth. Died gladly, I think. We—I never learned who was this Helen's father. That too you must know. It has a bearing on the girl's danger."

"A very definite bearing, if all the rest you have told me should happen to be true," he agreed. "Sorry—I'm listening."

"And convincing me that you know more of the shadow magic than you will admit," she said with a smile. "But—Helen. I had no other interest. My sister and I had been very near each other, until she went away and—and *that* happened.

"All that I had I gave and still give to this daughter of the sister I loved. She does not value it, but lives in a different world from mine. We pre-war survivals do not know their world.

"Perhaps I ought to have been stricter with her, but it seems to me now that nothing would have made any difference. Just two years ago, staying with friends in Edinburgh, she met a clever young engineer, Ian Kyrle, of Kyrle and Farquhar, the bridge builders. Eighteen months ago, they became engaged, and I invited him to stay here. I have no doubt that those two love each other, but then, while he was staying here, they met Gamel MacMorn—"

"You don't mean she had not met MacMorn before then?" he interposed.

"Certainly not. She knew him, slightly—we have very little to do with him, as you may guess, since I know what I do know. But they—she and Ian—became almost intimate with MacMorn. For one thing, Ian was interested in the three

stones that still stand, all that are left upright of the ring round MacMorn's house.

"You know, probably, that modern man cannot tell how those stones were poised, sometimes actually on their pointed ends, but so accurately that they remained upright for thousands of years. That for one thing, and then MacMorn can be fascinating when he likes.

"He *did* like. Invited those two into his house—I have never stepped over the threshold, and never will. I tried to warn them both, but all you and I have talked of tonight is mere childish folly to them. She laughs at it, and Ian laughs with her."

"Why not, if they are really in love with each other?" he asked.

"Because Gamel MacMorn has cast the thread," she answered. "I think you know what that means, without my telling."

"Yes, but how do you know he has?" he demanded sceptically.

"At times, I have the sight, Mr. Green," she said gravely, "and once I saw it. A faint, thin, wavering line, going out from her breast—and MacMorn holds the other end of that thread. Because life is what it is today—because there would be inquiry, trouble for him if he were not very careful, he waits his time to draw in the thread. You may be the only man who might be able to cut that thread without injury to her reason."

"If—*if* this is true, I never yet heard of more than one way of cutting that thread, and that way involves the destruction of the one who holds the thread and leaving it intact, to wither of itself. One other thing. What is MacMorn like?"

"PHYSICALLY, not unlike Callum, but darker. One of those who came to this country in the ships, with very white skin and very dark hair and eyes. Like a man who lives in the dark. There is no subject on which he cannot talk with knowledge, I think, and if you met him you would find him perfectly charming. I think you will meet him."

He shook his head, and said, "Impossible."

"You must! You cannot refuse."

"I cannot do otherwise," he insisted in turn. "Think over what you have told me—what you know Callum has told me—and what is the sum of it? Two thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven shadows! Nothings.

"Lives that went to the raising of a circle of monoliths so long ago as to be almost out of time. A girl or woman who chose to run away somewhere, forty years ago. A man with a rather odd sort of name who lives not far from here, and who was rather interested in an engaged couple. That couple, rather wrapped up in each other, modern enough in their outlook to regard old legend as no more than legend.

"Then think what you have asked me, and what is the sum of that? Simply that I should kill or in some way bring about the death of a man named Gamel MacMorn. For there is no other way of doing what you ask, if I credit the fantasy you have built up for me and call it truth.

"I repeat—there is no other way, if the thread that is the beginning of shadow magic stretches between MacMorn and your niece. While they both live, it cannot be broken."

"It is no fantasy, but truth" she averred.

"Then, short of murder, what could I or anyone do?" he asked. "However much I might wish to kill this Gamel MacMorn, I should hang if I did it. Get your niece to marry this Ian Kyrle at once, and keep them away from here. Keep her away from here, beyond his reach—MacMorn's."

"You know, as I know, that he could draw her back by that thread from any place on earth," she said, and for the first time he heard a harsh note in her voice. "Yet"—she softened again—"I see I cannot quarrel with your decision. I was foolish to hope—that there might have been some way—"

"I'm desperately sorry to be so futile," he told her.

"It is very late." She stood up. "In spite of what you say, you must be tired, and I have kept you talking a very long time. I accept your decision, Mr. Green, and you must tell me tomorrow what I owe you for this wasted time of yours."

"Nothing—it has been a pleasure to meet you," he declared.

"I should like you to meet my niece too. Can you stay till tomorrow afternoon—or till the next day, if you wish?"

"Yes, thank you—till the day after tomorrow. I've not even seen this place yet, thanks to the mist."

"I'll wish you a clear day tomorrow. Goodnight, Mr. Green."

When he switched off the light in his room and looked out from the window before turning in, he saw stars in a clear, moonless sky. No mist remained, nor, to his sight, did any shadows drive on the whispering night wind.

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN THE HAUNTED CIRCLE

A THIRD servant waited on him when Gees breakfasted alone the next morning, a girl in her twenties whom Elizabeth called Ettie. She told him that Miss Aylener would not be down.

Miss Aylener's staff was oddly competent for a place like this. Thirty miles from a railway station, and well off the tourist beat, Brachmornalachan was an archaism.

After breakfast, with his hostess still invisible, Gees went out to survey his surroundings. All the mist of the day before had vanished. There was sunlight, but so pale and heatless that it was more like early February than May. The air had that intense clarity that comes after rain, and hill crests in the remotest distances cut the skyline with etched distinctness.

Standing under the rowan in front of the house, Gees saw the track, by which he had come, winding away to eastward, descending gently to the level of a small lake. On its edge were seven cottages, and a stone-built post office. Three more cottages dotted the expanse near the loch, and, quite by itself, almost directly across it, a squat, solid stone house backed against the hillside. Equidistant from the house stood three monoliths, all that were left of the prehistoric circle of stones that had once stood to mark a place of assembly or of worship.

Gamel MacMorn's house.

With the stones, and a few protuberances from the peaty soil to mark where others had stood, it was evident that it stood in the center of the ancient circle, and had been built over the altar that had once occupied its site. The house itself looked more like a prison than an ordinary house.

At its eastern end there was a tree which, viewed from this distance, looked like nothing so much as a red umbrella, and Gees knew he was looking at a scarlet-blossoming thorn tree in full flower. In its way, it was as emblematic as were the four rowans guarding this house of Margaret Aylener's. Except for those five, there were no trees anywhere in the lower levels of this saucerlike valley.

Nowhere outside the garden of the Rowans was there any cultivation, and what the occupants of the scattered cottages did for a living was something that Gees never learned.

THE door of the Rowans opened and Margaret Aylener came out to smile at Gees and to hope he had slept well.

"Never better. You too, I hope."

"No," she said. "I had dreams. Perhaps we wakened too many things, last night. It is not good even to talk of them."

"Incredible, in daylight," he remarked. "Just as this is an incredible place. Do you know, Miss Aylener, I can't see why either you or that man over there"—he pointed at the house beyond the loch—"go on living here."

"Neither of us lives here all the time," she said, and again smiled. "He is often away for long periods, I know, and I—you would be surprised if I told you how

many places I have visited in the last ten years. But Brachmornalachan calls one back—that is, if one has been born here as I was. To me, the Rowans is like —like the thread that is the beginning of shadow magic, with someone at the far end to wind it in."

"I think we'll forget about that shadow magic, for today," he suggested. "It doesn't fit with the sunshine. I think I've seldom seen air so marvelously clear as this. That tree over there, like a red mushroom—it might be near enough for me to touch it."

"You see it—like that?"

"All the distances appear lessened," he answered evasively. "No, it isn't the sight you mean. I'm not fey to any devil who might force that sight on me. Just that the day is almost abnormally clear, and that is a remarkably fine thorn tree."

"It should be," she said, with bitter emphasis. "The ground in which it is rooted has been redder than those blossoms."

"You are harking back. I told you last night—" He broke off, unwilling to repeat his refusal of what she had asked.

"Is that to be wondered at? With the very last of us Ayleners, threatened— But you said—what you have said. I am not trying to persuade you. Mr. Green, I want some stamps—will you walk with me as far as the post office?"

They set off, and she walked beside him as if she had been a girl of twenty, not a woman nearly twice his age.

They entered the post office and general store, and Gees ducked to avoid striking his head against a brown-paper-wrapped ham pendent from the ceiling. Bathsheba Grallach faced them across the counter. The postmistress exuded cordiality as she leaned across her counter toward them. Margaret Aylener was his passport, he divined.

"A braw day, Miss Margaret," said she cheerfully.

"A change from yesterday," said Margaret. "I want twenty-four three-halfpenny stamps, please, and twelve pennies."

"And I want that ham," Gees added.

"Twenty-five shillin'," said the postmistress, unmovedly, "but I'll sairve the leddy first." She counted off the stamps.

Margaret Aylener turned to Gees. "What do you want with a ham?" she demanded, amusement dancing in her eyes. "You're not hungry, surely?"

"I'm going to take it back," he said, "and cook it on a gas ring in my flat. Then, when I get back late o' nights, I'm going to carve slices off it, and eat, and say 'Brachmornalachan' to myself and pretend I get the real native accent on the word. The ham may help with it."

He put down on the counter a pound note and two half-crowns. Margaret Aylener paid for her stamps, and the postmistress came out from behind her counter and took down the ham, which she handed to Gees as if it were a priceless treasure. He took it with equal reverence.

"Danish," she said. "I'd hated to cut it, but it's gey unlikely I'd've sold it whole. Unless—" she glanced at Margaret Aylener, and went silent, and Gees felt he knew the end of that sentence.

"I suppose not many of your customers want a whole ham," he said.

"Aye, ye're right," she answered. "Ye'll find it a good ham."

"I'm sure I shall." He gazed full into her dark-brown, almost black eyes, and did not like her. "If there is one thing in the state of Denmark that is not rotten, it is ham."

When they left the store, Gees fell silent, until, "If I were you, I wouldn't trust that woman, Miss Aylener," he said, after they had got halfway to the gate of the Rowans.

"I have known her most of my life," she retorted stiffly. "And her sister—why should I not trust her?"

"Maybe it was impertinent of me," he admitted. "It was that her aura and mine clash, probably. Do you keep a car?"

"I do," she answered. "Why—what made you ask?"

"One other set of wheel marks, in addition to mine."

"There should be another, soon," she

said. "Helen is arriving in time for lunch, and Ian is driving her."

"Long engagement, isn't it?" he said suddenly.

"They are being married the first week in June," she told him. "He wanted to wait until he became a partner in his firm."

He reflected that it was eighteen months since the girl had become friendly with MacMorn. And now just as she was about to marry, Margaret Aylener had yielded to her fear for the girl so far as to send for him. Why had she waited so long?

It was not his affair, though: none of it was, he told himself.

AT THE entrance to the house, he drew back after opening the door, "If you don't mind, I'll go and put my ham in the car, and then walk down to the water."

When he entered the stable he saw a sturdy old car beside his, a twenty horsepower coupé on a short chassis which, he knew, had a high power ratio. He noted that his own car had been thoroughly cleaned and polished.

With the ham—an absurd purchase, as he realized now—safely locked away, he returned down the granite drive and turned left at the gate.

Less than ten minutes' walk brought him to the spongy, sodden edge of the loch, and, keeping away to the left, he circled it toward the big, rambling house of Gamel MacMorn. Although he had refused to aid Margaret Aylener, he was curious about MacMorn. He wanted, too, to make certain whether MacMorn's house stood quite in the center of the ancient circle, over whatever altar had once existed there, as the circle declared it had.

It was no affair of his, of course. Mere curiosity. . . .

One of the three stones yet standing, a mighty pillar of gray weathered rock fully twenty feet in height, was set about fifty yards from the loch, and Gees turned toward it.

A protuberance at its top showed that it had been tenoned to bind in the mortise of a crosspiece, and, since there was but the one tenon in the middle of the stone, it had probably been one side of a gate.

Turning to get the angle of the sun, *Gees saw that, as nearly as he could tell,* this stone was at the extreme southern limit of the circle. Facing about again, he looked at his watch and saw that by solar time it was now just eleven.

At noon, his shadow would point from this spot directly toward the doorway in the middle of MacMoran's grounds. Therefore the house *was* on the line which would lie across the ancient altar.

Then the stone itself.

High up, within two or three feet of the top, were faint lines which centuries of weathering had not quite erased. Enough was left to convince Gees that they were not runic characters, which he could read with a fair amount of ease. Nor did they correspond to lettering of any alphabet he knew or had ever seen.

Studying them till his neck ached, he realized that a group of the lines toward the right edge of the pillar made a symbol, so crudely executed that he had not at first recognized it. He had met it only once before, far more precise on a pre-Roman piece of sculpture in North Africa; and it had been pointed out as the sign of Koré, forerunner of Persephone, queen of Hades.

If that symbol had been put there to testify to the belief held by the worshippers of the shrine, then the Druids and their ritual were mere modernities by comparison. Then he was standing at the edge of a circle in which had been practiced one of the vilest and most bestial, as well as one of the oldest, cults of this earth. He drew back from the ground of which this pillar marked a limit, and, as he did so, realized anew that MacMorn did not fear to live in a house within the circle.

CHAPTER V

THE NOONDAY SHADOW

EXCEPT for that symbol, Gees could make nothing of the inscription. Careful to keep outside the circle, he went on.

He counted a dozen or so low mounds marking where fallen pillars lay buried in the soil, and followed their curving line until he was in sight of the eastern end of MacMorn's house.

He saw that its windows were even smaller than they had appeared at a distance. Those six in the frontage, on the ground floor, were hardly big enough for a man like himself to crawl through, and in the eastern end of the structure were no windows at all, though it extended back a good thirty feet. The six first-floor windows were rather larger; in the rooms of the ground floor, though, must be a stifling gloom.

Another monolith topped by a single tenon reared up to mark another gateway, that of the north-eastern extremity of the circle, through which the first ray of the rising sun would strike at midsummer, just as at Stonehenge.

Here, though, was no sign that a stone had ever been raised outside the circle to cast the shadow of the rising sun toward the central altar. The devotees of Koré had fashioned their shadows in other ways, Gees knew. Nor, when he stood beside the stone and looked up at its outer surface—for he would not enter the circle—could he see any trace of such an inscription as its southern fellow bore.

Either it had not been carved at all, or else the weathering of thousands of years had erased all marks. The single tenon indicated that it was a gateway pillar, as did its position in relation to the center of the circle.

"You are interested in archaeology?"

A second before the words were spoken, Gees would have sworn that he had been alone. His spine crinkled with a sense of the uncanny rather than with fear as he gazed at the man who had stepped out from beyond the stone to face him.

A man about six inches short of his own height, with black hair and—yes, fully black eyes, those abnormalities in which the iris is so dark as to be indistinguishable from the pupil, and with bloodless, almost chalky white skin.

As Margaret Aylener had said, one who looked as if he lived always in the dark. He appeared to be about Gees' own age, or at most only a few years older, and his voice was cultured and friendly.

"Very," Gees answered, as soon as he could trust his own voice. "Especially in a circle as old as this. I hope I am not trespassing in walking round it. You are Mr. MacMorn?"

"I am. That is so. And you are not trespassing, Mr.—?"

Gees supplied: "Green."

"Mr. Green—yes," said MacMorn, courteously. "I am happy to welcome a fellow enthusiast. Though I am but an amateur dabbler, myself, and very little remains above ground here for study. Practically nothing, in fact. What lies underground, of course, I do not know."

"Under the roots of that thorn tree, for instance."

"Why?" MacMorn asked, with a sort of innocent interest. "What difference would there be between that spot and any other?"

"For one thing, abnormal fertility of soil, compared with that about it," Gees pointed out. "Quite abnormal fertility."

"I suppose it is, though I should never have thought of that if you had not noticed it." MacMorn met his gaze steadily. "You are staying here?"

"With Miss Aylener." Gees saw a change in the expression of those intense, strangely black eyes. For a moment they appeared to be specked with dots of fire, and then as MacMorn spoke they softened again.

"Ah! My charming neighbor," he said. "Not that we see much of each other. I am so often away, and so is she. Why—"

HE BROKE off. A coal black goat had come galloping from the back of the house toward the edge of the circle of fallen stones, and, following it, ran a kilted, wild-looking being with long, shaggy black hair flying back about his ears. A murderous knife was clutched in his hand.

The goat was giving little bleats of

terror—and was increasing its lead when it came to the edge of the circle.

There, although it faced open plain, it recoiled abruptly as if it had butted into a solid stone wall, and staggered back as if dazed. The kilted man hurled himself on the animal, knocking it off its feet, and Gees' breath hissed out as he saw the shining blade lifted to kill.

But MacMorn interposed with a shout which to Gees was utterly unintelligible, except for the first two syllables, "Partha!"

The kilted man got on his feet, and lifted the goat by its horns so that it stood passive and trembling in his hold, and began its bleating again. Then the would-be slayer turned back toward the house, dragging the animal along beside him by its horns.

"We kill our own meat," MacMorn said in explanation.

"And fence it in till killing time," Gees observed.

Again for a moment there were fiery dots in MacMorn's eyes. "Fence it in?" he echoed, with all the appearance of innocence. "There is no fence."

"The goat imagined one," Gees remarked gravely.

"Stumbled, and gave Partha time to reach him," MacMorn said. "And I told him in Gaelic to take the goat back, not slaughter it there."

"Yes," Gees said, "the blood would have been wasted—there."

It was MacMorn's turn to draw his breath hissing between his teeth. "We have no use for it," he said, "but—this soil breeds flies."

"Of course you have no use for it."

"I am sorry," MacMorn said gravely. "The sight of slaughter, or of attempted slaughter is always unpleasant."

"A sort of instinct that the victim hasn't a fair chance," Gees remarked. "I once saw a black goat like that sacrified to the Daughter."

"I don't know what you are talking about," MacMorn said coldly. "There is no analogy between killing for food and sacrifice."

"No, of course not. The influence of this circle and the hidden altar in its center set me thinking about it, I expect. I'm rather sensitive to influences, and this place to me reeks of—dark people."

He made a little pause before uttering the last two words. MacMorn, quite unmoved, smiled slightly and shook his head.

"You appear conversant with many old superstitions, Mr. Green," he said, "and I am inclined to envy you your knowledge. Yet, if I were you, I would not stay long in Brachmornalachan. It might be dangerous."

"DANGEROUS?" Gees echoed the word with an effectation of incredulity, even of lack of comprehension. "How could that be?"

"If one is—not exactly credulous, but inclined to believe old fables as you seem to be, one sometimes gets—well, carried away by them. Especially in places like this."

"Held, one might say, by a thread," Gees suggested.

"Held by a thread, as you say," MacMorn agreed calmly. And for a third time his eyes held sparks of flame.

"Yes . . . Hullo! There are Miss Aylener's visitors." He pointed across the loch at a low-slung, small sports car headed toward The Rowans. "Glad to have had a chance to talk with you, Mr. MacMorn, but I mustn't be late for lunch. Excuse me, won't you?"

"Only too pleased," MacMorn assured him smoothly—and ambiguously. "But don't forget my warning—you are much too sensitive to influences to remain in a place like this. Goodbye, Mr. Green."

Gees went thoughtfully back by the brink of the loch. MacMorn's eyes, the rarity of a coal-black goat, the language—*not* Gaelic, whatever it might be—in which MacMorn had shouted the command to his man Partha, the way in which he had circled to keep himself concealed behind the monolith while Gees approached it, and the sincerity and obvious threat of his warning—plenty to think about.

Partha, evidently, had let his thirst for blood master him, and MacMorn had stopped him, just in time, from robbing the Daughter of the sacrifice which must be offered on her altar—

Offered simultaneously with the arrival of Helen Aylener? . . . Or was it all fantasy?

MacMorn had been courteous, almost friendly. The goat might have stumbled, as he had said. Partha, the shaggy herdsman, might have been only slaughtering a beast for meat. And those mere scratches on the pillar of the southern gateway might mean nothing at all. The circle might be only slightly pre-Druidic. . . .

Why should he puzzle over it? He had declined to do anything at all, and tomorrow he'd be on his way back to London.

CHAPTER VI

BLOOD IN THE MIST

AT THE sound of Gees' approach, the two young occupants of the car looked up to greet him. One was a tall man with brown eyes and dark hair and a finely-cut, aristocratic-looking face; the girl was like enough to Margaret Aylener to show the relationship, but she lacked the rare beauty of the older woman.

"You are Mr. Green," she said. "I'm Helen Aylener. I've heard about you already. Do you know anything about carburetors?"

"Twins," the young man beside her put in. "My name's Kyrle, and I expect you've heard about me."

Gees smiled. "Indeed I have."

"I've always believed the other one ought to be drowned, when there are twins," the girl said.

"Give him a chance to answer what you asked," Kyrle urged. "Besides, you don't know which is the other one, in this case."

"They they ought both to be drowned," she declared. "But do you, Mr. Green? Because this pair has stumped us. Stumped him."

"I believe the connecting rod has shrunk," Kyrle asserted.

"*Now* who won't give him a chance to answer?"

Gees went round by the radiator. Kyrle rubbed his nose thoughtfully, and left a black smudge on it, while the girl took a cigarette case out of his pocket, snapped it open, and offered it to Gees, who shook his head.

"Not just now, thank you," he said. "The trouble, I take it, is uneven firing. It'll be inside one or other of the carburetors, or both. You can see for yourself there's no adjustment on that rod."

"We've had both carburetors down to their inmost innards, Mr. Green. She began traveling like an inebriated cow almost as soon as we left Joppa this morning, and we've stopped three times and tried to get the—what he called them—right. I won't tell you what he called them, but it's what they are."

"Ignition?" Gees asked.

"Like a song of angels, to mortals given," Kyrle half-chanted. "That is, perfectly sweet and no fault whatever there."

"I'll start her up." The girl swung up a long leg and stepped behind the wheel. "Then you can hear for yourself. *He* thinks he's an engineer, too!"

"Structural, nothing to do with—" Kyrle began a protest, but the whir of the starter and then a roar as the engine picked up drowned the rest of it. The girl took her foot off the accelerator, and a sort of *cockety-cock* noise indicated trouble of some sort. Gees held up his hand, and she switched off and got out again.

"I knew he was a good scout, Twister," she said. "You're a dud. Now tell us what's wrong, Mr. Green, and how to put it right."

Without speaking, Gees turned to the tool roll laid out on the running board. Presently he was tinkering happily with as haphazard a collection of innards he had ever seen on any machine.

He turned to Kyrle.

"Have you had it decarbonized lately?"

"Took it back yesterday," Kyrle answered, and wiped another black smudge on to his nose.

"We'd better tighten these bolts then," Gees said.

With smoke pouring from his nostrils, Kyrle obeyed.

"What did you say your car was?" Helen asked.

"I didn't, but it's a Rolls-Bentley," Gees answered her.

"Then there *is* that amount of money in the world." Kyrle grunted again. "This is a scrap-heap composite, my own design."

"You needn't shout the obvious," Helen said. She turned to Gees with a smile that made her brilliantly attractive. "You know, we're both quite mad," she told him. "If you think it's drink, you're wrong."

"If I were you," Gees said, "I'd pull down one or two of the front nuts and then come back to the middle. You'll tighten it more evenly. And then a final pull-down all round before trying it."

"I might have thought of that for myself." Kyrle attacked one of the pair of nuts at the front end as he spoke.

"He's structural, not mechanical," Helen remarked gravely. "The structure's got a slant in it this morning—commonly called a hangover. That's why he doesn't think for himself."

Straightening up for a rest, Kyrle passed the back of his hand over his brow and left a black and oily streak there. "My child, you wait till we're married," he said softly. "Wife-beating runs in my family."

"Will you never stop boasting about your ancestors?" she asked. "I hate snobbery."

"Suppose you get inside instead of being rude, and fiddle with the starter?"

She got in and seated herself at the wheel again. Kyrle stood back. She pressed in the starter. The engine sputtered as it picked up, then steadied to a purr, and Kyrle grinned at Gees.

Helen switched off the engine and got out of the car. "We're really grateful to you. Come inside and have a quick one before lunch?"

"If I make a third on that, there ought to be time for a wash and then another nip," Kyrle said, "and I'll drink your health both times, Mr. Green."

"Make it Gees."

"Well, Gees, I'm Twister—*caught it* off my real name at prep school, and it's stuck ever since. Helen is just Helen unless I get really irritated with her, and then I call her Blazes."

"How did you know those nuts needed tightening?" Helen asked.

"I didn't," Gees answered, "but I could see along the edge of the gasket that whatever composition had been put on to make a joint had not quite dried, and guessed it had been off recently for decarbonizing. And it seemed worth while to try whether the nuts had been pulled down."

"Sherlock Gees," she observed. "And he's Structural Watson."

Kyrle opened the door and stood back for her to enter first.

She led the way to the dining room sideboard, and there drew forward a decanter and syphon and two glasses.

Helen poured liberally. "Here's to Gees, gasket-gluer," she toasted.

Kyrle gulped his liquor down. "Helen, do you remember that drink that old MacMorn mixed us?"

"COULD I ever forget it?" she answered. "He took two bottles and each had something in it as clear as colorless as water, and mixed us drinks, fifty-fifty out of each bottle. And as soon as he poured out of the second bottle, the mixture fizzed like champagne and then turned brilliant crimson. But it tasted like—like heaven in bottles. Old vintage heaven, too."

"I know a little about chemical compounds, but I don't know any mixture of two water-white fluids that turns red," Kyrle put in. "It did, though, just as Helen says. Have you any idea what it was?"

Gees shook his head. "It's a new one on me," he said. "What was the flavor?"

"Undiluted joy—wasn't it, Helen? Indescribable."

"Quite," she agreed. 'Like nothing else. I've never felt quite the same since I had that drink, and often and often I find myself wanting another one like it. I wonder how he—Twister, if you don't go and scrub yourself, I'll squirt soda water over you."

"P'raps you're right." He drained his glass and went out.

"Sometimes I think he's too good for me," she said.

"Then he must be very good."

"When we first met," she pursued, "I knew I was much too good for him, but now I love him terribly. Aunt Marge told me about you before we went out to doctor the engine. Told me she actually got you to come here because of her bee. It is a bee, you know—nothing else."

"I don't know anything," he said.

"It takes a wise man to say that. She told me you're going back tomorrow, too. I don't see what else you could do. I know Gamel's got a face like death warmed up, but he's a kind soul when you get to know him, and he is terribly —well, exciting. Twister likes him, too. But Aunt Marge has had that bee ever since I was old enough to remember."

"What did she tell you about my coming here?" Gees asked.

"That she wanted you to investigate Gamel and see if there was anything in what she thinks about him. I've tried time and again to persuade her it's a racial feud, born in the blood of both of them."

"Did you mean what you said about wanting another of his drinks, and remembering it and not feeling the same after it?" he asked.

"Well—yes, I did." She gazed at him dubiously. "Why—have you been stung by Aunt Marge's bee?"

"I told you, I don't know anything," he answered, "and you know already that I'm going back to London tomorrow. Therefore."

"Buzz-z-z!" she mocked. "And here's my little playmate all unsmirched again! Twister, you shall mix your own as a reward."

Kyrle said: "I was wondering whether we could go over and see MacMorn this afternoon," he remarked.

"I'll tell her you feel like stretching your legs while she rests," Helen suggested. "Otherwise—well, I could hardly go and call on a single gentleman of uncertain age after you've gone, could I? It will be my only chance while I'm here, and even if you don't start back before six, you can make Edinburgh in time to get up tomorrow morning."

"Care to come over with us, Gees, while Helen's Aunt Margaret has her siesta? MacMorn's very interesting."

"I'd be delighted," Gees said. He wanted to see no more of MacMorn, but if these two meant to visit the man, an uninfluenced third party with them would be all to the good.

GEES didn't tell them he had already met MacMorn. He had an impression that the girl's apparent frankness and disregard of her aunt's belief covered away something altogether different. Fear, perhaps. . . .

"This place acts on you, Helen," Kyrle said abruptly. She grinned at him impishly. "It does," he insisted. "As soon as we get here—I noticed it last time—you bottle up some sort of excitement inside you. You're different, whether you realize it—"

"Don't be a fool, my fool," she said, and, blowing a kiss at Kyrle, went out. Gees put down his empty glass and looked at his watch as he followed Kyrle toward the door.

"Miss Aylener's told us, you know," Kyrle observed abruptly.

"That's more comprehensive than enlightening, as a statement," Gees said.

"Do you believe any of it?" Kyrle asked —rather uneasily.

"Do you?" Gees asked in reply. They had halted, facing each other.

"NOT till I get here," Kyrle answered. "When I'm at the works, it feels like foolishness, all childish tales. I mean, that anyone could work magic in these

days. I don't know what sort of magic, or anything about it, but she—Miss Aylener—warned me to keep Helen away from this man MacMorn, because he's got occult powers. I've never believed in occult powers. You can find a rational explanation for most things."

"But now—?" Gees asked, and waited.

"What do you mean by that?" Kyrle demanded.

"If you had felt quite as sure of your rational explanation for anything Miss Aylener thought worth a warning, you wouldn't have asked me whether I believed in—anything she may have told you."

"It's Helen." Kyrle let his anxiety appear in his tone. "Ever since that first time we went to see MacMorn, she's been—different. You know, I'd already heard of you. That Kestwell case you figured in. And now I meet you I can see you're a good scout, and don't mind telling you Helen means everything to me. And since that day something of her has been withdrawn. As if something, somebody or—I don't say it's MacMorn—but as if some part of her were held away, imprisoned, almost. It won't go into words. Unless you can sense what I mean, I can't make it clear. Absolutely intangible—the merest shadow—"

"Are you sure it's not you who've changed?" Gees asked.

"I? Good Lord, no! Except—I suppose it's thinking about her—I don't sleep so well, and I get dreams. About her—as if something whispered to me about her. The oddest fancies. Unreal people, shadows of people, whispering at me in the night.

"Ridiculous, of course, but you know how things exaggerate in sleep. I even saw a doctor, and he prescribed for liver. It helped for a night or two, or I thought it did, and then they came back."

"Who came back?" Gees persisted.

"The whispering things. And yet it wasn't whispering—it isn't whispering, but as if they thought at the inner me, not in speech at all. Again I can't explain that any better, but always it's as if I ought to go to Helen, hold her back from—from the things that whisper at me themselves. I could disregard it at first and think it *was* liver, but it goes on. You must think me an ass, unless—"

Gees made no reply. As he had told Margaret Aylener, he could do nothing, even if he believed all that she had told him.

"Unless you believe what she believes," Kyrle added. "Common sense tells me there's nothing in it, and so I wondered if you—" Again he broke off, seeking encouragement from Gees' face and not finding it.

"Have you told her—Helen—any of this?" Gees asked.

Kyrle shook his head. "I couldn't. It won't go into words with her. I know she ridicules anything of the sort, and even more so since we met MacMorn. This place—this *damned* place! Not The Rowans, but Brachmornalachan. Have you ever been at Glencoe?"

"Driven through it, once," Gees answered.

"Drive through it by night, and stop there for a few minutes to feel it—then you'll know what I mean about this place. Not what's ordinarily known as haunting, but the influence of the evil done there surviving to color one's thoughts. Oppressing—closing in on you—shadows of people. I felt that in the pass of Glencoe, at night. Imagination, knowledge of what had been done there, perhaps."

He shook his shoulders and, smiling, moved toward the drawing room.

"We ought to go and talk to Miss Aylener, if she's come down again yet," he said in a lighter tone. "Otherwise, she'll wonder what we two have been doing with you. You're going back tomorrow, I know, and it's no real use my telling you all this. But"—he paused, grasping the handle of the door—"I just wondered if you believed any of it, and even now you've not told me whether you do or no."

"Since I'm going back, it makes no difference," Gees said.

Kyrle, opening the door, stood back for Gees to enter.

Margaret Aylener looked up at them. "So you have got to know each other," she said. "This afternoon, Ian, I am foregoing my usual rest to discuss things with you. The last opportunity before your marriage, you know. Mr. Green, I hope you will excuse us till tea time—my niece can look after you."

"I shall be glad to fit in with anything you wish," he said.

"Take her for that walk we were talking about," Kyrle suggested. "She can show you all the sights, and you can get back for tea."

BY THE time Gees set out with Helen, leaving Margaret and Kyrle in the dining room with a businesslike portfolio she had brought in, the sun had disappeared, and the hills that had loomed so clear and near in the morning had receded, become hazed and dim. They went the way Gees had gone in the morning, the girl silent and, it appeared to him, hurrying along by the brink of the loch. She kept a pace or so ahead of him, as if eager to reach their destination rather than to make a walk of it.

"Good fishing in this water?" he asked, for the sake of something to say, when they had come to where he had turned aside from the loch to inspect the southern monolith that still stood.

"Good—I'm sorry." She slackened pace for him to come level with her. "I'm afraid I was day-dreaming. I think—yes. Pike, I believe, and small fresh water fish. Not that I've ever tried." She inclined away from the water, toward the monolith. "Pike are horrible, don't you think?"

They reached the standing stone, and passed within the circle. Unseen by the girl who was hurrying again, Gees crossed himself. It could do no harm, even if it could do no good.

"I'm sorry Kyrle couldn't come with us," he said.

"Yes." She sounded abstracted over it. "But he's got to—my aunt wanted him to drive me up here so she could have this talk with him."

Such a reek as had developed to fog the day before chilled the air about them, and the distant hills grew less distinct. Presently the frontage of MacMorn's house masked the horizon, and the red-flowering thorn away to their right shone like a great live coal. They faced the main entrance, and Helen lifted the heavy knocker and thudded three times.

"He told us—Mr. MacMorn told us, when we came here before—there is not a scrap of iron in the construction of the house," she said as they waited. "All the metal is copper and bronze. Oak rots iron or steel, he said, and there is none anywhere about the place."

Gees remembered that the knife he had seen the man Partha lift over the goat had had a yellowish sheen.

The door swung inward silently, and a black-attired, black-haired, respectable-looking serving man faced them.

"Mr. MacMorn?" Helen asked.

"Mr. MacMorn is not at home, madam."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Will you tell him we called? Miss Aylener and Mr. Green."

"Yes, madam." He inclined his head toward her as he spoke.

"Thank you. Nothing else—just that we called."

She turned to Gees as the door closed, and he turned to go back. Now, he observed, she walked slowly, draggingly, as if there were no object on which to concentrate, as there had been in coming here.

"I suppose we just go back," she said, listlessly.

"This haze is dampening—there seems nothing else to do," Gees concurred. "A pity. I'd have liked to see the inside of the house."

"And I— Oh, well!" She shrugged. "I suppose one cannot expect—"

"Crimson cocktails all the time," Gees suggested.

"Now how did you know I was thinking of that?" She turned her head to look at him with the question, seemed irritated.

"I didn't. But you said you remembered that drink so well."

"You might have known I was only fooling. I remembered the strangeness of it, two whites making a red. As red as that tree."

"And the flavor, apparently," he insisted.

"Yes, that too. Twister said he shut his eyes and opened them again after he finished his, and had an illusion that an hour or two had passed. And since then he's been inclined to credit Gamel—Mr. MacMorn, I mean—with some of the tricks Aunt Marge blames on him. Not that Twister actually believes anything, but sometimes I think he's a little bit credulous. Can you smell the sea in this reek?"

"I hadn't noticed it" Gees answered.

She stopped, and snuffed the air. "The coast is not more than ten or twelve miles away," she said. "But—no, it isn't the sea tang at all. An odd smell, like—like—what is it like?"

"It'll be like getting wet if we don't hurry back," Gees told her.

She nodded impatiently, without quickening her step at all.

"Yes. But I've smelt that smell before somewhere, but can't place it. Coming directly from the house toward us—the wind has eddied. I don't like it, and yet I do. Gone, now. The wind is west again."

They went on. Gees, too, had detected the faint odor, and recognized it. The smell of blood newly-shed.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Manhattan Compass

SCREWY Mad. Topsy-turvy. No sense. So that's what they say about New York City. So it isn't true, hey? So they just thought it up, hey? All right—how about this?

One of the rivers that make Manhattan Island an island is the Hudson. Only in Manhattan it's known as the North River.

And why? Such a dope! It's the North River because it's on the west side of the island. Of course the East River is east of the North River; but then the East River isn't a river at all anyway.

And what *should* be the North River (because it's north of Manhattan) is called the Harlem River, and it doesn't go much of anywhere.

Somebody on the Federal Writers' Project thinks that this is all on account of the mapmakers of the sixteenth century. And we'll take vanilla.

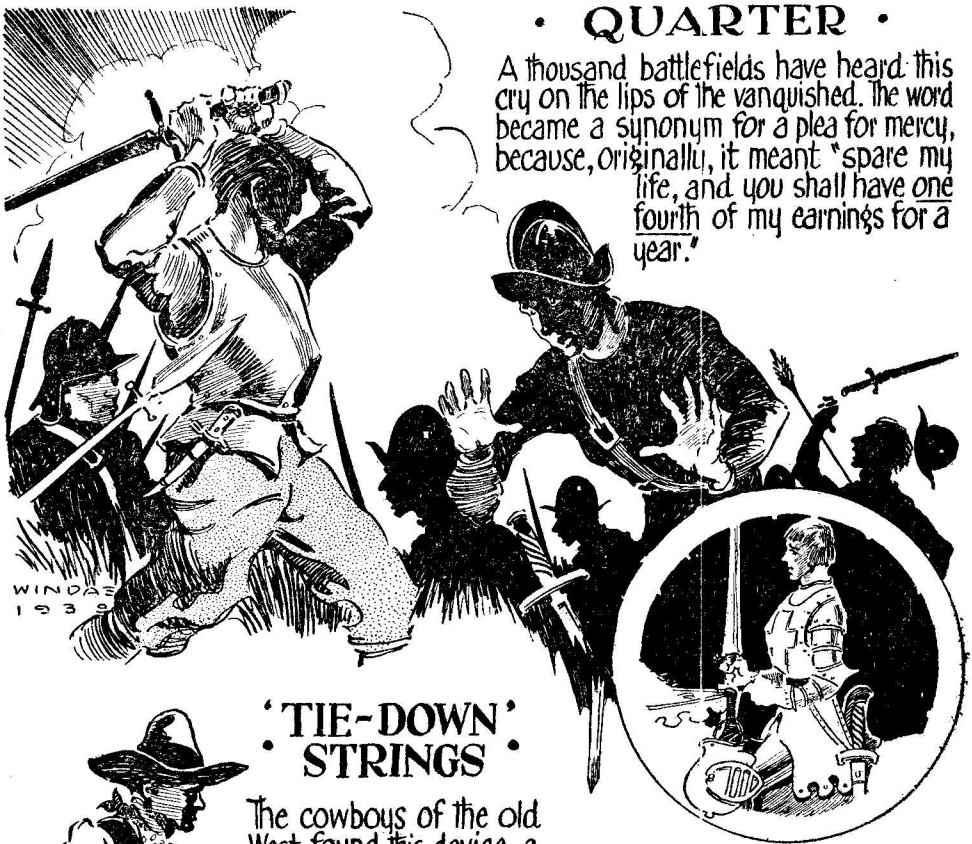
—*Skippy McMullin*

LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS

· QUARTER ·

A thousand battlefields have heard this cry on the lips of the vanquished. The word became a synonym for a plea for mercy, because, originally, it meant "spare my life, and you shall have one fourth of my earnings for a year."



'TIE-DOWN' STRINGS

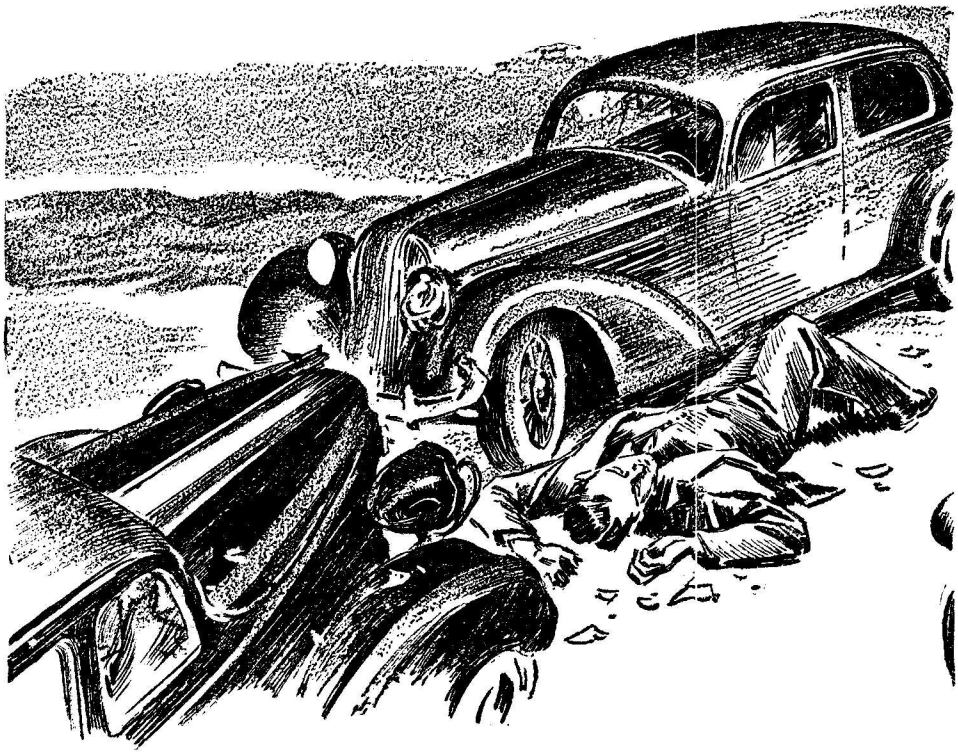
The cowboys of the old West found this device a great help in quick-drawing. However, it was originated by the U.S. cavalry, and its purpose was to keep the holster from slapping the horse when in motion.

· SADDLE-HORN ·

The modern saddle-horn is a relic of the high peg upon which the medieval knight hung his helmet when not in combat.

· TRAVEL PAY ·

The modern practise of paying a discharged soldier his transportation, started in England in 1697, when a bill was passed stating that "privates discharged shall receive each man fourteen days' pay to carry him home".



Holocaust Highway

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "Chaos Is a Quiet Place," "Flaming Acres," etc.

Meet Barry White, the fall guy. Cops called him a public enemy before they saw him; and when he trod upon the cinders of a ghost town, they flared into a million-dollar blaze

I

NOBODY could blame a guy for not wanting to stop at that hour in a place so far from anywhere. Besides, the road was as flat and smooth as a ballroom floor, and Barry's little old Chevvy, for the first time since he had left Chicago, had unexpectedly and most gratifyingly got all its squeaks squeaking on agreeable notes at the same time.

The car was in harmony with itself, warm and happy; and as though to celebrate this startling fact it was going faster and better than he had ever supposed possible. To interrupt such a synchronization of sound and stress, which might never occur again, would be a shame.

Barry sighed; and the tin of imported chocolates his aunt had given him before he left home pressed flat against his heart.

He had no choice. A brown coupé, facing him, was pointed half across the road. One of its headlamps was out; the

They stood on each side of Barry, silent and ominous, and beyond lay the dead man

...er, burning feebly, was badly off kilter. A large dark sedan was pulled clear across the remainder of the road's width. Apparently it had been going in the same direction as Barry. It did not seem to have suffered as much as the coupé.

Funny place for a head-on collision, thought Barry, out here in the middle of the prairie. One of the drivers, or both, must have been asleep. Or drunk.

The Chevrolet screamed to a stop, shivering. Barry did not shut off the engine nor did he stir from his seat.

The headlights showed three men. Two were standing, young men, noisily dressed, staring at the third, who was motionless on his back, his arms flung wide.

There was blood clotted on the prone man's face and head. The two young men looked up as Barry approached. They walked toward him.

"Alone, buddy?"

"Maybe."

One looked into the back of the Chevrolet. The other leaned upon the door very close to Barry. His manner, unlike his clothes, was quiet. He was even polite. Yet he seemed a man who had only recently learned not to talk out of a corner of his mouth.

"We had an accident."

"So it seems."

"That man who was driving the other car—he's dead."

"You sure? Maybe I'd better take him—"

"No, he's dead. No doubt of it."

Moonlight lay half-heartedly upon the corpse. Probably that man, whoever he was, had never known what happened. A piece of broken windshield—the windshield of the coupé was a mere framework of jagged glass triangles—must have caught his jugular vein.

Barry's glance moved to the sedan. Its windshield, non-shatterable glass,

showed no crack. The sedan indeed seemed very little damaged—a crumpled fender, a smashed head light. It was a dark, large car and had a funereal air.

As Barry stared at it a girl's face appeared for an instant at the back window. Barry could not see her well. He saw only that she was very young, no more than a child, pretty, and badly frightened, for her eyes were large and bright with fear and her mouth was open as though she were about to scream. Then a hand went over that mouth from behind, a large man's hand, and the face disappeared.

IT happened very quickly. Before Barry could catch his breath the young man leaning on the door of his car leaned closer still, so that his face was near Barry's, and spoke in a whisper.

"Don't you think we better get going, buddy? You were heading for Clinton City, weren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then I wonder if you'd take me and my friend along? I think we ought to report this ourselves."

"And leave a dead man lying in the road like that!"

"There's another guy in the back seat of our car. He's all broken up about it right now, that's why he don't come out. He was driving. But he'll be all right in a minute. But we can't use that car because it's disabled."

"Looks all right to me."

The young man shook his head. The other young man was climbing into the back seat.

"No, it's disabled. Won't go. So you'll take us, huh?"

"Must you both come?"

"I think it would be better."

He climbed into the seat next to Barry.

Nobody said anything about violence. Nobody needed to. Barry White, unarmed, was no fool. He drove slowly and carefully into the shallow ditch, around the rear of the sedan, back onto the highway. Then he started to go fast.

She was no spring chicken, this car. She was old enough to have a hand throttle, for one thing; old enough to think she ought to be retired when she was forced up to sixty. She was slung high, compared with newer cars; and when, because the road was hard and dry and the engine in excellent condition, Barry coaxed her up to sixty-seven, she swayed from side to side and seemed to be trying to fly.

"Quite a crate," the man next to Barry shouted.

Barry did not answer. He pushed the hand throttle all the way down and took his foot off the accelerator. It needed every ounce of his attention and skill to keep the car on the road.

Clinton City was twelve miles ahead. On either side stretched prairie, bland in the moonlight, rolling a little, and empty. The road was perfectly straight.

Something touched his right elbow, and the young man shouted into that ear.

"This is a gun, buddy. Better stop the car."

Barry shouted back, without turning his head, without taking his gaze from the road: "You shoot me and I'd give this wheel a twist. That would kill all of us, at the rate we're going."

The car carried on mightily, filling the night with angry sound, and for a little while there was no speech. Then the man in the back seat, who had evidently been leaning forward, cried: "Why, the lousy—"

"The ignition key's in my pocket, and if you reach over to shut off the hand gas you'll hit my elbow," Barry shouted. "Try knocking it out of gear, if that makes you happy. I happen to know it can't be done, with the car going at this clip. And as for the emergency, it might as well be tissue paper."

They thundered on, rocking from side to side.

"Yes," shouted the man next to Barry, and then his voice fell, for the engine roar had suddenly lessened. "Yes, she's quite a crate."

AS they rolled to a leisurely stop, even the squeaks and rattles subsiding, Barry saw that the man had simply slipped the barrel of his pistol under the instrument board and smashed out the two ignition wires.

Barry shrugged, and took the car out of gear.

"'At's the boy. No sense getting sore about it. Now if you'll just step outside We want to use your car a little while."

The man in the back seat had already got out, on Barry's side. Barry looked sideways at the other man, who smiled.

"Why not use it with me in it?"

"Now let's not argue about this, buddy. We got our reasons." He waggled the gun. "So get out!"

Barry got out. His chin was on his shoulder as he did so, for the gun fascinated him. He had forgotten, for the moment, the other man, and that was a mistake. Something large and blunt struck him just above the back of his neck.

It threw him forward on hands and knees, but it did not quite knock him out. Had he been wise he would have remained there, playing 'possum, but the blow had made him sore, and he got to his feet. Both men came at him at the same time.

He was groggily conscious that they did not want to shoot him here, and he took advantage of this, swinging wildly. One fist met a mouth and warm blood gushed across his knuckles. This, however, was his only contribution to the fight.

Somebody got him from behind and held his arms, while somebody else hit him again and again, first on one side of the head, then on the other, with what might have been a blackjack. It didn't really hurt. He didn't know how long it lasted; but not long.

The next thing he knew they were carrying him, one having his ankles, the other his arms. They took him for some distance, and then they dropped him into a sort of gully. He couldn't see well, and it hurt him to try to open his eyes at all. He did not make a sound. They dropped him on his back, and he did not stir.

"All right. You're so anxious, after that smack he handed you. You can do it. Go ahead."

The banging of the gun was immediate and very close, but somehow it did not seem important. What perturbed Barry was the behavior of the chocolate tin in his left shirt pocket. It was a large, flat tin, and it hung low in the pocket, so that when it was slammed against him three times, the effect was as though he had been kicked just underneath his ribs. It knocked the wind right out of him.

He could not have moved or spoken if he'd wanted to. It was all he could do to breathe.

Sticks and stones were falling upon him, rubble, dirt, dried prairie grass. The dust tickled his nose and throat, but with a terrible effort he held in the sneeze.

"You're sure he's cold meat now?"

"If a guy with three slugs in the heart can—"

"All right, let's move. That's good enough. Nobody's going to come looking for him anyway. Look: to save time, you cut across and get things set for us while Al and I do the zowie act. Right?"

"Right. I'll be seeing you in a little while."

II

BARRY lay there for a long time. He was without feeling of any sort, and he was a little afraid to move. It was the first time he'd ever been dead and buried. For surely he was dead in the opinion of his late companions, and he could not quite understand why he wasn't. He was buried too, though inexpertly.

When at last he stirred, dry sticks and grass fell away from him and little dry chunks of dirt sifted into his eyes and mouth and nose, so that he sneezed vehemently. That sneeze sent a flame of agony through him; for a moment he almost lost consciousness again. But at length the pain subsided a little. He rose.

Remembering how the chocolate tin had rammed his lower ribs, he took it from his pocket. He noticed as he did so that there was a large hole in that pocket. It had been made from the outside.

The fancy foreign tin no longer was brave with paint. A wide groove of this had been lifted away, and the bare metal showed. The tin was badly dented along this groove.

Three shots had been fired, in quick succession and presumably at close range. Had the bullets struck this tin straighton, they would have penetrated it. They must have struck it at a slight angle, and been deflected. Barry examined the inside of the pocket. Yes, there was another hole, far around, almost under the left armpit. The bullets had never even scraped his skin. All he suffered was bruises caused by the kick of the chocolate tin.

He whistled, wiped his face. He was trembling a little. A man, he told himself, could not possibly have a closer escape than that.

He was still dizzy, and weak as a baby, when he walked back to the road half a mile away. His car wasn't there. He had not expected it to be. He started on foot for Clinton City.

He had lost all track of time; but it was near dawn when he came to a service station. The attendant eyed him warily.

"Been in a fight or something?"

"Accident," Barry muttered. "May I use your washroom?"

"Help yourself."

The water was cold and felt good, and there were towels. Yet he was still groggy, his ears were still ringing, when he opened the door of the washroom to step out. He wasn't himself. Otherwise he would not have done what he did.

A Ford had drawn up in front of the pumps, having come from the direction of Clinton City. In it were a fat man with a rifle across his knees, who was obviously the sheriff, and at the wheel a hatchet-faced young man, probably a deputy. The sheriff was holding a paper.

"If you see this man," he instructed the service station attendant, "I want you to let my office know right away. Barry White, twenty-six years old, five foot eleven, a hundred and sixty-five pounds, brown hair, brown eyes, light complexion, wearing a heavy brown flannel shirt, black belt, no hat, brown corduroy pants."

Barry, half out of the washroom, gasped. Actually, what had happened was perfectly simple. He had been lying out on the prairie for several hours, and in that time his car had been found. Its license number had been wired to the Illinois state motor vehicle department, which had supplied the name and statistical description of the owner.

This the sheriff had undoubtedly verified by telephoning gas stations back along the line. Barry had got out of his car at one to stretch his legs; he had chatted for some time with the proprietor, who would remember him and his clothes.

So there was no miracle here—only routine police work swiftly carried out. Yet for the moment it dumbfounded Barry.

"He was in a smashup out toward Sycamore late last night. Killed the other driver. Got panicky, I guess. Ran away. Abandoned his car. Be careful of him if he comes along. He's from Chicago, and we found a loaded Smith-Wesson automatic in his car, and if he leaves one there he's probably got another one with him."

Barry gasped again. His car had not been in a smash, and he had never owned an automatic or any other kind of gun. Could they have changed license plates? But—

"Little old Chevrolet touring car it was. 'Bout ready for the junk heap anyway. So if you see anybody like that—"

"Listen," cried the attendant. "There's a man just came in—"

BARRY did not wait for the rest. His whole body throbbed with pain; his ears were ringing; and he could think of only one thing—to get away to some safe

place where he could figure this whole business out.

He stepped back into the washroom, locked the door, and crawled through the narrow window. He dropped into a litter of grease cans and oily rags, and immediately started to run.

He had made no noise—he was sure of this. Yet a moment later he heard a shout. *"Stop!"* He only ran a little faster.

It was the worst thing he could have done, but he wasn't altogether sane just then.

"Stop!"

The first bullet passed with a high, taut, fiercely impatient sound; and afterward the pip of the rifle shot seemed insignificant.

Barry, head low, started to zigzag. There was another shot.

Luck was with him. It was not quite dark, not quite day, the worst possible time for shooting. Even so, after that second rifle bullet Barry heard the clatter of a pistol, and he felt something tug gently at his trousers as he ran. Later, when he had thrown himself exhausted into a gully, he found two neat holes through his right trouser leg.

Had they found him there, he would have given himself up. He was beyond resistance. But they did not pursue him immediately, and after a little he got back his wind and his strength and some of his common sense.

Whatever was happening, he was the fall guy only by accident. He had never been in this part of the country before; he had no enemies here, and he wasn't rich enough to rob. He had just stumbled into something—but what?

Cold-bloodedly those two men had set about killing him. Then one of them must have driven his car back to the scene of the wreck and deliberately smashed it into the brown coupé. Finally, leaving a gun in Barry's car, the man had departed in the sedan.

And the girl? What was she doing with a gang of gorillas like that? It was a safe bet that she was not there by choice. Barry could not forget the wild fear in her eyes. What would she have screamed to him, if she had not been so quickly silenced?

When the two men left him, Barry had been stunned and only half conscious, his eyes closed, scarcely breathing; it was small wonder that they supposed him dead. But Barry could remember a part of what they had said. There had been talk of getting things fixed up and seeing one another soon, and then they had separated. Since one of them must have gone to the highway, the other had probably headed out into the prairie.

That suggested a camp of some sort, a hideaway. And it could not be far off, else the gunman would not have started for it on foot.

BARRY rose slowly, painfully. He turned his back to the highway. If there was a hideout, he'd find it.

It was then that he heard the dogs.

Somewhere, years before, he had read that if you ever heard bloodhounds howling down the trail behind you, don't worry. If they are actually after you, you won't hear anything. They don't howl when they've got the scent: they only howl because they haven't got it.

He remembered this now, but it was scant comfort. In the chill of early morning across that empty prairie, the dogs' baying was an ominous, terrifying sound. He shivered.

Moreover, the dogs fell silent quickly. Were they coming toward him, noses low, sad eyes half closed—with alert deputies scurrying behind them?

On his right and his left and before him stretched prairie. Behind was the highway. He spun on his heel and started to run.

It was his only chance. The summer had been exceptionally dry and there was not a brook or rivulet of any sort on the prairie; it was like a desert. So far as Barry could see, the only possible way to shake off the dogs was to catch a ride.

He kept thinking as he jogged: Suppose word has been spread already; suppose the first driver I thumb has seen the notice—*Barry White, twenty-six years old, five feet eleven, one hundred and sixty-five pounds, brown hair, brown eyes . . .*

It was the chance he had to take.

That first driver came promptly; he was alone, and stopped. He squinted suspiciously at Barry.

. . . light complexion, wearing a heavy brown flannel shirt, black belt, brown corduroy pants, no hat.

Suddenly the driver grinned.

"Goin' my way, son? Hop in! Hop in!"

They jogged along, the driver talking with much animation about nothing at all, while Barry nodded, pretending to listen. When they came in sight of the wreck the driver whistled and threw out the clutch. Barry unlatched the door at his side.

"Looks like they's been trouble, eh?"

The brown coupé sagged wearily, half in a ditch. There were men hoisting the front of Barry's car, using the crane on a wrecker. The axle was bent, the front wheel smashed. It gave Barry's heart a wrench to see that sturdy little veteran being ignominiously hauled off the field through no fault of its own. He felt like shouting, "You let that car alone! That car's all right! It can take more than you can!" But he did not say a word.

Three or four other machines had stopped and the drivers and passengers were snooping. There was the wrecker crew too, and several deputy sheriffs. The deputies certainly would have a description of Barry White—he could not risk trying to pass them.

As the car in which he was riding approached the scene of the wreck, slowing up, he slipped quietly out. The driver was so intent on the maneuvers up ahead that he did not realize Barry had left him He went right on talking a blue streak.

BARRY started across the prairie. Maybe the bloodhounds would be taken in a wide circle after losing his trail at the highway; or maybe they wouldn't. The sheriff, naturally assuming that Barry would try to get as far away as possible, would busy himself telephoning up and down the line to have all cars stopped and searched.

It took Barry a long while to find the place where he had been left for dead. When he did find it, there was no mistaking it. He could see the impress of his own body, the loose sticks, stones, dirt, grass. He could even make out the hole in the earth where the bullets must have gone after passing between his left arm and side, and that reminded him of the chocolates. He was suddenly hungry, and so he sat down and ate some of the candy. After a while he took up the trail.

He was city bred, no plainsman. But he knew that the man he was after had probably taken a course at right angles to the highway. The ground here was dry and hard, but it was covered in places with fine dust that occasionally revealed foot-prints. The man had made no effort to cover his tracks, and Barry went on easily and rapidly.

It was about four in the afternoon when he came over a rise of ground and into sight of the oil-well camp.

But this camp was desolate and still No oil gurgled, no machinery clanked, no smoke rose from the buildings.

It told a story not new. Some prospector, discovering oil here, had precipitated a rush, and the first strikes had made it look like another Signal Hill. Men had come into camp every hour of the day and night in every manner of motorcar, jogging and rattling along the now half obliterated wheelruts which led from the highway several miles south. They had come with blueprints and great ambitions—and sometimes with a little capital.

For a time there had been oil, and it had come fast and steadily, as if it meant to keep coming. It had begun to fill tanks —and even to fill pocketbooks. Then, suddenly and for no evident reason, the oil had refused to flow.

But by that time a camp had been built, and so it still stood here, deserted

now and useless. The gaunt black towers of the derricks reached toward the sky, some of them never completed; pump-sheds and tanks, garages and tool-sheds were scattered about, weather-worn but still sound. There were even a few homes, and these seemed the most dismal ghosts of all to Barry White.

He stood a few moments, gazing at these drab relics of a forgotten oil boom. And the hunch came to him then that he had reached the end of the trail—that ahead lay dynamite. Yet he had no reason for his queer feeling of climax. The air was drowsy and still, and the shabby conglomeration of shacks before him looked wan and harmless in the late afternoon sun. A tiny sworl of dust, born of a vagrant breeze, waved aimlessly across the prairie; but when it came to the edge of the dead village it paused, then swung sharply to the left, for all the world as though it scorned to enter a place so dreary and futile.

But Barry could not get rid of his conviction that there was hell packed into the deserted oil camp.

A jackrabbit, superbly awkward, came bounding down the main and only street. One of its front paws struck a stone, turning the beast a bit to the right; and since it hadn't been going anywhere in particular, it continued indifferently in that direction, passing between the two end houses, the building nearest Barry.

An instant later, when the jackrabbit emerged, it was going hell-bent-for-election. Clearly the animal had one thought in its mind—and that was to get far away as soon as possible. A moment or two later it had disappeared.

Barry said, "Oh-oh," and moved from the ridge. A man didn't have to be a Kit Carson or a Davy Crockett to get the significance of that business.

III

SCOUTING, he found a ravine, dry and deep. Most of the year no doubt a stream ran here, ran right past the deserted town; but now there was only the arid sun-scorched bed of stones. The ravine's mouth, however, was very close to the edge of the town, and there was a live-oak there, offering shade, as well as a clump of discouraged sumac which could be used for concealment.

There Barry sat, and watched the end house, where nothing moved. He ate chocolate, while the shadows grew longer and the air more chill. His muscles were sore and he was very tired, but not in the least sleepy. He had no idea what he would do when it got dark. But something would happen: he was sure of that.

Something did. Night came to the ravine a little ahead of time, snuggling into the river bed. The darkness was close around Barry when a hand suddenly grasped his shoulder from behind and a sharp object was pressed against his ribs.

"Just take it easy, my friend. I don't want to kill you."

A hand went over him, sliding around his belt, patting his hip pockets and the loose of his shirt.

"All right, get up. But take it easy."

Barry rose, turning. He put his right hand on the ground to brace himself for a heave to his feet, and his fingers closed around a small flat smooth stone. The feel of it somehow reassured him.

He saw the man only as a blur, a darker shadow against the background of shadows. But the pistol, which caught what faint light there was, he could make out easily. It was the pistol he was interested in.

He stepped sideways, swinging up his right hand, the stone in it.

The stone hit the pistol, clanging harshly, and the man cursed and dropped the gun. In the same instant Barry let go the stone and swung with his left. The light being so bad, his fist skittered off the man's cheek. The man stooped, presumably to recover the weapon, but Barry straightened him with a right uppercut. The man muttered something—and closed in.

It was a singularly silent fight. Some-

times they were locked together, on their knees or rolling on the ground; and sometimes they stood toe to toe and swapped punches. Neither could see the other clearly, and the punches more often than not were wild; but when one did connect, it counted.

They breathed hard, and now and then one grunted in pain, and their fists smacked wet flesh, but there was no other sound. When a fist he never never saw coming caught Barry across the left ear so hard that he staggered sideways and fell, his antagonist sprang upon him, punching and kicking. It was only after a great deal of squirming and wriggling that Barry got clear again.

The next instant the other man tried a second time to reach down for that pistol, which gleamed feebly on the ground. Barry, not properly balanced to use his fists, brought a knee up into the man's face.

YES, it was an unpleasant little combat. And it continued in this way until the two men couldn't fight any more. It was not that either was badly injured, though both were bruised and bleeding; but they were completely exhausted. They lay on the ground, each afraid to release the other's arms, each too weak to get his own arms free.

"Why don't you—yell for—your pals?" the stranger panted.

"Why don't you—yell for—*yours?*"

"You don't mean you're not—"

"Who are you anyway? Are you part of this gang here?"

"Oh . . ." A considerable silence. Then: "I thought you were their lookout. That's why I jumped you. That's why I didn't shoot when you turned on me. You were a fool to do that. If I hadn't been so sure that I could take you with my fists—"

"You didn't want to make any noise, eh?"

"That's the idea exactly. Now listen: Who *are* you?"

"I," said Barry White, "am the driver of the Chevrolet."

"Oh."

"And who are you?"

"I," said the man, "am Ellis Decker."

"Oh."

Of course he knew the name. Next to J. Edgar Hoover himself there was no G-man more celebrated. Ever since the F. B. I. boys had begun smoking out big-time bandits, lank, hard-eyed Ellis Decker had been in the midst of the excitement.

He worked on the Boettcher kidnaping case, the Stoll case, the Urschel case; he was one of the special agents who pumped Charles Arthur ("Pretty Boy") Floyd full of lead.

Recently, however, Decker had resigned from the government service to open a private detective agency. Thereafter he had dropped out of the public prints.

"Yes, I'm Decker." He and Barry had released each other now. "And I guess we're looking for the same thing." He nodded toward the darkening houses. "They must be over there."

"That's what I figure."

"Tire prints led here from the highway, all new, all Firestones, and none leading away. So they must be here."

Barry told him about the jackrabbit. He nodded.

"Did you trail the car here too?"

"Not exactly."

"Tell me about it."

Barry did, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Decker, intensely interested, demanded a description of the girl.

"Well, I hardly saw her. She looked pale, and I'd say she was probably thirteen or fourteen, but remember I only saw her face, nothing else. She was pretty. She had very large eyes and they were light colored, but I couldn't say whether they were blue or gray or violet or what. She had sort of light hair, maybe light brown, maybe blond."

"And the man in the back seat with her?"

"I never saw him at all. Just his hand."

"What about the other men?"

"Well, the one who sat in the back seat of my car was short and squat, with a

square face. Young. Not bad looking, but sullen. Looked as if he had a grudge against the world. The other one, the one that sat up front with me, was tall and slim and dark haired. Pretty good looking guy."

Decker nodded.

"Hymie Landon and Charles Edward Weir. They call Weir the Strut, or sometimes Strutsy. The man in the back seat of the sedan, if I'm not mistaken, was Al Baxter, the only member of the old McClockey bank-robbery gang still alive."

"And the girl?"

"THE girl," Decker answered slowly, "is the daughter of a client of mine. I'm pledged to secrecy about this, but you and I are going to have to work together for a little while anyway, whether we like it or not, so I might as well take you into my confidence."

"The girl is Sarah Case, only child of John M. Case, who is a widower and one of the wealthiest mine owners and utility magnates in this state.

"Mr. Case and his daughter were spending the summer at Lake Opahonnahee, about eighty miles north of here, and the day before yesterday the girl disappeared. There was a note left. It wasn't a ransom note. It simply informed Mr. Case that if he hoped to see his daughter again he must not report her absence to any law enforcement organization or individual and must do exactly what he would be told."

"I thought that sort of thing had been wiped out?"

"There's big money in kidnaping, sometimes. And wherever there's big money there will always be crooks to try and get it.

"Anyway Mr. Case didn't go to the cops or the sheriff or the F. B. I. But it happened that he knew me slightly, so he sent me a wire, and I chartered a plane and was at Lake Opahonnahee within a few hours.

"I picked up a trail—never mind how—the trail of three men roughly answering the descriptions of Al Baxter, Landon and Strutsy Weir. They could be the snatchers. It was their sort of job.

"But it so happens that not one of them is wanted for anything right now; and I couldn't get any gas station man or anybody else to say he'd seen a girl in the car with them. They didn't stop long anywhere, naturally.

"Just the same, I kept asking questions. I learned that they'd passed through Sycamore late last night but I couldn't find anybody in Clinton City who had seen such a car, so I went back.

"I stopped at that wreck and looked at your car and the brown coupé. And on the front of the coupé I found some black paint scrapings. They certainly didn't come off your car, which is blue. I also found imbedded in the hood packing of the coupé a tiny piece of nickel which must have been broken off an ornamental radiator cap.

"Well, your car didn't have any such cap, but the car I was looking for did. I saved that chunk of nickel. It may be useful to you later."

"Thanks."

"What happened, of course, is perfectly simple—now. The gang had a collision with the coupé and killed the driver. Their own car wasn't badly damaged, but if they drove away they wouldn't be able to use it for fear the bent fender and scraped paint would start an investigation.

"And they needed that car. It was really theirs—Landon's—bought and paid for, with legitimate plates. They needed it to go back and forth in, to wherever they were going to send the ransom notes from and wherever they were going to collect the ransom itself. They couldn't afford to have anybody snooping around asking questions.

"Then you came along, like a gift from heaven. It would be necessary to kill you, of course, but a little thing like murder never bothered that outfit.

"So they killed you, as they thought, and rammed the brown coupé with your car and left a gun in it just to make things look that much worse. Everybody

would jump to the conclusion that you had run away. Nobody would think of looking for any other driver, and the bent fender of the sedan would pass unnoticed.

"Since they must have disappeared somewhere between the accident and Clinton City, I sleuthed along until I found this obscure turn-off with fresh tire tracks. And here I am."

"You've come to the right place, too." Barry nodded toward the end house. "Look."

THERE was a light in the front of the house. It was the first sign of life in that ghost camp. It shone yellow through the gloom, laying a parallelogram of wan illumination upon the earth outside the window.

"So we're at home," muttered Decker. "But not receiving, eh?"

"Wouldn't it be best to get a squad?"

"Yes and no. Naturally we're not going to tackle them alone. But at the same time an ordinary posse would come banging in here the way they've done it in the movies. Then we'd have a siege—because those babies aren't going to give up without a scrap—and a lot of people would get killed, including Sarah Case.

"After all," Decker pointed out, "while I'd like to see those hoodlums laid out, what I'm really here for is to get that girl back safe and sound. The way things are now I'm sure that they haven't the slightest intention of returning her, even if they get the ransom. She's too smart, and she's seen too much.

"They're only holding her now because they might need her to write a letter or something. Kidnaping's a capital offense in this state, the same as murder, and they just can't afford to let her live."

Barry White, recalling that pale pretty face he had seen so briefly, shuddered.

"The first thing is to make absolutely certain that she's there," Decker went on. "If she is, then I'll stand guard while you beat it back and raise a rescue party."

Barry shook his head.

"As soon as I showed my face I'd be pinched for manslaughter, hit-and-run driving, being a fugitive from justice and a dozen other things. By the time I got through explaining, Lord knows what might have happened here. But you, on the other hand, could get quick action.

"Yes, you're right. Well, we'll do it the other way 'round. But first I've got to have my look. Now listen: Whatever happens to me, don't you chime in. It's all very well being a hero, but try to remember that if I'm erased, you'll be the only person left who can possibly restore Sarah Case to her father. Just keep that in mind, won't you?"

He nodded genially, and slipped out of the bushes.

IV

FROM the mouth of the ravine to the house was about two hundred yards. The intervening space however was bare. Full night had come, and when the moon was not showing, it was comfortingly black. The trouble was, those scurrying, low clouds kept shutting the moon on and off as though they could not quite make up their minds whether they liked the effect of its glow.

Ellis Decker did the wisest thing when he slipped out of cover in a dark moment and moved fast, trusting his luck.

Barry, with straining eyes, saw him for a little while, then lost track of him. Suddenly the clouds slid away from the face of the moon, and Decker, half-way to the house, was visible. He lay utterly still. If Barry had not been looking for him, he never would have taken that blur for the huddled shape of a man.

The clouds slipped back, and the crouched figure was obliterated from sight. The next thing Barry saw was the top of Decker's head silhouetted against the lighted window.

This only for an instant. Decker had had his look and was satisfied. A moment later Barry made out the muffled beam of a flashlight at the back window of the house. This too vanished swiftly.

No sound reached Barry, but Decker must have stepped on something that snapped, or stumbled. Chairs scraped, and three men raced out through the front door, Strutsy Weir armed with an automatic rifle while each of the others carried a shotgun. Their voices, though whispers, came clearly to Barry.

"Couldn't have been a jackrabbit or a prairie dog."

"We shouldn't have risked that light."

"Maybe just a tramp or something."

"What would a tramp be doing this far off the highway?"

Precisely as though they had waited for this moment, the clouds slithered away from the moon; and all the landscape was bathed in a silvery glitter. Halfway between the house and the mouth of the ravine once more, Ellis Decker lay huddled and unmoving.

"What's that?"

"Rock, isn't it?"

"Rock, hell! I think it's a guy! I'm going to put a couple of slugs into it anyway before I get any closer."

Barry White, sick with fear, watched all this. He was remembering that Decker had warned him to keep out; it was his duty to sit tight—and an enormously difficult one.

Strutsy Weir raised the automatic rifle to his shoulder.

At the first explosion the shapeless black mass came suddenly to life. It rolled; it kicked itself upright; it ran, bent low. And from it spattered flashes of orange-red flame.

Strutsy jolted back on his heels, swearing. He steadied himself—and the rifle stuttered. The shotguns bellowed then, one after the other swiftly. Ellis Decker went to his knees, got up again, still shooting. He staggered a few steps—toward the men. He was trying to lift his own pistol, which hung from a limp right arm. He shifted it to his left hand.

Then the full stream of rifle bullets hit him and he lurched backward, step by step, creakily, like a shooting gallery target improperly fastened. For a moment longer he kept his feet staggering a few paces; then he gave an abrupt twist and fell on his face.

Strutsy Weir pumped five or six more slugs into the motionless body. Barry could see the coat flatten as they struck, and the tiny puffs of dust rise out of it.

The three men walked over to what remained.

"That'll teach the—"

"Who is he, anyway?"

Weir said slowly, "Ellis Decker."

THEY were silent for a little while. Al Baxter shifted his shotgun to his left arm, took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. Hymie Landon looked around, squinting; he stared at the black splotch which marked the end of the ravine, where Barry was hidden. Even dead, this man Decker inspired them with fear.

"He was probably working alone," Strutsy said at last, "but if you guys feel the way I do about it—"

"The gal gets it! Absolutely the gal gets it!"

"We can't take no chances now!"

Charles Edward Weir nodded. "Yes," he murmured. "We can bury her under one of these old houses. Maybe we can collect some snatch dough anyway, but we can't afford to have her hanging around." He glanced toward the mouth of the ravine. "The first thing to do is to find out for sure that Decker was alone. If there is anybody else, they'd be right over in those bushes. Come on."

Strung out, walking abreast, they started toward Barry. Landon took out a powerful flashlight and began to swing its beam back and forth.

It was not fear that kept Barry White motionless for fully half a minute, though he was frightened enough. It was a conflict of thoughts. He had to make up his mind in a hurry.

He could run up the ravine, but he would undoubtedly make a racket, what with all the loose stones. The ravine was not long, and at its upper end he would

be obliged to emerge upon the open prairie. The gunmen would run after him. In the open, unless he had a break with the erratic moonlight, they would shoot him down very quickly.

Even supposing he did get away—supposing the clouds behaved, concealing the moon, and he reached the highway—what then would happen to the girl? The answer was obvious—and terrible. With Decker dead and another man escaped, these gangsters would return to the village and murder Sarah Case. So that if he ran, Barry might conceivably save himself, but he would certainly kill the girl.

The three gunmen were close, coming slowly, warily.

Barry thought of that small white strained face. He was remembering that he was now the only person in the world who could possibly save that Sarah Case's life.

No, he couldn't run away.

On the other hand, he couldn't stay where he was. They were coming straight at him, and the beam of the flash was beginning to sprinkle the leaves above him with flicks of sharp hard light.

There was a third course, and he took it. As the men entered the bushes, Barry, bending very low—dashed directly at them.

He charged between Landon and Strutsy, and as he did so he pushed Strutsy's hip, shoving him against Al Baxter on the other side. Then he broke into the open and ran madly for the house.

As he passed Ellis Decker's pitifully twisted body, he scooped up the automatic which had fallen from Decker's hand.

It was then that the first shotgun spoke. It boomed commandingly, and the same instant Barry felt fierce stingings on the back of his left shoulder and arm, and on his left hip. But they didn't stop him.

Another shotgun exploded. Ground on his right and just ahead of him chittered and danced in sudden dust fountains, but none of the shot touched Barry. The automatic rifle began to go *clut-clut-clut-clut.*

BARRY reached the rear window of the house, the dark window. The lower sill was on a level with his chest. There was no glass, no screen. Barry, arms in front of him, dove head-first through it without even scraping the sill, and landed with a thump on the floor.

He sat up.

"Who—who is it?" The girl's terrified whisper came from somewhere close at hand.

"Is that you, Sarah?"

"Yes. Is this the man who was here a little while ago, who said he was going to take me back to my father?"

"Well, no. But this is a friend of his."

"There—there was a lot of shooting. Was anybody hurt?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Were you hurt? Do you want to borrow my handkerchief?"

In the darkness he smiled. "Thank you, Sarah, but not right now. Just now we've got to keep those men from coming back, the men who took you away. Now I don't want you to get anywhere near this window, Sarah."

"You're near it."

"It's different with me."

Cautiously he looked out. A strange silence brooded over the place. Decker's misshapen corpse was clumsily asprawl, but there was no sign of Landon, Weir or Baxter. Barry reasoned that they must have seen him scoop up Decker's automatic: they must be afraid to come into sight.

Cocky, he raised his head. There was a slap like two boards struck together, and something went *wonk!* into the wall behind him.

"I see what you mean now," said Sarah Case.

She had recovered her calm.

Barry lowered his head. He looked around the room, able to see the dim white oval of the girl's face, her motionless

white hands, and a table, a couple of chairs.

"Are you free, Sarah," he asked softly. "I mean, have they got you tied up?"

"No, I'm free. They did tie me to this chair, but I worked myself loose a little while ago."

"Good girl! Now I wonder if you'll do something for me? Take that old broom, and put my handkerchief over the business end of it, and then raise it very slowly above the windowsill on the side nearest you. But be sure you don't get near the window yourself!"

She did not ask questions, but went to work promptly, with no more fuss than as if this had bene an everyday duty. Cautiously she raised the broom, with the handkerchief on it, above the sill. Barry waited at the other corner of the window.

There was a crack, like a whip's. The handkerchief fluttered crazily, and bits of straw went here and there. Sarah Case dropped the broom. And Barry, at the other corner of the window, fired carefully at a spot just back of where he had seen the flash. Then he ducked.

Thereafter all was silent outside.

"Did you—did you kill him?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. It's dark over there and I couldn't see him. But it ought to keep him quiet a while."

"Is he there alone, or are all three of them there?"

Barry had not even thought of that, and he was appalled by his own stupidity. He'd been so pleased with himself, he told himself bitterly, because he had made the dash for this house successfully that it had never occurred to him that the gangsters might separate.

HE was still a long way from safety. He'd had no sleep in thirty-six hours, and in the past twenty-four he had eaten only chocolate and drunk nothing at all. He was exhausted and dizzy from the dull ache in his head; his body was covered with dried blood and stale sweat. The shotgun pellets in the flesh of his left arm, shoulder and thigh stung viciously.

Wounded and near collapse, armed with a pistol the chamber of which was almost empty, supported by a defenseless girl, he aspired to hold off indefinitely three well armed and desperate gangsters.

It wasn't as though the house itself were suitable for a seige. A simple wooden shack of two rooms, with no windows in front or behind, it had no back or side door. Each room had one window looking out over the prairie, one looking past a gaunt tall derrick at the side of the next house. To surround the place, he realized, would be ludicrously easy.

"I think it might be a good idea if we got out of here, Sarah," he muttered. "You trust me, don't you?"

"Yes, I trust you. You're trying to take me back to my father, aren't you?"

"I'm *going* to take you back to your father," he declared, adding under his breath, "I hope."

He examined Decker's pistol. It was a 7.65 mm. Luger with a 4½-inch barrel and a stock of dark American walnut. On top of the breech block were the initials *D.W.M.*, and projecting above this was the extractor, on which appeared the word *Geladen.*

There was at least a cartridge in the jacket, or that extractor wouldn't stick up that way. He learned, however, when he opened the magazine, that this was all the ammunition it did contain, for the magazine itself was empty. One cartridge for three men. And where were they?

The knock on the door was an answer to his thought. It was the door between the two rooms. Sarah looked at Barry, who held a finger to his lips.

"Hey! Open up!"

The knob was rattled, the door shaken. It held. "Come on—open up! We know you're in there, and if you don't open up right away, we'll set the whole place on fire!"

Still Barry did not answer. There were only three possible exits from this rear room. One was the door, at the other side of which stood at least one gun-

man. One was the window facing the prairie, which presumably was still being covered by Strutsy Weir with his rifle. The third was the opposite window; just outside stood the derrick, a mere framework, offering no protection against gunfire. Beyond the derrick, perhaps fifty feet away, was another shack, similar to this one but locked and boarded up. If they got behind it, they could still be smoked out in the same way.

"All right. If you won't come out, I'll come in and get you!"

A gun exploded. A hole appeared just above the latch and a shower of wood splinters fluttered to the floor. He fired again and again, and a series of holes circled the lock.

He's got plenty of cartridges, thought Barry. He'll shoot that lock out in no time at all. I've got to think fast.

The best place to hide is up. In some ways we may show traits of our ape ancestors, but in the matter of concealment we seem to go even further back; we run to bury ourselves in holes in the ground. A frightened man's instinct is to get underneath something. In consequence, when you seek a fellow man, you seldom look above the level of your eyes. It isn't natural.

Barry did not work this out step by step, as he scampered across the room. He acted on a sudden hunch; and, anyway, there was no way to go except up.

"We're going to have to do some climbing," he whispered to the girl. "A little Tarzan stuff. Think you can make it?"

"If you'll stick by me—"

"Oh, I'll stick by you!"

"Then I'll be all right."

The gun in the next room roared, and again splinters flew. The rickety door sagged. The man on the other side was ramming it with his shoulder, kicking it with feet and knees.

V

SARAH and Barry slid over the sill. It was only a few steps to the nearest corner of the skeleton tower. In that corner, luckily, was a ladder. A sort of ladder anyhow. There were sticks, more or less rotten now, nailed at irregular intervals to the corner upright. Some had fallen, though the rusty nails remained.

"Up we go, Sarah! Sing ho for the life of a sailor!"

She giggled as she started to climb. It was a good sign. Barry wished that he could feel like giggling.

They were about twenty feet above the earth, fumbling with the dubious slats, sometimes stepping from one to another, sometimes obliged to pull themselves up, when they heard the door in the shack slam open. They heard footsteps, and a great deal of cursing. Al Baxter's head appeared at the window out of which they had just climbed. He, too, climbed out. Barry, looking down over his shoulder, Decker's automatic thrust in his shirt pocket, saw all this.

"We'd better keep climbing. The higher we are, the better."

"The ladder stops here," she whispered back. "Maybe I could climb up on the framework."

"All right. Just be careful not to make any noise or to drop anything. I'll be right behind you."

Al Baxter, below, fascinated Barry. He was immediately underneath them, having stepped under the framework of the derrick perhaps in the hope of finding them concealed in a hole there or under some old boards. Of course he did not think to look up. Yet he sensed their presence. He knew that they were close at hand.

He yelled for Landon, who came from the shadows between two shacks across the street, a long revolver in his fist.

"What happened to them?"

"Damn it, they can't be far away!"

Strutsy Weir came out of the ravine. The rifle was cradled in his right arm, and he was scowling.

"You didn't let 'em get away, did you?"

"They must be right around here somewhere," Baxter muttered.

There was a silence, while Sarah Case and Barry White, above, waited breath-

lessly. Then Strutsy said in a low careful voice:

"Yeah, and we might find them in a few minutes or we might take three hours, with all these shacks they could keep ducking behind. I don't know how you guys feel, but I don't like the idea of hanging around here much longer—now we know Decker's been after us. This guy must have been working with Decker. If there was one guy, how do we know there weren't more?"

"He didn't have a gun, whoever he is," Baxter interposed, "or else he wouldn't have grabbed Decker's."

"Well, he knew how to use it when he got it," Strutsy muttered. "When he blasted at me he couldn't have seen anything more'n the flash from my rifle, but he took my hat off. You want to go on looking for a guy like that? Remember, he knows where we are; he's probably watching us right now—but we don't know where he is. He could easy get one or two of us before we got him."

They nodded. Barry, clinging to a dry rough beam, leaned far forward so as not to miss a word. These men had no notion of who he was or what he was doing here. They had seen him only as a fleet shadow. What a shock Landon and Weir would get if they learned that this was the same young man they had killed and buried! He grinned, leaning low to catch every word.

BAXTER said slowly, "Well, maybe you're right. We blow then, huh? Call it a miss?"

"Yeah," said Landon, "I guess that's the best thing to do."

"Yeah," said Strutsy. "We can hang out in some cooling-off plant for a while, out in the country somewhere. It's a damn shame," he admitted, "but I don't see what else we can do, now."

They nodded sadly.

"Well," said Baxter, "let's get the car out."

Barry White gave a deep if silent sigh of relief, relaxing, drawing himself closer to the beam to which he clung. Above him he heard Sarah sigh too. Very soon they would be safe.

As he pulled himself back from his stooping position Barry felt the Luger slip out of his shirt pocket. Gasping, he reached for it with his only free hand, his left. It glittered in the feeble moonlight, and his knuckles struck the barrel, knocking it even further away. It seemed to hang suspended in mid-air. He snatched at it. The tips of his fingers, slippery with sweat, just grazed the smooth shiny barrel. Then the thing was gone.

It landed with a dull self-satisfied thud at the feet of Strutsy Weir.

"Well!" said Strutsy. And a moment later: "Now what do you think of that?"

He looked up. The others looked up. Barry and Sarah clung to their beams, not stirring, not making a sound. The moonlight wasn't strong, and perhaps. . .

"So that's where our friends have been lingering, eh?" Strutsy raised his rifle. "Come on down, sweethearts."

They did not move. The rifle stuttered angrily, and the air was filled with whining lead; splinters flew.

A pause. Then Strutsy called, "Had enough?"

Still they did not answer. But Barry, the back of whose right hand, lacerated by splinters, was a smear of blood, craned his head upward.

"You all right?" he whispered.

"Yes, I'm all right. I can hold on."

"If you want to go down, I'll go down with you."

"They'd only kill us if we did, wouldn't they?"

"Yes."

"Let's stay here then," said she quietly.

A pistol spat, then another. Baxter and Landon were taking potshots. But neither was any great shakes as a marksman; and the light and the angle, as they were beginning to understand, were the worst possible.

It is always difficult to shoot upward. It was especially so in a wan moonlight which came and went unexpectedly

through the interstices of the derrick. Moreover, since Sarah and Barry refused to move or to make a sound, the men below could not be sure which blotches of blackness they were represented by.

A lot depended upon the moon. And she was being kittenish, dodging back and forth behind clouds and out again with all the irresponsibility of a butterfly tumbling in a breeze.

Weir called, "We won't hurt you if you come down now. But if you don't—"

No answer. No movement. The men below muttered among themselves, and presently one of them went a short distance down the street to a garage, from which he brought a shiny five-gallon can. There was a splashing. A match flickered, a torch made of rolled-up newspaper was ignited, flaring in sudden brilliance.

"Last chance!"

Barry hesitated. Should he sit tight? There was the girl to think of.

She whispered, "What are you going to do?"

"Well—I don't just know."

"Let's stay here and stick it out. At least they won't be able to say we gave in to them. And something might happen yet."

He thought: This girl's got more nerve than I have.

"Okay," he whispered. "Sure, something might happen yet."

VI

IT WAS monstrous the way the flames leaped and spread. The fire's first intensity was easily understood, for gasoline had been splashed upon half-rotten boards piled around each of the tower's corners. But that the derrick itself, the uprights, the cross-beams, should become ignited so swiftly and should crackle so lustily seemed malevolence without reason.

The wood was old, and it had been soaked in sunshine for many months, so that it was dry and brittle. It went like celluloid. Thin, sly flames, yellow or bright red, slid finger-like along the uprights and curled themselves around the beams, setting them to spluttering like fireworks. The smoke was amazingly thick and black, and it was greasy, billowing upward as though an oil well had come suddenly to life and was blazing defiance to the sky.

Barry White climbed to the beam upon which the girl stood. They could not go much higher, for the upper cross-pieces were too thin and rotten to bear their weight. He offered her his handkerchief, but she already had her own pressed against mouth and nose. Over it her large hazel eyes, reddened now by smoke, gazed at him without reproach or fear. She coughed a little, and said through the handkerchief:

"Hot, isn't it? Should we just let go pretty soon?"

In the presence of such courage he was ashamed to tremble.

"No, we'd better hang on," he said.

He did not say why, though perhaps she guessed. If they fell they would land in the middle of the derrick's base, and almost surely they would break one or both legs. That would mean lying there helpless, suffering horribly, while pieces of burning wood fell upon them and they waited for the entire structure to collapse. No, it was better to stay where they were.

It was hotter now, and sparks streaked up through the smoke. One of them landed on Sarah's shoulder, and he beat it out with his free hand.

From time to time through rifts in the smoke they saw the reaching flames massed below them. Sometimes too they caught glimpses of the prairie; over its brown surface danced the crimson, flickering light. They saw Weir there, and Baxter and Landon, standing well outside the danger of sparks; and when a groove suddenly was cut in a beam a few inches from his face, Barry realized that the men were shooting. He could not hear the shots over the roar of flames.

But he and Sarah had no fear of the shooting now. A bullet in the right place at this time would be a welcome thing.

The derrick gave an abrupt, violent shudder and lurched a little, leaning out toward the prairie, making grip and footing even more precarious. Something had given way.

And whatever happened was going to happen mighty soon. No doubt about that at all. The earth looked very, very far away just then.

"We'll go down in a blaze of glory when we do go," Barry shouted.

She smiled with her eyes, nodding.

"That's better than giving up to them," she said through the handkerchief.

"Much better."

The derrick lurched a little more. It was a Leaning Tower of Pisa now, and the flames sprang higher all the time; sparks flew thicker and faster through the smoke.

"Are you afraid?" she called unexpectedly.

He looked at her.

Why lie about it? The girl wasn't dumb, and she wasn't a coward. Only one thing to say.

"Of course I'm afraid. What do you think?"

"You don't look afraid."

"You don't either, Sarah."

"I wonder why that is."

He shrugged. He had been wondering the same thing. But it didn't make any difference. Nothing made any difference now.

EVEN when he looked down upon the prairie and saw the automobiles arriving, two of them, three of them, it did not seem to matter. They were small unimportant things racing around down there, like ingenious toys, amusing, but not to be taken seriously.

Certainly they could have no meaning for him and Sarah.

Landon and Al Baxter, he noticed, were running away from those automobiles, out of which men poured. The men had guns and were shooting. Barry could not hear the shots, but he saw the flashes of flame. He saw a man sit down suddenly and topple to one side. He saw another man go to his knees, sway a moment, then fall flat on his face. Strutsy Weir had not run away but was on one knee, the automatic rifle leaping and kicking at his shoulder.

But all this still didn't seem important. Its furiousness without sound in the red light of the flames seemed ludicrous.

Then the derrick fell.

The derrick first gave a convulsive lurch, a sort of yanking-up movement. After that it fell. It fell as it had been leaning, out over the prairie, out over the place where the foolish little men were running around shooting one another. There was a terrific up-shower of sparks, as though they'd been forced out of a bellows, and then sparks and smoke vanished abruptly. Barry and Sarah went lunging toward the earth.

Nothing much to do about it.

Barry got his arms around her. He was outside the framework now, and had her out there too; he had his knees and feet braced for the jump.

It was not so much a jump as a simple kicking-away. There wasn't anything else he could do. He just held Sarah tight, drew in his breath, waited as long as he dared, closed his eyes, pushed with his legs, and hoped for the best.

He never knew when he struck the earth.

•

THE nurse said soothingly, "Yes, yes. Yes, she's perfectly safe. You've asked that a dozen times already. She's right in the next room, with her father, who's going to buy you a new automobile and I don't know what-all."

"Oh . . . I've been delirious?"

"Yes. You kept asking about the Case girl."

A hatchet-faced young man came into the room, smirking. The last time Barry had seen him was when he was in a Ford next to the sheriff.

"How's my prisoner?"

"Am I a prisoner?"

"Technically, technically. But it'll be cleared up. Sarah Case says you weren't

even there when the accident happened. Besides, there's the evidence of the paint. Blue paint from your car superimposed upon black paint from Landon's which in turn was superimposed upon the brown paint of the coupé.

"So the sedan must have hit the coupé first. I discovered that." He nodded, chin high, eyes half closed. "So you see we're not all dumb, us hick cops out this way."

"I think that was mighty smart," said Barry.

"That got us looking for a black car that'd been in an accident, but we couldn't find anybody in Sycamore or Clinton City who'd seen such a car go through. So we got rubbering around and we found fresh tire tracks leading out to that old oil town.

"This was after we'd chased you, of course. By the way, did I wing you in the leg with those shots I took after the chief had popped at you with his rifle?"

"Came within inches," Barry replied. "Made a couple of holes through the leg of my pants."

"That's pretty good shooting, considering everything."

"Mighty fine," Barry said. "But to go back to the accident—"

"Oh, yes. Well, we didn't know but what you might have something to do with that black car, and you might have had some gangsters with you. So instead of barging right in we played safe and raised a good-sized posse first. Just as well we did, too."

"It is. But I still can't see where I'm cleared. It's the Case girl's word and mine against the word of three men—"

"One. Baxter was driving, but he won't open his trap. As for Weir and Landon, they're not going to say anything—ever."

"I see."

"I didn't aim at *their* legs," the modest deputy explained.

"I see."

"Hello!" In the doorway was Sarah Case, propped up in a wheelchair, bandaged but smiling. Two nurses hovered nearby.

"I'm all right. How are you?" she cried.

"I'm swell. They've got me all patched up and in a little while I'll be able to walk again."

Sarah nodded happily.

"You're coming out to our place at Lake Opahonnahee for the rest of the summer," she announced. "You and I are going to have a day nurse and a night nurse apiece. Gee, I hope they fix us up so's we can go swimming before it gets too cold."

"I guess they will all right. We're a pretty hard pair of babies to kill, you and me, Sarah."

"Sure," she said. "We can take it, can't we, kid?"

"Sure," said Barry.

I signal for a fair ball and keep on goin', with a hundred miners behind me yellin' for my blood

Pinch Hitter McGee

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Old Yukon System," "McGee on Horseback," etc.

The batter of the day: Just No-Shirt McGee, who knows how to win a ball game single-handed with the bases full. After which McGee himself gets full, and everybody is happy

IN THEM days, the North was full of young cusses who didn't have any more sense than the law allowed. Most of us went places where angels feared to tread and it wasn't because we was brave. It was because we didn't have any better sense.

So when a delegation of boys came to me and said, "No-Shirt McGee, we're going to have a ball game," I said, "That's fine!" And when they said, "You're goin' to be umpire," I answered, "Sure!"

Just to show you how crazy I was, you must get the set-up. This game was to be played between the miners and a team made up of gamblers and bartenders. Each outfit had practiced plenty.

The bartenders and gamblers trained when off shift, by doin' road work to improve their wind and harden their legs. Even in them days it was known a man was only as good as his legs.

The miners called their team The Pure In Heart. And they called the rival team, Satan's Own. So you'll see there was bad blood right at the start.

As soon as word got around that I was

umpire, the boys began buyin' me drinks and offerin' toasts like this, "We salute you, who are about to die." One of my good friends asks, "No-Shirt, who talked you into this, any way?" And I answer, "Why, a cuss named Fixer Trent."

We called him Fixer because he had the habit of fixing busted things, and patchin' up quarrels between pardners. He'd only been in camp a short time, but he'd made hisself well known. "He's no friend of yours, No-Shirt," my friend said. "This umpire business is goin' to be dangerous."

Twenty-four hours before the game a bartender came to me. "Listen, No-Shirt. You're no bartender or gambler."

"I ain't no shortstop nor center fielder, either," I adds.

"Exactly," he says. "Now get this. If you favor the other side you're goin' to hear from us. And you'll never be the same afterwards, see?"

"Yep," I answers. "I see. And I'm goin' to call 'em as I see 'em."

"Be careful. That's all," he warns. "The girls below the line have dug deep into their socks and are backin' us. We're backin' ourselves, too."

And hours later the miners called. "You're no miner," they say.

"Is that so?" I snort.

"Yes," they tell me. "That's no mine that you own. That's just a hole in the ground. We're coverin' every ounce of gold the resort boys and girls put up. Don't go to favorin' them, any."

The delegation departs, givin' me a dirty look.

I don't sleep much the night before the game. And I'm almost sick when the chairman of the ball committee introduces me as, "Umpire—No-Shirt McGee, the blind man."

THE game starts at seven o'clock at night. You might figger I could save my bacon by callin' the game on account of darkness, but no dice on that. Daylight is continuous at that season of the year.

Well, to make a long story short, the score is twenty-seven to twenty-seven at the end of the thirteenth innin' and the players are gettin' tired. I've been threatened by both sides. Sometimes all eighteen men are around me, while a couple of Northwest Mounted Police are keepin' the crowd back.

Only two Mounties handlin' hotheaded miners? you ask. That's all. You see, the Mounties had explained in advance that if any of the crowd poured onto the field, the guilty would get a winter's work on the woodpile. It took a mighty hotheaded man to forget that woodpile; but I could tell there was a couple of hundred men who'd cut wood all winter just to get their fingers on my throat and bear down.

We go into the fourteenth innin' and the Satan's Own pitcher cracks. The miners get seven runs. And that makes me happy. No hairline decisions for me to make.

Then the miners trot onto the field. Already they're spendin' their winnin's. Their pitcher cracks, too, and they grab seven runs. The score's all tied up again, with two men out.

Then One-eyed Johnson, faro dealer, comes to the bat. He hits a line drive. I run to see whether it is foul or not. It's goin' about two inches inside the foul line, and beginnin' to curve.

I take a long squint. It's a fair ball by a sixteenth of an inch. Either way I know I'm in for it. I signal it's fair when I'm close to first base, and I keep right on goin'.

I can hear the roar of the miners who figger it was a foul ball and I can tell they ain't afraid of a thousand Mounties and all the woodpiles in the Yukon country.

A Pure in Heart fielder is goin' after the ball, hopin' he can peg it home ahead of the runner, or hopin' the runner will break his leg or there'll be a miracle. The crowd's yellin' for him to play me and not the ball, but he don't hear.

I hit the bank and jump. A moan goes up, as the crowd figgers I'm committin' suicide to cheat it of revenge. My jump lands me in a canoe that has a

month's grub, rifle, axe, tent and sleepin' bag in it. Two seconds later I'm goin' down the river.

At least a hundred follows the bank a mile, yellin' at me, then they give it up and go back.

THREE weeks later who should come in my camp but Fixer Trent. He's wearin' his smooth smile, and gives me a warm hand to shake. "I've fixed everything," he says. "You are a hero, No-Shirt."

"Keep it to yourself," I say, as suspicious as a bartender of a parson. "You're luring me back for the kill."

"No," he insists. "You're a hero. I've fixed it."

"Fixed it! You couldn't!" I argue.

"Yes," he says, "I pointed out it took a man of absolute courage and fairness to make the decision you did. And they agreed."

"Don't be an idiot," I jeered. "No man of courage would hightail it out of there like I did. He'd have stayed and got himself mobbed."

"That's where you're wrong," he says, smooth as oil. "I pointed out that you had their best interests at heart. That if you had stayed they would have all been on the woodpile for the coming winter. The Mounties backed me up, and added that a more serious charge than disorderly conduct would have been brought if you had been hurt. So now come back."

Well, I went back, and you can imagine my surprise when they cheered me to the well-known echo. Hands dragged me into the nearest saloon and ordered the best in the house. Bartenders gave me the best, then ordered drinks on the house.

Up to that day I always thought I was a two-fisted drinking man. But three different nights strange but loving hands put me to bed.

The fourth time I woke up in the barracks with a Mounty actin' as nurse. "You tried to lick three men," he said, "that's all. No, don't become alarmed. It won't be the woodpile. We don't want to put the manager of our new baseball team on the woodpile."

"The manager of—what?" I ask, bewildered.

"Have you forgotten? Mr. Fixer Trent has organized a baseball team, selecting the best available talent. You are manager. We have sent the miners at the big camp at Bear Creek a challenge. They will undoubtedly accept it."

"Bear Creek?" I asked. "Say, that camp is as big as this one, and the boys have lots more dust."

"True, but our boys have been taking a little money out of the ground," he explains, "and I imagine we'll cover their bets. There's nothing like sports, McGee, to supply an outlet for the pent-up emotions of red-blooded men. We of the Mounted welcome things of this sort."

I must've been higher'n a kite to be crazy enough to act as manager for a ball club made up of miners, bartenders, and gamblers; but us McGees aren't hundred percent fools. I figgered I'd better go ahead or I'd end up on the woodpile.

Two nights later I started in the training period, with Fixer Trent cheering things on and predicting what we would do to the Bear Creek miners.

Gradually I got a team together. It was a one-sided score that it always run up on the scrubs, but the scrubs didn't care. "Just wait until we play Bear Creek," they say, "we'll get our pay in Bear Creek dust. We're goin' to cover every ounce of gold those tin-horn sports put up."

IT WAS Fixer Trent who suggested we elect a betting commissioner and put our dust into one big pot, then split up the winnings accordingly. We elected Walt Elliott commissioner that night.

I had three thousand dollars in dust. I needed every ounce to hire men to clear away a lot of overburden on my claim. If I lost it . . .

It'd be a fine note, though, if the team manager didn't back his own team. My gold was the first in the pot.

Walt Elliott was as steady as a rock.

He was a good judge of human nature too. When he had sixty thousand dollars in dust in the pot, he came to me. "No-Shirt," he says, "every ounce has been covered and the Bear Creek bunch is howlin' for more. I smell a rat."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I'm not so sure of this man Fixer," he explains. "This is just between us, of course, but it suddenly came to me it was Fixer who started this baseball business. He promoted the Pure In Heart-Satan's Own game. He organized the local team and made you manager. And it was he who suggested we cover every ounce Bear Creek sent down."

"That's right," I agreed.

"May be he's fixing something for the Bear Creek crowd," he suggests. "I'm going to look into matters. I don't want our boys to put up any more money. They need it for development work. Some of them will lose their claims if they don't develop them more."

"And you're close enough to spit on one of 'em," I said. "I'll try to keep 'em from putting up any more."

"You can't do that, No-Shirt," he says. "A manager can't knock his own team. The big game is three weeks off. I'm going up and have a look at the Bear Creek bunch."

The next morning he hired four Indians and a canoe and went upriver. He was gone a week, and when he come back his face showed nothin'. He said he'd been up on business. But when he was alone with me his face was plenty worried.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I've seen Bear Creek's pitcher," he said. "He's a big fellow with a beard a foot long. He's got a fast ball, a curve and plenty of control. He's supposed to be a miner. And he has a mining claim, too, which he goes through the motions of working, but he's no miner."

"Who is he?"

"Shave off the beard and you'll find Jerry Compton underneath," he says, and waits for it to sink in."

It don't take long. Jerry Compton is one of the best pitchers in the minor leagues, and I said so.

"He *was*," Walt says quietly. "He quit, and went to farming. The inside story is, Jerry threw a game and was kicked out of baseball. They hushed it up because the scandal would undermine public confidence. What more natural than he would come up here and plan a clean-up?"

"Who brought him up?" I ask.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but what more natural than he should work hand in hand with Fixer Trent? By the way, have the boys quit betting?"

"It's worse than ever. Every miner in camp believes our boys can hold their own in the Pacific Coast League," I answer. "Some of them have mortgaged their claims."

"Mortgaged their claims and put it on the team, eh?" he says sharply. "Who supplied the money?"

"Search me?" I answer. "A man named Smith who claims he is going to start a bank here is agent. I don't know who's back of him."

"This is bigger than I thought," Walt admits, "and there is nothing we can do about it. If we yell fraud, we can't prove it. If we accuse Compton of being a ringer before the game they'll claim they had no intention of working him. Besides we'd have to prove he was a ringer."

WELL, there was a fat chance of provin' that. We'd have to spend money roundin' up witnesses. If we sent outside for them, it would take weeks, or even months.

We both look at each other a long time; then he says, "No-Shirt, you are a resourceful young man. Besides, you are manager of the team. It's up to you to outsmart the Bear Creek crowd and Jerry Compton."

"I'm no miracle man," I mutter.

"It strikes me you proved your resourcefulness when you had a canoe loaded with grub, cached and ready that day you umpired," he says. "Most of us became im-

pressed with you because of that. 'There,' we said, 'is a fellow who can take care of himself. He'll go far in this world.'"

"Holy K. Smoke," I moan, "there prob'ly isn't a pitcher in the North who'd have a chance against Compton. With our men missin' his fast balls and curves, we couldn't run up a score against 'em. In the meantime his bunch is gettin' hits off'n our pitcher."

"That, my dear No-Shirt," he says, "is your problem." He turns to go away, then pauses and asks, "By the way, did you mortgage your claim and bet the money on our team?"

"As George Washington said, 'I can't tell a lie,'" I answers. "Smith said he'd advance twenty-five hundred dollars on my hole in the ground, so I took him up. The money's in the hands of your helper."

"Good gosh!" he moans. "After that game, this will be the deadest camp in the North."

"Or the livest," I answered, "with plenty of money— Bear Creek dust—for development work. You see, Walt, I've just about got to figger a way to beat that blasted ringer."

Have you ever been in a argument, got the worst of it, then thought of a lot of smart things you should have said after you was on the way home? Sure you have. And you tell 'em, plenty, too—on your way home.

That's the way I felt about this ringer business. I was in a argument and I didn't have any smart answers.

Time goes on, and I'm gettin' nowhere fast when suddenly I find myself on the bank of a stream. Maybe I'm ponderin' on my problem, or possibly I misjudged the width of the stream; any way I took a leap and fell short. I lands waist-deep in icy creek water.

Some lucky fellows would have come up with their shoes filled with gold-bearin' sand. It was a sandy creek. But I come up with an idear that sounded too good to be true.

I slept on it two nights then decided it was our only chance. And havin' decided, I didn't mention it to nobody for fear of a leak. Of course there was some risk involved; and if the enemy heard, the north country wouldn't be big enough for No-Shirt McGee.

And I'd never been given time to explain they had it comin' to them.

THE next day I called all hands together to build a new baseball field. "The ground around the old field is too flat," I explained. "Enough of the boys can't see the game. This new place has a natural slope on three sides, and there's room enough for ten thousand folks if that many wanted to come."

They put in the day fixin' up the grounds and tampin' 'em smooth and flat. Everything from the home plate to a point well beyond center fielder's position was cleared. We didn't want any of the boys fallin' down or sprainin' a ankle trying to stop a home-run hit.

After this was done, the banks was terraced so a man could set down and enjoy the game. We planned to borrow lumber to throw on the ground for seats the day of the game.

We also rigged up three entrances and put five-gallon cans at each so the crowd could drop in the admission fee in dust to pay expenses. All that was left over was to be split sixty-forty among the two teams—winners to get the long end of the split.

I borrowed a carpenter's tape and personally laid out the diamond. Then I built up the pitcher's mound, fixed the home plate so it could be brushed off, and cut up squares of moose hide for first, second and third base.

Our team quit the old field and done their practice work on the new one. "I want all you boys to work hard," I explained, "specially the pitchers. I want you in shape, but don't overdo it. You'll be the best judge of your condition. I ain't makin' a lot of fool rules and regulations for you to follow. I'm puttin' it up to each man."

They reacted good.

Fixer Trent publicly congratulated me. "I like the way you have taken hold of things, Mr. McGee," he said. "You've done the job and done it right. Even Mr. Smith —he's the manager of the bank that's to be established here, you know—has commented on your enthusiasm. Organizing a baseball club is no mean undertaking, I assure you."

"You don't have to assure me," I say. "I know it. Well, it's all water over the wheel, as the feller says."

"Confidentially," he asks, "do you expect to win? Has—er—any unusual talent cropped up?"

"Just run-of-the-mine stuff," I answer, "but we expect to win. You can't beat our boys' spirit."

"Spirit is a fine thing," he says, and I had a hunch he figgered it wouldn't beat Jerry Compton's pitching. Mr. Smith beams to prove him and Fixer saw eye to eye.

ON EVERY stampede there're always some lads who pack along their musical instruments. They figger if they don't hit it rich they'll land a job in a band or orchestra. So it wasn't no trick at all to organize a band.

The boys played a few times together, then lined up on the river bank the day the Bear Creek boys arrived. They play a couple of stirrin' tunes, then the Bear Creek lads trot out a band. Aside from the trumpeter soundin' as if he'd split a lip, it was a pretty good band.

Greetin's were exchanged all around, then our boys bought the visitors drinks. The two teams, of course, weren't drinkin'.

I had a good chance to size up their pitcher. He sure sported a crop of whiskers, but he was Jerry Compton all right, though you'd never guess it unless you was a real ball fan, and took about seven hard looks at the cuss.

He called himself Ace Fisher. He claimed he'd played ball on sandlots and in school, which was likely the truth.

Around noon the managers and the two teams got together to make ground rules and such. Their manager was a hardboiled mick named Ryan. "Who're you goin' to have for an umpire?" he demands, and I can see there's a chip on his shoulder.

"Tip McCall," I answer.

"Never heard of him," Ryan snaps. "And I'm again' him. We brought our own umpire along. We don't aim to get robbed, with all the money we've got up."

"Tip McCall," I explain, "is a sergeant in the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and he's a square man. Now what've you got to say to that?"

"A yellowlegs, eh?" he mutters. "I guess he'll have to do. Does he know anything about baseball?"

"Yeah," I answer, "he's been studyin' up for weeks, and he's umpired our practice games. He won't stand for no back talk, either. In case you haven't heard, they have a woodpile over to the barracks."

"I've heard," Ryan answers.

AN HOUR before game time, the crowd flocks out to the ball park. As each miner passes through the gate, he drops a little dust or a nugget into one of the empty coal-oil tins.

When the last man is inside, Ryan puts his hands to his mouth and bellows, "We'll bet our share of the gate against yours. Winner take all. How about it?"

"Had we better do this, No-Shirt?" Walt Elliott inquires. "You've told me nothing that suggests we'll win. That ringer of theirs will hold our hits down to almost nothing."

"I've been plottin' again' them redskins," I answer, "and I think we're goin' to win the game."

Well, the visitors go to bat first, and before our pitcher gets warmed up they nick him for three singles, then a home run. The score is visitors four, home team a goose egg.

Their pitcher fans out our first two men, then we get a home run. Our boys nearly went crazy. And I was pretty well pleased.

"It shows his ball can be hit," Fixer

says, and Mr. Smith nods. "And that will give our boys confidence."

"Why don't you cheer, then?" I demand.

"It may be too soon to cheer," Fixer says.

"Heh! Heh!" There ain't much mirth in Mr. Smith's laugh. "He who laughs last laughs loudest, eh?"

Jerry Compton's pet ball is one that drops sharply and cuts the corner of the plate. If it ain't worked just right the batter is liable to connect and knock the old apple into the middle of next week. But when it works, the batter slices the air and looks foolish.

The first five innin's Jerry has trouble with his pet ball, and we get just enough runs to stay out in front. The excitement is so thick it can be cut with a knife. There's no tellin' who'll win.

Jerry's got a serious look on his face, and so has our pitcher. But try as they will, the boys keep gettin' hits off'n 'em.

Now this don't surprise our bunch much. They know their pitcher is just a sandlot player who turned miner. But the Bear Creek bunch know Jerry's supposed to be a shut-out man when he's right, so his performance pains 'em.

The uproar is constant as we go into the tenth innin' with the score eleven to eleven. Our pitcher fans two of 'em, then has a weak moment and walks one. McCall is doin' a swell job of umpirin'. He's callin' 'em as he sees 'em, but our miners jeer him when he calls that last ball.

"I think McCall is very fair," Fixer says.

"I agree," I chime in, "but I think you're pullin' for the Bear Creek bunch to win. And what's more, I think you've known right along that pitcher's real name is Jerry Compton. If you don't know it, then I do."

He looks pale as a ghost at that, and Smith commences to perspire. "Don't get excited," I add, "I ain't told any of the miners. And what's more, I don't intend to, because I don't want you two cusses murdered, or a riot started."

RIGHT then their batter poles out a home run and the score is thirteen to eleven in their favor. Our pitcher fans the next man, then we go to bat.

It's now or never. And it looks like never when Jerry pitches straight ball and fans two. The next man up fathoms the straight ball and gets a two-bagger. Jerry switches to his pet ball, figgerin' it'll break right for him by this time.

It don't and McCall calls 'em balls and the tyin' run is on first base. I take a look to see who's the next batter. It's our pitcher, and he can't hit the side of the barn. "I'm pinch hittin'," I say, then pick up a bat.

I'm a sandlot player myself, and can smack the old apple with the best of them, even if everything else I do is rotten. "No-Shirt McGee pinch hitting for the home team," somebody says, and a loud cheer goes up.

I don't feel very cheerful myself. If I fan out, then they'll always claim we might've won the game if I'd let the pitcher bat. I'm mindful of the fact that most of the claims in the district depend on my battin' eye. And I know, too, plenty of miners will leave camp and kiss their claims goodbye if we lose. And winter's just ahead, too.

Then I see Jerry wind up. I make out as if to bunt, and the infield comes in a little. At the same time I signal for a double steal. The ball comes over the plate and drops so hard into the catcher's gloves he juggles it.

The double steal works and our gang goes crazy. They're implorin' me for a hit—any kind of a hit if it'll only tie up the game.

"Strike one!" McCall says. Nobody argued it.

When the next one comes it cuts the corner neat, and McCall yells, "Strike two!" You should've heard our gang moan and jeer. I tell 'em to shut up, McCall's right.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Fixer Trent and Smith. They look as if they're goin' to have pups.

Jerry winds up and lets fly. "Ball one!" McCall bellers.

I grin. Jerry figgered I'd go for a bad one. And I figgered he'd figger just that. He winds up again and I get set. It fairly whistles at me. The idea is for it to break just as I swing and make me look foolish.

But it would've broke after it got by me—if it'd got by me.

I put everything I had into the swing and caught it square. It was one of those flies that would take an outfielder's leg off if it hit him. Jerry makes a desperate stab, but the ball's six inches above his fingers and is still climbin'. It goes up. Up! Up! Then on. On! On! Then it curves downward and drops into the mighty Yukon with a loud splash.

I trot around the bases, scorin' the two men ahead of me. The game's won.

OF COURSE I'm packed around on a lot of people's shoulders. It's quite a while before I can escape, and by that time I'm fuller'n a goat. But us McGees carry our liquor well unless we get too much and even then it don't loosen our tongues. We either want to fight or go off somewheres and go to sleep.

I couldn't do either. It was about time for the steamer to take the visitors back home when I found Fixer and Smith alone.

"You almost hooked us at that, Fixer," I said. "Oh don't try to look puzzled. You came down to organize a home town team, then stampede us into bettin' our shirts against the Beaver Creek bunch with their ringer pitcher. Walt Elliott spotted him. Smith, here, supplied the money, the idea bein' he could foreclose on our claims. Well . . . can't blame you for tryin', as the feller says."

I walk away and hail Jerry Compton as he's boardin' the steamer. "That was a tough game to lose, Jerry," I said.

He stops, and I can see he's worryin' his head off.

"I couldn't get my ball to drop soon enough," he said in a puzzled sort of way. "I didn't seem to have the old control."

"Some time," I tell him, "I'll tell you why you didn't have the old control."

All of a sudden he realizes I'd been callin' him Jerry. He'd been so puzzled over losing the game he'd forgot he was supposed to be Ace Fisher. He looks at me kinda surprised for a second, then hurries aboard.

The steamer is cheered to the echo as it pulls out. Our boys felt that way because Elliott was payin' off the bets and it meant that for once the lads who located a new minin' district would skim the cream.

I drop in to get my money so I could pay off Smith's mortgage and salt away the profits.

Walt is lookin' kinda puzzled. "No-Shirt, I still can't understand how we won that game. Of course, your pinch hitting put over the winning run. But our boys were hitting the great Compton and hitting him regularly."

"Most folks will always figger I done my pinch hittin' in the last innin,' Walt," I answers, "but I really done it when I laid out the baseball diamond."

"You did?" he exclaims. "How? What?"

"Easy," I answer. "I figgered Jerry Compton would depend on his pet ball, which breaks sharply just before it reaches the plate. So I shortened the distance between the pitcher's mound, and home plate.

"His balls naturally dropped after they'd passed the batter. That's why our boys connected with so many. And that's why I was pretty sure I could pole out a home run in the last innin'."

"All of which," he says, "should surprise me, but it don't. I had a hunch you'd turn the trick when I left everything to you. Which calls for a drink on me over at the Pastime."

He takes another look and says, ". . . a drink tomorrow, No-Shirt. You've had enough for now."

And I figger he's right at that. One more drink and I might wake up and find myself elected to some office or other.

Dark Thunder

"Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!" they cried, and then they were roaring the Horst Wessel song

By ROBERT CARSE

IN Paris David Lowe, foreign correspondent, met the beautiful Margett Von Rudvig, and soon his love for her helped him to forget the horror of the Spanish War. Some months later Lowe saw her again, in New York; Margett was on her way to her home in Haiti, where her family had lived since the time of Christophe. Accompanying her were her brother Ernst, recently wounded in Spain, and Herr Colonel Count Maxim Spelke.

Spelke, a high Nazi officer, David Lowe remembers all too well from Paris. For there Spelke was Margett's constant attendant, and on his orders a group of Storm Troopers beat up Lowe. Now David Lowe learns from his friend John Folsom, a major in Army Intelligence, why Spelke is going to Haiti with the Von Rudvigs. He is sent by his government, Folsom says, to establish a secret Nazi headquarters on the island. Furthermore, the Herr Colonel Count holds an inexplicable and absolute control over Ernst Von Rudvig.

MAJOR FOLSOM'S plan is for Lowe to go to Haiti, to discover why the Von Rudvigs are so completely at Spelke's command, and to expose this Nazi intrigue that threatens the safety of the Caribbean. To this Lowe agrees, for he must find Margett; and so he sets sail for Haiti on a yawl, accompanied only by a tough, competent Negro named Monk.

As the boat nears Haiti, a Messerschmidt plane appears suddenly in the sky—and attempts to bomb David Lowe's frail craft. But, taking too great a risk, the plane crashes to the sea, and from it Lowe rescues Ernst Von Rudvig. All Lowe can learn from the wounded, nerve-shattered German is that he was serving Spelke's orders, and that Spelke seeks something in Haiti which Von Rudvig alone can help him find.

ARRIVED at the dark island, neither Von Rudvig nor Lowe tells Margett the truth about their sea encounter. David Lowe is invited to Crête à Moulin, the ancestral home of the Von Rudvigs. So he sets out for that German estate in the hills, with Ernst, Margett and Maxim Spelke; his only insurance against the danger that he knows

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will come in the presence of the faithful Monk.

At Crête à Moulin the party receives a welcome from the natives, spoken with drums. Lowe is quick to see who is the real ruler of this island fastness—Maxim Spelke. The house contains a dozen hard-faced guests—all of them with German military titles. And only a few moments after arrival Spelke gives David Lowe a private warning; he must not try to speak to Margett alone. "If you do—" The Herr Colonel Count snaps his fingers. "This!" . . .

CHAPTER XI

SALUTE THE GREATER REICH

DAVID LOWE stood quite still. He looked down the vaulted hall, because he knew that if he looked any longer into Spelke's eyes he'd leap striking at the man. There was a life-size portrait of Bismarck on one wall, and an heroic portrait of Kaiser Wilhelm in dress uniform on the other. The course of history was often strange, he thought. Both Ernst and Margett had been tricked and trapped by one simple, inexorable fact, their deep-grained love of Fatherland.

"All right," he said to Spelke. "You make your warning pretty plain. But what can I do, for or against Margett?"

"Go upstairs and change," Spelke said. "The butler will show you to your room. Then come down and we'll have a drink, and maybe you'll learn a bit of what you'd like to know."

"Thanks," Lowe said, and went slowly along the hall. He passed the door of a huge drawing room as he neared the staircase. Margett and Ernst were in that room. Margett sat weeping, her head in her hands. Ernst was behind her, by the wide-winged fireplace, rum from his glass slopped down his convulsed, colorless face.

David Lowe took more than half an hour to change. He was afraid of himself, afraid of his consuming rage. If you go down there now, he thought, you'll take a poke at Spelke or that guy Gilschau. Then you'll get shot, and Margett will be worse off than ever. Be calm. Move slow, and only when you're sure. The whole job is really too big for you, but you've got to go about it the right way. Starting too fast won't win you anything. Your stunt's to play afraid of Spelke. . . .

He dressed in a linen dinner jacket, carefully knotted his tie. When he stepped out onto the landing, he met the butler. The man stared at him with inimical, bitter eyes, and drew back against the wall.

"No," Lowe said. "I'm not one of the lot downstairs. I'm Mam'selle Margett's friend, and I mean what I say. What's your name? How much do you know about what's going on here?"

"I'm named Vaubin," the butler said. "I know very little, sir. But if you—Listen to them, singing there."

It was the *Horst Wessel* song, given loud and strong. Glasses shattered as the chorus was finished, then Ernst's voice shouted, "More of it! Rum and song!"

"M'sieur Ernst's been to a war," Lowe told the old Negro. "He was badly wounded, and he's brought the wrong friends home. Don't forget, though, that I'm Mam'selle Margett's friend."

"Yes, sir," Vaubin said. "Mam'selle Margett just sent me for you. Dinner is ready to be served."

SPLINTERED glass was all over the drawing room fireplace, but Spelke and the six were far from drunk. Ernst alone staggered dull-eyed. He flung his arm loosely over Margett's shoulder, mumbled to her as she led him into the dining room.

"Don't worry," Ernst said. "Told you not to. These just some of the old pilots out to watch the world grow."

Margett wore a flame-colored dinner dress and a little white piqué jacket. Seated behind the massed candles at the end of the long, perfectly appointed table she seemed as fully in possession of herself as when David Lowe had first seen her at the Château Madrid. But her glance to him was beseeching, almost pitiful

in its intensity, and she hardly replied to what Ernst or Spelke said.

The rest applied themselves steadily to the food and wine, seldom looking from their plates. Near the end of dinner, one of them, a young and handsome fellow with a flushed, scarred face, asked Ernst if he could sing.

"Don't ask me," Ernst said. "This is a military mess here now, except for Margett and her American. The *Herr Oberst* is the man to give you permission."

"Go on, Bruecken," Spelke said, hunched low in his chair. "But be sure it's the right song."

"Our own, *Herr Oberst,*" Bruecken said. "The Condor Legion's." Then he rose, began to sing.

His expression was suddenly transformed. Every sign of intelligence left his eyes and features. He stood as though drugged by some powerful narcotic, veins pulsed blue in his throat and his hands clasped across the chair back. It was sheer hate that held the man, David Lowe recognized. He glanced from Bruecken at the others. All of the German men had the same look.

A chill, swift comprehension came to David Lowe. These men were slaves, he realized, slaves of hate. Once that was aroused in them, they no longer reasoned; they lived only to kill, to destroy whatever stood in their way.

The song itself was an outright expression of defiant hate. Now they roared the chorus together:

We whistle high and low,
And the world may praise or blame us.
We care not what they think,
Or what they'll one day name us.

The crash of hoarse voices stopped. Ernst Von Rudvig was swaying to his feet, hysterically laughing. He lifted a rum decanter high. "Spain," he cried. "Austria, Czechoslovakia, Memel . . . We've showed them, the dogs. Drink to us. *Sieg Heil; Sieg Heil!*"

Margett was leaving the room, but none of them seemed to notice her. They were drinking the toast, shouting the cry Ernst had uttered. David Lowe slowly pushed back his chair, started for the door.

"But no," Maxim Spelke said. "You're a man, despite your blood. Stay and drink with men. Here you will hear things to interest you."

David Lowe flexed his hands shut, then open. "I'm your enemy," he said clearly. "I love all that you hate."

"Foolish talk," Spelke said. "Really nonsensical. I've heard others like you before. But in time they've listened. We're willing to recruit you. In your limited way, you can be of use to us."

"How?"

"To tell America what a great force we represent. Your nation has been stubborn, stupid, has not listened. But we're going right on. All of the world will be ours before we're through."

"Like hell."

Spelke smiled. "It may be hell for a while. But our system is the right one. We are—"

"You're mass murderers," David Lowe said, "who give yourselves the stature of heroes. And when the world wakes up, they'll treat you as murderers. Hate isn't everything. Hate can't conquer the world."

"A philosopher," Spelke murmured, "besides being a fool. . . . But now I must leave you. Ernst will explain to you our new objective. Be patient with him. If you become one of us, you may be his brother-in-law. A pleasant relationship should exist between you, *nicht wahr?*"

David Lowe did not reply. He, like every other man in the room, was listening to the planes.

THEY came in formation flight. The motor sound was nothing at first except a faint tremor against the eardrums. Then it was a high throb, an overwhelming roar.

Spelke rose, made a sign. "Follow me," he told the six. "Von Rudvig, stay here with the *Amerikaner.*"

Ernst Von Rudvig's hands were tense. "Those are the Junkers JU Eights," he

said. "Later, the Heinkel Threes and the Messerschmidts will come. This is to be a great base. From here, we'll be able to smash your fortifications at Puerto Rico into the sea, wreck New Orleans, Baltimore, New York. It is our day, the beginning of our day of glory in the Western World."

The planes were landing. David Lowe heard them come in one after the other, smooth, fast. Searchlights cut through the darkness outside, reared up over the sky. He looked back at Ernst with a kind of pitying horror. "Where are they coming from?" he asked. "Who arranged to bring them here?"

"From our bases in South America." Ernst said, and poured himself more rum. "We have fields and pilots all over that continent. But it is the little, sour fellow, Gilschau, who made the field here. That was not a job for me, the *Herr Oberst* said.

"No—I was to go out to sea and get my flying skill back by bombing you. Now, though, I am where I belong. I'm home, and Crête à Moulin has become a part of the Greater Reich. There's a radio set in the windmill, and our operators bring the planes right in on the beam. Clever, eh?"

"Clever," David Lowe said, "the way Spelke and these other Nazi thugs are using you and your place. You're the wreck that proves my point. Goodnight."

He moved fast toward the staircase once he was outside the dining room. He must find Margett right away, he thought, talk to her of this. But one of the young lieutenants was at the staircase foot. "*Nein,*" he told Lowe. "I have the orders of the *Herr Oberst* to shoot if you try to pass me. You can only go up there with a guard."

"How about the lawns?" Lowe asked, pondering how he could reach Monk, or Hugo.

"You can go as far as where the sentries are stationed," the lieutenant said. "But don't try to slip by them. They'll shoot you without warning."

Heavy white dew was on the grass of the lawn. Fireflies traced across it, but they were made dim by the searchlights. David Lowe stared at the searchlights. They were ranked in batteries, and at every cardinal compass point. Down through their yellow-sweeping radiance the planes dived to earth. There must have been forty or fifty of them that had landed now, he figured.

A sense of futility, of complete defeat abruptly possessed him. You're whipped, he thought. How can you win? This setup is just too tremendous for any one man to break. Then memory of John Folsom came to him. He recalled the intelligence officer's words, pronounced so slowly and earnestly in the cabin of the *Hyperbole* in New York.

Folsom had suspected then what was happening at Crête à Moulin. And Folsom said he was the man for the job, that there was nobody else. Big John had been right about that last, David Lowe thought. But he'd no idea how tough it really was.

This lot Spelke led was determined, tough, absolutely disciplined. Death to them was no more than the pulling of a trigger or a bomb release. The ruined cities and subject peoples of Europe were in their conception simply expression of the Leader's will. They had a single idea and purpose, Greater Germany.

If Folsom were here now, though, he wouldn't stop. He'd keep on trying to bust the show apart until the Germans killed him. He was that kind of man. He never talked much about it, but he deeply loved his country, had a true passionate understanding of the meaning of liberty.

Another flight of silver-pale Junkers crossed the searchlight glare, dived and flattened, landed. Just that one flight, David Lowe told himself, could wreck an American coastal city in half an hour. He shook the sweat from his eyes, and went on around the house.

A white man speaking German halted him. He wore a military brassard on his left arm, carried an automatic rifle. "Back," he said leveling the weapon.

DAVID LOWE returned to stand against the ivied wall beside the door. His hands caught the ivy, clung to it. He was weak, sick with humiliation and rage. They've brought you here like an exhibit for a carnival side-show, he thought. You're just a cheap laugh, Spelke's imported buffoon. The best thing you can do is go out and clout the closest one, and get shot. But then how about Margett?

He shut his eyes to keep out sight of the planes. When he opened them, Vaubin stood before him. The old Negro had taken off his livery and his shoes. He was dressed in fieldhand's jeans, wore a machete inside his belt.

"*Mille pardons, m'sieur,*" he said softly. "But would you tell me why you're here?"

David Lowe's laugh was a rough, quick sound. "I used to be sort of a reporter, Vaubin," he said. "A man who went around the world finding out things other people didn't know. Maybe, though, I found out too much, or not enough. Right now, I'm in a very bad way. I'm no good to myself, or anybody else."

The red-veined, wise eyes gave him a sidewise stare. "I came to talk to you," Vaubin said, "about that. Your man, Monk, he's worried about you. He and Hugo have got to be friends, and Hugo's my nephew. So Monk asked me to tell you that he was all right. He said that if you needed him he'd be along quick."

"Monk had better stay where he is," David Lowe said. "Before he can help me, I've got to help myself. But I have the idea you used to swing quite a stick around here, Vaubin. What do you think of this now?"

"I'm worried," Vaubin said. "The men M'sieur Ernst brought here aren't the kind who belong at Crête à Moulin. Her maids have told me about Mam'selle Margett. She's been alone in her room all evening, and most of the time she's wept. M'sieur Ernst—"

The pistol shot was muffled, but they could hear it plainly there. "Don't come in," David Lowe told Vaubin. "Don't get mixed up in this." He ran for the door.

Ernst Von Rudvig was alone in the dining room. He sat leaning forward, his head on the table. The bullet hole was right over his right eye, and blood filmed out darkly across the spilled rum.

David Lowe didn't know how long he stood in the doorway, waiting. It wasn't long. Margett was first into the room, then Spelke and four or five of the German pilots.

Margett screamed once as she saw her brother. After that she remained motionless, her hands locked across her mouth. But Spelke walked to the table, picked up a black Luger pistol from beside Ernst's chair.

"You did a nice job of it, American," he said. "This is our host's own gun. But what do you think you gain? The Haitian courts hang men for murder."

Margett turned. She looked wide-eyed at David Lowe. "You didn't do this," she said. "You didn't kill Ernst."

"Yes, he did," Spelke said. "He sat here and drank with Ernst. He tried to make Ernst be false to the Fatherland, make him desert our cause. When he failed, he took Ernst's gun. Ernst had no chance; he was drunk before we left."

"I don't want to believe it," Margett said. "I don't think he would do that."

Spelke shrugged slightly. "Don't let emotion," he said, "interfere with logic. Who but Lowe would have reason to kill him? What other man was near enough to do it? I know just where all the others were at the time of the shot."

David Lowe made no effort to speak. He watched Margett. She faced the great, broad windows giving onto the lawn. Hundreds of the plantation blacks stood there, staring in at the man who had been their master.

"He's dead," Margett said to them, the black people. "He has just been killed, and"—her stretched hand pointed—"by that man, who came here as our guest. Take him away. Lock him up. Watch him until the *gendarmes* come."

"Margett," David Lowe said, "you're wrong. I've killed nobody. There were no witnesses to Ernst's death. Don't believe what Spelke has said."

But half a dozen strong black men were in the room, and their machetes were free from the scabbards. "Take him away," Margett repeated. Then she staggered through the door, not looking at David Lowe or anyone.

CHAPTER XII

DUNGEON

THE place where they locked up Lowe was in a solidly walled cellar beneath the windmill. It had been used as a dungeon before, he found when the blacks were gone. There were thick iron bars across the opening for air, and the door was made of huge planks of mahogany.

It was through that space that he heard Spelke. Spelke came and crouched down against the bars. "You were rash just now, and not smart, American," he said. "You should have insisted more upon your innocence. You won't ever get out of here to face any court of law. There won't be any Haitian *gendarmes* to listen to your report of what's going on at Crête à Moulin."

"Why don't you slug me here, slob? You could make up another story for Margett proving I did it myself."

"That wouldn't give me enough sport," Spelke said. "These plantation blacks had a great love or Von Rudvig. He was their master, and with the proper amount of rum and talk, they'll soon be brought to the point where they'll take care of you in their own way. Listen; you can hear them down there. Listen to the drums!"

"Pretty cute," David Lowe said. "But why did you kill Ernst?"

"Ernst was another fool," Spelke said. "He woke up a bit when I took his gun from him, and asked me practically the same question."

David Lowe lay back against the damp stone of the wall. He kept still, wanting Spelke to speak again. But Spelke went away, and then there was just the drum clamor.

It was closer, had become more fierce. Several drums played, all in the same concatenation. The beat lifted until at last the separate notes drew into a mad, throaty hammering of one constant percussion.

There must be a lot of men who accompanied the drummers, Lowe thought. It would be almost impossible for a black man to keep away from that terrific call. But they were coming for him. They were going to kill him, in vengeance for Ernst's death.

He smiled in the darkness. Here the usual roles were changed. Black men were possessed by the lynch-mob passion, and sought a white man. 'Damn' strange," he muttered. "There's a good magazine piece in it."

He sat up a bit, unable to keep still any longer, shocked to motion by the drums. But he was calm yet, and amused. Since he'd started to read the books in his father's library as a kid, history had fascinated him. At school and at college he'd lacked any interest in fiction or drama. For him, they were drab, empty things. Why bother with them when you had the splendor, the endless change and flow of life itself? A stage couldn't contain that, nor could a novel.

It was the same belief which had held him so long in the newspaper business. A reporter was the one man who got consistently close to history, could live once in a while right in the middle of the making of it. What had driven him from the trade was his inability to keep objective. He'd tired of reporting the actions of other men; he wanted to identify himself more fully with the life stream.

"In which," he said in a mocking voice, "you were wrong, mope. Now you know why Spelke brought you here—to take the blame for Ernst's murder and play the prize chump. You've lost your girl and gained nothing but a brutal death. The lad on the *Courier* who writes your

obituary will write a dozen more the same day. Sit still. Let this be a lesson to you."

But he got up and reached for the bars, strained at them. He hammered at the door, slid his fingers over the lock and the hinges to find some weakness. There was none. His stomach tightened with animal fear. Sweat ran down him. In the darkness he thought he could see the faces of the black men up there outside the tower, and then Margett's face.

Margett would miss him. Margett would be the only one. The others, Big John Folsom and Brick Hanegan, would put him down in their memories as a fool. He shouldn't have let the Nazis trap him. His stupid idea of what was supposed to be courage had forced him into this jam from which there was no escape.

He should have stayed in Saint Marc until he'd got a reply from Folsom. Old Vaubin had been with him on the lawn tonight when Ernst was shot. Vaubin was a witness Margett would believe. If he had asked Vaubin to speak for him then, Spelke would have been discredited, the whole phoney story of Ernst's death exploded. But he'd figured he was able to handle Spelke alone. So now he was going to die alone, very stupidly.

He beat his hands against the enormous planks of the door. "Monk!" he called. "Hey, Monk! Hey, Hugo—Vaubin!"

"Quiet, please," Vaubin's low-pitched voice came to him from above. "Be still, and we'll get you out."

THEY were there, all three of them, Vaubin and Hugo and Monk. One of them had a crowbar; he pried powerfully at the grating bars. Little, blue sparks licked from the twisting iron. Bits of cement fell. Then a bar came loose.

"Tini," Vaubin said. "Heave!"

The drums were no longer palmed fast. They gave a low murmuring which undertoned the shouting of the black men outside. Those men carried axes, and some sort of heavy piece of timber. The panels of the main door were splitting with their blows.

"Skipper," Monk called down, "we ain't got much time. You want to take my pistol?"

"I want to get out," David Lowe said. "That's all. If they catch me, they'll kill me, gun or no gun. But give me a hand now. Pull me up!"

They pulled him up while the stone and iron cruelly gouged his shoulders and his hips. He panted in extreme pain, but they brought him through, let him drop prone between them. "We come in by one o' the old drains," Monk said. "Kinda close goin'. You think you're fit to make it?"

"Yes," David Lowe said. He was looking around at the main door. Gaps had been sprung in it. Black faces were beyond. They glistened in the torchlight. Their expression was the same, that of unreasoning and passionate hate.

"Spelke's propaganda," Lowe said, "is cheap, but efficient. Where's that drain?"

Old Vaubin crawled down it first, a machete sharpened as thin as a bayonet in his hand. Hugo went after him, then David Lowe and Monk. Where they came forth was in a tall tangle of guinea grass. "Now give me your pistol," Lowe told Monk. "I'm going to the house."

"For Spelke?" Monk muttered.

"For Margett, and then him. But you guys have risked enough. Get out of here."

"Excuse me, *m'sieur,*" Hugo said. He was hunched down in the grass on all fours like a football linesman about to make a play. "But these German men do a damn' unlawful thing. If you—"

"I'm going to the house," David Lowe repeated. "Vaubin can come with me if he wants. He's my witness that I didn't kill M'sieur Ernst. He might help me a bit."

"Bon, ça," Hugo said. "You take my uncle, you take all of us. That house, it's very full of Germans with guns."

"How can we get into it?" David Lowe asked Vaubin.

"From the rear of the house and the servants' staircase," Vaubin said. "Please, follow me."

They moved, bent double, through the

guinea grass to the edge of the lawn. But there they were exposed, had no time to crawl flat. One after another they ran from bush to bush and tree to tree, stopping only when they heard the pealing burst of shots.

"Guess them fellas found you wasn't there," Monk said. "But that don't say they ain't going to catch you."

"Not for a while," David Lowe said, and sprinted on behind Vaubin. The scrawny little butler ran with a cat-like agility; he had reached the side door, flung it open. He stood just inside it until Lowe and the other two were there, then he started up the lightless stairs.

The house seemed to contain no sound of its own. The cries, the yells and movement were all outside. But men must be here, David Lowe thought. Some of Spelke's guards certainly were stationed near Margett's room. Then he heard the clunk of boots over the hardwood floor of the hall, and the slick of Vaubin's hand changing position a bit on the machete haft.

A guttural gasp came from the German as the machete point touched his throat. "Speak," David Lowe told him over Vaubin's shoulder, "and you'll get that rammed through you."

The man made no attempt to speak, but he tried to stand back. David Lowe hit him a swiping blow across the lower jaw with the automatic barrel. "Better than giving him the machete," he said. "He might've yelled before he died."

"Maybe," Vaubin said. "But now?"

"Now finish him," Lowe said. "Then take his gun and shove him down the stairs. We'll have to get out fast, no matter what *mam'selle* decides. Monk, you and Hugo stay here and watch for us."

THE door to Margett's room was unlocked. Margett had been at the window, staring out at the lawn. She turned slightly as she heard David Lowe and Vaubin, but then she held herself immobile.

"Margett," Lowe said to her, "don't be frightened. What you've heard is a lot of lies. I didn't kill Ernst; I wasn't even near him when he died. Vaubin will tell you that, because Vaubin was with me, out on the lawn when it happened."

Margett moved very slowly forward. She put a hand out to the great, high mahogany bed to give herself support. "How," she said, "can I believe you? How can your words have any meaning, now that Ernst is dead?"

"Let Vaubin tell you," David Lowe said. "He's been here all your life, and I'm a man you've only known a short time. But I must say this: Maxim Spelke killed Ernst. He shot him, and admitted it to me after I was locked up in the mill. It's he who started your people out to get me, so he felt safe to talk."

"C'est vrai," Vaubin said. "This man gives you the truth, *mam'selle.* All is the way he says it, and I'm his witness."

"But why?" Margett said dully. "Ernst had done nobody any harm."

"Nobody," Vaubin said, "but himself. You see, it was from M'sieur Ernst that the other man, Spelke, learned about what is at the Citadel."

Margett's eyes widened. Color came into her face, and her voice was suddenly incisive, strong. "You've always been loyal to our family, Vaubin," she said. "When you name M'sieur Ernst's murderer, I don't doubt you. But what had his death to do with anything at the Citadel?"

Vaubin upturned one pale-palmed hand in a shrugging gesture. "I'm not sure, *mam'selle.* There is something there, though, this Spelke wants very much. The time he was here before, he and M'sieur Ernst made a trip together to the Citadel.

"They told you they went somewhere else close by here in the mountains. But I found out later from black people who'd seen them that they spent several days at the Citadel. And when they came back, M'sieur Ernst was greatly changed. He was afraid of Spelke and did just what Spelke ordered him."

Margett swung, went quickly striding to her dressing table, picked up the little

evening bag she had carried to dinner. "I found this early in the evening," she said, "on the floor of the library." She opened the bag, brought out a yellowed scrap of parchment. "I thought it had fallen from one of the old map cases. But it's been torn right across. The writing's that of old Captain Johann, and all I can read is, *For My Son.*"

"May I look at it, Margett?" David Lowe said.

"Yes," she said, deeply flushing. "Of course. You're the one to really help me now."

THE parchment was very old, David Lowe saw, and had been kept folded for a long time. But it had been recently refolded, shaped to fit a wallet before it was torn. Just below the words Margett had read aloud and at the edge of the rip, were the rusty, faint marks of numerals.

"Part of it may have been a map," he said. "I can make out what looks like calculation figures. Did you ever hear any family stories of something Captain Johann may have left or hidden at the Citadel?"

"Nothing special," Margett said. "In his later years, he was supposed to be a bit out of his head. He was forever talking about his service at Waterloo and with Christophe, or about the huge sum of gold Christophe left at the Citadel.

"But even then everybody in Haiti was telling the same Citadel story. The place was searched hundreds of times for gold, and not a penny was found. Before he died, Captain Johann's sons got to consider him quite a bore."

"Maybe they were wrong, though," David Lowe said. Then he looked at Vaubin.

Vaubin had gone to a window that faced down over the drive circling the house. A powerful automobile motor boomed there, and a man harshly called a command. Vaubin stepped aside just in time; the bullets crashed the window all around where he stood.

David Lowe went crouched to the window. The car had slowed a few hundred feet along the drive. It was the big Mercedes. Four or five men were in it, but Spelke was the only one who showed himself. He sat with the rear door open, an automatic rifle propped across his knees.

"You should've yelled, Vaubin," David Lowe said. "He's not sure he got you." But the car was being sent into gear. Spelke sat back, and then it swerved with a splatter of gravel out into the tree-bordered avenue leading to the Haiti Road.

David Lowe didn't want to gaze into Margett's eyes. When you do, he thought, you realize how fully you love her and what it'll mean to leave her. But you've gone this far and you can't stop.

"Spelke," he said, "was in that car, Margett. He's bound north, and I've got the idea he's heading for the Citadel. But wherever he goes, it's my duty now to follow him. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said, "that he killed Ernst. And that if he keeps control of Crête à Moulin there will be serious disaster for a great many people. If there's another car here, I'm going after him right away.

"We've got a Delage in the garage," she went on. "It's not as fast as the Mercedes, but it's lighter. Once in a while, Ernst and I—" Her voice broke and her lips came tightly together.

"Margett, darling," he said. "Margett, I love you so. But I can't take you with me. It's too big a chance. There's no telling what Spelke will do once he finds I'm after him. You'll be safe here, safer at least than with me. I've got to keep going until I get him. I promised a friend of mine in New York that I would, and I promised myself. But I'll come back as soon as I can, and when I do the whole show will be different."

"Don't say any more now," she said, her arms about him. "I have to stay here, because of Ernst, and what Ernst should've done. But I'll keep Vaubin with me, and you can take Monk and Hugo. Hugo can drive for you."

David Lowe kissed her once, swiftly and very hard. Men were mounting the staircase at the end of the hall. They were calling in careful voices for the sentry.

"All right," David Lowe said, and nodded his head to Vaubin. "Open the door, but keep back from it. I'll go out alone. You stay with *mam'selle*. Take care of her, hey?"

"*Mais oui*," Vaubin said, then opened the door.

David Lowe went out, walking slightly stooped and keeping against the wall.

CHAPTER XIII

FLAME IN THE MOUNTAINS

DOWN the hall, some man had a flashlight. It slashed from right to left, and over him. He held Monk's pistol low against his thigh, fired as fast as the trigger worked.

The flashlight went out. Margett's door had shut. The hall was a place of uneven shadows. Somewhere along it a wounded man crawled, blood pumping up from his torn lungs in whining gasps. Then the flashlight went on again. The little, lank man, Major Gilschau, held it.

David Lowe threw a shot at him and at once sprawled down flat. Bullets chunked the wall above his head. The flashlight fingered toward him, closer, closer.

But Gilschau spoke; he said, "Take your time. Make sure of him."

Two men started forward past the wounded one. They stayed by the walls and out of the thrust of the flashlight. David Lowe almost laughed aloud. Monk and Hugo fired out of the utter dark of the rear staircase in the same fraction of a second.

"Cut it out," Lowe said, in beside them. "You nailed that pair clean and Gilschau's beat it. We've got a real job. We have to catch Spelke. He just went north in the Mercedes. How about it, Hugo? Have we got a chance in the Delage?"

"Possible," Hugo said. "But we got to run fast to get to the garage. Once I'm in the car, no man stop me."

They were fired at as they came out onto the lawn and as they lunged across it. But a blur of mist was over the dew-whitened grass, and it obscured their hunched figures. "Lucky," David Lowe murmured once, "that those guys are flyers. Their weapon's a machine-gun more than a rifle."

A sentry who was a better shot guarded the garage. One of his bullets clipped the upper lobe of Monk's left ear. "Leave me have him," Monk whispered. Then he slid away soundlessly into the mist.

Monk pitched pebbles out into the driveway before the garage, sprang from behind. When David Lowe and Hugo got there, he was making a bandage for his ear. The sentry lay face-down and oddly flung, the splintered spinal bone showing pale through his jacket.

"Good enough shooter, but not a real bright fella," Monk said. "You want for to take some spare gasoline, skipper?"

"No," David Lowe said. "We'll have to see what we can do down below. Get rolling, Hugo, as fast as you can."

Hugo didn't stay on the driveway. He cut across the lawn, between the trees and tall flowers and shrubbery. Men raced them part way, firing repeated bursts. But Hugo knew his car, and every yard he drove. He sent the Delage hammering at over eighty miles an hour down the avenue to the great, arched gateway, then out into the open night.

There were bullet gashes all along both sides. One fender was crumpled as if hit by an immense fist, and a headlight was gone. Yet the motor had the same strong, even stridence, and the tires were sound.

"Look yonder," Monk said. He pointed down into the valley gap below them where headlight beams struck the mists. "Other lot ain't makin' so much time."

"Yes," David Lowe said. "But they could've gone faster. Probably they stopped, to fix the road for us. Watch it, all the time."

They were through the mahogany forest, had descended the first slope of the mountain before Hugo halted the car. "Don't like it ahead," he said. "Rocks there been changed."

"I'll take a look," David Lowe said. "I saw a couple of road mines in Spain."

HE shed his shoes and socks, moved with slow, delicate steps. The mine was planted right in the middle of the road, and the contact wire stretched from side to side. He found that by the fresh trace of fresh earth which was untouched by dew.

"We'll have to dig up the stuff and disconnect," he called back. "It seems to be a dynamite job. But if you want to keep your teeth, don't walk on the space I'm marking."

A bundle of twenty-six dynamite sticks was neatly buried under the flat rocks. "Plenty," Monk said, "to blow a fella high an' fine. But what we goin' to do with it, now we got it up?"

"Explode it," David Lowe said. "Make Spelke think he got us."

"Won't fool him long, skipper. He'll see our headlights, just like we seen his."

"We'll drive without headlights. Can you do that, Hugo, if we go in front and guide you?"

"Yes, sir," Hugo said. "I can."

"Then turn off your lights," David Lowe said. "Get the car across, and around the next curve. I'll let go the stuff."

He chose a stone bigger than a baseball, crouched down behind a solid outcrop of the cliff wall as he slung it back. His distance was about twenty yards from the exposed contact wire, he figured. He was pretty close, but he had to be to make sure.

The rock landed with a rattling thud upon the wire. It won't work, he thought. You'll have to try again. Then the road was split by an up-leaping sheet of dusty flame.

He was knocked from his haunches, down under the outcrop. Trees snapped on the cliff edge, fell into the road. Stone and earth and sod smacked in violent impact. Out in the valley, echoes met crashing over each other, and he retched, the compressed air tight in his lungs.

When Monk and Hugo got to him, he couldn't see. But he was able to laugh. "Be all right in a minute," he mumbled. "Quite a charge, and quite a noise. Spelke will hear it, even though he's singing the Condor song."

They carried him to the car, put him in the rear seat. Then Monk went out in front, started forward at a jog trot. Hugo kept almost at his heels, holding the car in low gear, exactly following each direction he gave.

They're good men, David Lowe thought. If you don't get through, they will. But it's important you do. You're the only one who can talk to Folsom, tell him what's happening. . . . He straightened up then, brushed his hands hard over his face and stared into the valley.

Spelke's car moved at reckless speed. It was in the lower reaches now, nearly out into the plain past the range. "He beats us," Hugo said. "We're too slow."

"We can't go any faster until after sunrise," David Lowe said. "And we'll have to stop down at that town for gas."

Hugo was watching Monk so hard his English failed him. He spoke in soft Creole French. "There's a *Garde* post in the town. When we get there, you could telephone on ahead, have the *gendarmes* stop him."

"Not possible, and for a couple of reasons," David Lowe said. "Spelke is a big man in the German service; he must have a diplomatic passport and a whole pocketful of special papers for him and his bunch. As long as he's just riding in that car, he isn't breaking any law. That's his reason for using it, instead of a plane.

"If I had him halted, I'd have to tell the *Garde* all about the business at Crête à Moulin. The natural, logical thing for them to do would be to go up and investigate there right away. How many roads are there into the place?"

"Just this one, *m'sieur.*"

"Then there's no doubt Gilschau will have it well guarded. He'd shoot every *gendarme* in Haiti before he'd let them in to see those planes. And if he thought he couldn't keep them out, he'd kill Mam'selle Margett, or have her shipped back to a concentration camp. That was the chance I had to take when I left her, that she—"

Hugo braked the car and slowly glanced at him. "*M'sieur,*" he said, "let me tell you. I've known Mam'selle Margett all my life. It was only her brother that made her weak. She can take care of herself against anyone. She'll be all right, she'll be safe at Crête à Moulin while you're gone."

"Thanks," David Lowe said, and smiled. "I needed that. . . . Now I'm going to take Monk's place and give him a rest. But as soon as it's dawn we can make real time. All we have to do is keep Spelke from getting too far ahead of us. My hunch is he's going to the Citadel, but I'm not sure. He must be after something important, though, or he wouldn't leave Crête à Moulin at a time like this."

CHAPTER XIV

SHORT CUT TO PERIL

DAWN caught them at the base of the mountain, in among the glossy spread of sugar cane stretching to the little town. Dogs, chickens and children scattered back across the main square in front of the car.

"Other bunch must ha' burned through quick," Monk said. "Skipper, how about a man for to have a drink o' rum while Hugo gets his gas?"

"You rate it," David Lowe said. "Let Hugo buy it, though. I don't know who's around here watching for us. Sit back, and keep your head down. Anybody asks you, Hugo, you're on your way to Port au Prince."

Hugo took a short pull at the rum bottle when they had left the town. Then he grunted, stretched and stepped hard on the gas pedal. "Nobody asked anything," he said. "But some car's following us. Hold tight; I'm aiming to lose him, the other side o' the ford."

He went into the ford at close to thirty miles an hour. Spray hissed over the hood, flicked the windshield in shining jets. But the motor pulsation only deepened, the skidding wheels took hold, gripped bank. David Lowe looked back and cursed.

Another car was swerving to make the turn into the ford, and the driver was one of the German pilots from Crête â Moulin.

"Fella can drive, too," Monk said. He had taken out his pistol, was fingering the safety catch.

But Lowe told him hoarsely, "Put that away! We can't show our hand until we know for certain where Spelke's going."

"How we find out, skipper?" Monk asked. "He's a good three-four miles in front o' us now. And just one bullet and I take that fella behind right out o' his seat."

"You listen to M'sieur Lowe," Hugo said. "He talks fine sense. We're past the Port au Prince road now. Only place Spelke can go is north, to Cape Haitian and towards the Citadel."

"Well," Monk said, "that makes a big damn' difference. Sorry I was so eager for to use the iron, skipper."

"Just wait a while," Lowe said, grinning at him. "You'll use your iron plenty."

He sat back in the seat then, closed his eyes. The sun, the heat and his exhaustion had become too much for him. He slept, and dreamed of Margett, mumbled her name aloud, and the two black men looked at him in silent, sympathetic understanding.

When he awoke it was mid-afternoon. The hood of the car was flaked gray with dust, and the metal around him was scorching to the touch. But they no longer crossed the wide central plain. They climbed a series of great, looping

curves around the edges of gorges that were already purple-black in shadow.

"This is the Puilboreau," Hugo said. "Over the other side, we come into the Plaine du Nord and the Cape. Right beyond there's the Citadel."

David Lowe gazed up at the far reaches of the road, then down. The Mercedes was ahead up there, perhaps a mile away. Behind, almost within pistol range, was the car that had followed them since the ford.

"How many roads lead towards the Citadel," he asked Hugo, "after we're over the Puilboreau?"

"Only one main one," Hugo said. "But a couple of smaller ones branch out from a town down there called Plaisance. You want me to try to get closer to the Mercedes?"

"No," David Lowe said. "I want you to slow down gradually and let the Mercedes get over the summit without us. That guy in back must know where Spelke's going. Get around the next turn and I'll jump out and have a little talk with him. Keep on for a couple of hundred yards, then wait for me."

He jumped into a thicket of bamboo and spike-cactus, crouched down with the stuff lancing sharp against his flesh. But he hardly felt it; he was watching the lower road over the Colt fore-sight.

THE car came up the slope with an easy sweep of power. He put a pair of shots into the windshield, another into the near front tire. It bucked in a sidewise skid across the road, raked against the bank and stopped. The driver got out jerking at a Spandau machine-gun.

David Lowe shot him high in the right arm. The man went down, lay kicking painfully in the road. "Get up," Lowe said, then hauled him up by the hair of the head. "You know me; I'm the *Amerikaner*. Where's Spelke going? Tell me, before I beat hell out of you."

Blood beads were on the German's lip where his teeth bit. He unclamped them only to curse David Lowe.

"All right," Lowe said, and dragged him over to the car. A compact radio telephone set was under the dash, the headpiece on the seat. "You've been using this to talk to Spelke ever since you started following us. You know where Spelke's going. I'm in a hurry; I'm not fooling. Tell me his plans or I'll whip you just as bad as your own Gestapo."

The German cursed again. "I'll tell nothing," he said.

A kind of sick horror took David Lowe. You must, the thought kept repeating in his brain. If you don't learn what Spelke's doing now he'll get away from you. Then more peaceful cities will be wrecked and countless innocent folks killed. So just shut your mind, and strike. . . .

He hit the German open-handed, across the eyes and mouth. He knocked him down, kicked him pitching, writhing. Then he once more brought him upright.

"I'll call my men to hold you while I do the fancy Gestapo stuff," he panted. "They know who killed Ernst Von Rudvig, and why. They don't mind a bit if you scream."

The German coughed out the words as though his throat were already in a strangling grip. "Spelke is going to the Citadel," he said. "But for what reason I don't know. That's all he has told me or any of the others."

"You're sure?" David Lowe's hand was poised back taut.

Fear flickered in the blinking eyes, fear that was tearing down the last resistance of will. "More men are to meet Spelke at the Citadel. They're from some German ship off the coast. But they—"

The man started to run. He stumbled toward the Spandau gun in the road.

David Lowe let him get his hands on it. "I understand," he said then, and drew the Colt down level with the other's heart. "You've just realized what Spelke will do if he catches you after this. But I can't give you a chance. I can't trust your word and let you get away. Go on—try to pick that up!"

Veins distended on the German's hands. They seemed huge, no longer parts of his body. But they closed about the smooth steel and wood of the gun, began to raise it.

Some residue of memory, some dim recollection of the horror there in Europe, made David Lowe pull the trigger of the Colt.

The German fell with his face to the sun. He lived for several more seconds. His staring eyes fixed on David Lowe. "The Leader," he gasped, "the Leader will someday know. . . ."

David Lowe didn't want to look at him, or touch him. But he lifted the body, tossed it far down into the gorge below the road. Then he went stumbling up the slope, dully hearing Monk's voice. But it made no impression upon his thought. "The Leader," he said in a thick whisper, "will someday know. . . . Know the truth, the poor guy meant. But Spelke's first. It's Spelke who's carrying out the Leader's mad dream."

WHEN he returned to the car he was beyond the point of speech. He sagged in the seat, his head down. Every resource of his energy seemed to have ebbed away, left him weak, almost senseless. But then he became aware of Monk's and Hugo's tense curiosity. He looked at them and nodded.

"I got him," he said. "He had a Spandau gun, but I nailed him leaving the car. There's a trick radio phone set in the car. Spelke must have another like it in the Mercedes. They've been keeping track of us all the time, and weren't fooled for long when I blew that mine.

"But we can't worry Spelke much. I found out for certain that he's going to the Citadel. Another bunch of Germans from some ship will join him there. The longer we follow him, the better off he is. He knows just where we are, and if we do catch up to him, we'll be three men against half a dozen, or a whole lot more. The way he rates us, we're still a small laugh."

"You find what he's out to get at the Citadel?" Monk said.

"No," David Lowe said. "The guy I stopped insisted he didn't know. He said nobody in the German outfit but Spelke knew. But we have to get to the Citadel first. How can we do it, Hugo, if any?"

Hugo let go a slow, thoughtful whistling note. Then he pointed, off to the sharp-reaching mountains in the north and east. "Leave the car," he said, "and cut across country on the back trails. There's a man who lives near here who used to soldier in the *Garde* with me. He'll get us horses, guide us. But it's a tough haul. Those trails are bad."

"Do you think Spelke might use them?"

Hugo grinned. "No, *m'sieur*. The black men around here don't work for strangers. And without them, nobody can get through the back country to the Citadel. Spelke'll have to go into Cape Haitian on the main road, then swing around through Milot. That's still a long way; he'll be quite a time yet before he gets there."

"How long will it take us by the trail shortcuts?"

"Depends how good you can stick on a horse, *m'sieur*."

"Once I'm on, I stick. How about you, Monk?"

"May have t' lash me on," Monk said. "Horses and me ain't very strongly acquainted."

"Then we use the shortcut," David Lowe said. "They may have to lash both you and me on after a while. I'm no bold *caballero*. But it's the ticket for us."

Hugo pulled the car to the side of the road just over the summit of the Puilboreau. Down in the folds of the broadening valley David Lowe could see the Mercedes. It kept steady speed, was already miles away. You're certainly a confident guy, Spelke, he thought, and then looked up as he heard Hugo.

ANOTHER man was with Hugo. He came walking beside him from a white-washed hut set back from the road

behind a huge star apple tree. A broken straw hat was on his head, and he was barefoot. But the scabbard of the machete at his hip was beautifully kept, and the wide-set eyes in the lean, black face were keen, steady in their scrutiny.

"This is Gros Catulle," Hugo said. "Sergeant in the Seventeenth Company of the *Garde* with me. He lives here. He owns horses, and he knows all the country from here to Santo Domingo."

David Lowe shook hands with Gros Catulle. "Are you willing," he asked him," to make the trip with us to the Citadel?"

"Oui, m'sieur," Gros Catulle said quietly. "Hugo's my friend. Once, when we're fighting the *cacos,* he saves my life. When do you want to start?"

"Right now," David Lowe said. "But if you've got a gun, bring it."

Gros Catulle touched the machete haft. "Enough for me, *m'sieur.* I leave the rest for you and the Citadel guard."

"There's a squad of *gendarmes* stationed at the Citadel," Hugo said. "They stay in the place all the time, and they've got rifles. Anybody who hasn't a pass to enter, they stop."

"A break for us," David Lowe said. "But we'd better feed Monk before we put him on any horse."

"Yes, sir," Monk said. "And plenty. The horse won't mind."

They sat in the dooryard of Catulle's hut and ate rice and chicken stew while Catulle and Hugo saddled four stocky little horses. The bridles and saddle blankets were made out of palm coir, David Lowe saw, and the saddles were constructed of nothing but rough slabs of wood.

The back trails, he decided, would make real tough going. Then for the first time he realized that he hadn't changed his clothes since the night before; he still wore his linen dinner jacket, black alpaca trousers and glazed shoes.

The jacket was stained, filthy. There was a frayed tear across one knee of the trousers, and his tie had disappeared. He laughed, finding Monk's eyes upon him. "How about it?" he asked. "Do I look as though I'm set for a night's outing?"

"Look like a fella," Monk said, "who knows what he's up to for sure, hell or corruption. But before you started them was nice pants."

"If I get Spelke tonight," David Lowe said, "I won't mind buying a new pair." He rose then and signed to Catulle. "We're ready to go," he told him, "any time you are."

"Right now," Catulle said, and swung the nearest horse around. "Just follow me."

David Lowe slipped into a state of dreamy stupor during the hours of that ride. He dreamed to keep back recognition of the pain that jabbed burning through all his body. His imagination took him to the Connecticut town of his boyhood, and he played ball in a wide, elm-shadowed street, dug for clams in a mud flat of the bay, hitched rides behind a sleigh whose runners made a creaking whine over the fresh snow.

There'd been no pain to hide from then, no terror across the world. At night, maybe, when you'd eaten too much and grunted and rolled in your sleep, your mother would come upstairs to see if you were all right, but that was all. The world had been different, even for her and your father, and 1914 was still just a date on the calendar.

That date had changed everything. In prep school, some of the older boys had gone off, and months later you'd seen their names in the paper, killed while serving with the Royal Flying Corps, or such and such battalion of Canadian infantry.

Then the States had gone in, and you'd worn khaki yourself, paraded up and down the town at college wishing the girls would really think you were a soldier. But at the Armistice you'd shared in the free beer, and you were no longer a kid. You were a man, and already jealous of the shortness of your youth. . . .

The thread of his dreaming broke with memory of the Armistice. He emerged

into the world about him, felt the cruel galling of the saddle against his thighs, the rough-jerking stride of the little horse down the mountainside. Go on, he thought; curse it. Get the pain out of your system that way. But then he knew if he cursed the other men would know how much he suffered by the sound of his voice.

HE looked around him, off into the night, trying to spell himself in its weird beauty. It was all silver and black, misty shadow and moonshine in the valleys. Then on the upper slopes the firs lifted like wings against the moon, and the stars scorched the sky blue-white.

Across the eddies of the valley mists a drum syncopated. Gros Catulle swung his head as he heard it, then raised a big, curved shell from his saddle bow.

"Name for that's a *lambi,*" Hugo said. "Really's nothing but a conch shell, but the hill men use them for a bugle. Catulle is calling over to some other folks to get us more horses."

"Time he did," Monk said. "This one and me ha' just about signed a suicide pact. My legs ain't my own."

"There'll be a snort of rum for you across the valley," David Lowe told him. "But how far from there to the Citadel, Hugo?"

"About ten kilometers. We keep along that next ridge to the north. It'll bring us right up against the south wall of the place."

"Good," David Lowe said, and was silent again.

Black men bearing torches met them in the valley bottom, helped them and the horses up the far slope. Then they came into a clearing where there were half a dozen huts and women kept a cooking fire built high.

David Lowe fell from his horse, numb from the waist to the feet. But circulation throbbed back, and he was able to get Monk down, move over to the fire. The women smiled, held out bowls of steaming food.

"Papa mi," Monk said. "These people know what a man's stomach needs. But that rum now, that's something I'd like good."

Gros Catulle was walking toward them, a rum bottle in each hand. "One for drinking," he said in the Creole. "The other to massage your legs. Up ahead there, maybe you'll have to step around quick."

"Very probably," David Lowe said. "I guess Hugo told you about the kind of men we're up against. It'd be fine if we could take some of these fellows here with us."

Gros Catulle shook his head half smiling. "They don't work for anybody but themselves," he said. "In the old days, their folks were runaway slaves, and they've always stayed here in this valley."

"Then let's go," David Lowe said. "We haven't got much time."

They went fast on the fresh horses. A twisting trail rang along the ridge between the tall trees, and Catulle kept the pace at an even trot. David Lowe was aware of every sensation now; his strength had returned, and he was eager.

He noticed the change in the mists, heard the birds and the cicadas begin their choruses. The mists were thinning, lightening. Bands of opal broadened in the eastern sky, brought the brief, false dawn. The horses whinnied deeply and took a swifter stride. He pulled back on the bridle, slowed his mount. The Citadel was straight north.

CHAPTER XV

SECRET CITADEL

IT was so vast it seemed unreal. It raised as though free from the mists about the immense flanks. But the dream of a simple black man built that, Lowe thought. Christophe could hardly sign his name, and yet he made folks like Captain Johann and the rest work for him. He must have been really great, Christophe; he'd have taken care of Spelke in his time. . . .

Catulle had stopped, dismounted. "Dawn soon," he said. "Men on the walls can see us. Better we leave the horses here."

David Lowe nodded, still watching the Citadel. "We'll go on foot," he said. "Stay with the horses if you want."

Catulle stood straight. "I go with you, *m'sieur,*" he said. "Hugo, he's told me about this."

"We need you," David Lowe gravely said, then looked around him at the other men. They had nothing but three pistols and Catulle's machete, he realized. There at the Citadel they were certain to meet men armed with rifles and light machine-guns, perhaps hand grenades. But there was no going back, not for him or any of the three.

He sensed their glances studying him, and he brought himself to smile. Now he was completely their leader, they wanted him to understand. They weren't fools; they'd seen enough of death to reckon the danger ahead of them. Fear was in the backs of their brains, and yet they knew what Spelke stood for.

"There's nothing I can tell you," he said to them, "except that we've got to get in there, find Spelke. Catulle, you know the place. We'll step out in front of Monk and Hugo, take the front rank."

"Oui, m'sieur," Catulle said, and then he brought his heels together, his fingers stiffly met to the brim of his broken straw hat.

They were forced to crawl after a few yards. A forest fire had swept the ridge here, and nothing was left except low brush and scanty grass. The sun was out and it rimmed the world red. David Lowe felt it on the back of his neck; he blinked against its rays as he stared up at the Citadel.

The huge, battlemented walls were empty. Down below the gun embrasures gaped dark in shadow. It was quite silent. The sounds were those of a piece of dry mortar dropping, a trickle of water far within. But that silence wasn't right, David Lowe thought. A whole squad of the Haitian Guard was supposed to live in the place, and in the tropics men got up early, did their duties before the hours of heavy heat.

He looked aside at Catulle. "Something wrong," Catulle whispered. "I smell cooking fire, but it's almost burned out. Men of the guard—"

The rifle bullet passed less than a foot above their heads. It caromed from a rock beyond, left a bright, sharp mark. Then a rapid volley broke.

DAVID LOWE remembered what the International Brigade men had told him in Spain. He kept his head down and kept on moving. Catulle followed him, and Monk and Hugo. They used every slight depression of the ground, every bush.

But the men sniping them were excellent shots. Monk got it first, through the calf of the leg. He rolled over in a jerking heave, then lay still.

"Fella," he grunted, "knows a leg when he sees one. Should ha' had it behind the bush."

"Can you keep going?" David Lowe asked him.

"Not for much, skipper. Fella hit me solid on the bone."

A sweat of rage came down David Lowe's face. Spelke was in the Citadel. Spelke's crack riflemen were potting at them like shooting gallery pigeons. But he was going to reach the guy, get to him alone.

He slowly spread the leaves of the bush that sheltered him. About ten yards away was a tumbled gray mass of ruined masonry. "Monk," he said, "do you think you could reach that?"

"Try," Monk said. "Better than bein' killed here."

"I'm going to run past it," David Lowe said. "I'm going right on to the Citadel. You guys keep together in that place. Get a bandage on Monk's leg, Hugo. If I'm not back in half an hour, take the horses and go. There's no real reason why you should be killed in a useless

scrap. My act now is purely personal."

He rose before any of them could speak, thrust his slippery soles hard against the soil and ran. The bullets made a whirr, a hiss. The air vibrated with their passage. In his brain he saw them, small, dull-shining, any one enough to kill him.

But he laughed as he ran. He felt deathless. You're so big, he thought, they should score on you a hundred times. Look. You're past all that old pile of stone. Twenty, twenty-five strides more and you're out of the open. Then you'll be right underneath the Citadel, so close they can't get you from above. Come on; count the strides.

He was busy counting when the bullet hit him. It struck somewhere in the side, and it hurled him on his back. He fumbled in his pocket and took out the Colt. His movement was wholly instinctive; he hadn't yet seen the man before him.

The German stood on the ramp leading up to the portcullis gate of the Citadel. He had a Mauser rifle, and as he worked the bolt to eject the empty, it made a faint click.

David Lowe heard that. He propped the Colt across his left wrist, pulled the trigger with a slow squeeze.

The German had been about to fire another shot. He took a backward step, lifted his left hand to touch his face. Then blood frothed from the cheek puncture and he lurched over dead.

"Nice going, Lowe," David Lowe mumbled. "But you're getting a lot of support from the outfield. That's the one reason you're still alive. . . . Move, will you?"

A racking drum-fire of automatic shots came from behind him. The three had reached the stone pile, he realized, were ranging volleys at the German riflemen in the Citadel embrasures. He'd been wounded by the man posted as sentry at the gate.

He hunched his elbows, began to crawl. To move at all gave him intense pain. He flopped giddily, at last dragged forward on his belly. But when he reached the dead German he took the Mauser, braced himself erect with it.

The shooting had lulled. He could hear the pound of heavy boots high in some gun gallery, and Monk's grunted curse as his leg was bandaged. All right, he thought. The lad you're looking for is inside. Your unlamented pal here left you his rifle, and he was a sentry. Maybe you can get the next one with his gun. . . .

HE went up into the Citadel, shunting against the rough brick wall. He knew where his wound was now, between two of his lower ribs. The ribs were broken, and when he moved too hard, blood pounded out hot and slow.

These boys like your ribs, he thought. They broke a couple for you before in Paris. But what you like is their heads. Put all your shots there. Head-hunter Lowe, the Connecticut wizard, that's you. Watch where you're going, though, wizard. Make absolutely sure of your next shot.

The second sentry was at the turn of the wide stairs within the portcullis gate. Sunlight from above streaked the obscurity where he stood, touched his ruddy face.

David Lowe drew a bead between the eyes. The man fell lopping one step at a time down toward him. This one carried a grenade sack, Lowe found. He slipped it off, slung the strap over his own shoulder. Now you can be the big noise, he thought. But you'll have to wait until you're up top.

There were no more sentries. He passed huge, dusty, empty gun galleries and corridors that echoed only to his own shuffling sound. Then the light brightened, became incandescent. He heard men.

They were in open air, he realized, out in what must be the main courtyard of the place. Their voices were guttural German, and stopped abruptly as Spelke spoke.

"The other three will make us no more

trouble," Spelke said. "We can get them any time we want them. Now lay your fuses. We'll have to blast that whole wall out to drain the water. Sergeant, go down and tell the men with the mules to bring them right up to the gate."

David Lowe released his breath in a kind of sob. His strength was nearly gone, he knew. For a while here he'd been out of his head, driven to move by his hatred of Spelke. But a lot of men were in the courtyard. One of them was coming toward him now, and he was too weak to lift a gun.

He huddled back against the side of the staircase, took a grenade from the sack and tried to pull the pin. It rolled from his hands, pitched jarring down the steps.

The German was at the top of the staircase about ten feet away. He was a big man, with a cropped, square head. The sunlight there gave him added stature, made him appear gigantic. *"Wer ist's?"* he called down, and then grasped at his pistol.

In that intense sunshine where the German stood the grenade explosion made a pale green whorl of fire. His body was erased, flicked away like a shadow from a screen. Beyond, fragments of steel flung off stone, and the staircase quivered in tremendous shock.

David Lowe turned gaping, not comprehending. The man who had picked up and thrown the grenade was a couple of steps below. It took all of Lowe's remaining thought to recognize him. He was John Folsom, and behind him were men in the khaki uniforms of the Haitian Guard.

"Just a quick one," John Folsom said. "How are you, sport?"

"I've been better," Lowe said. Then it was all black where he sat, and he let himself go, slide down and again down into deep unconsciousness.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

The woman sprang up then, carried by a screech that set every Indian back on his hams; she and Rusty leaped like crazy

Fire Medicine

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Cleopatra's Amulet," "Isle of the Dead," etc.

A short but significant commentary on the constancy of woman in Injun territory. With supplemental notes on how to tell buffalo hides from scalps, and keep the right ones

"FEELS durned good to be a free man," muttered Rusty Smith complacently. "Seventy hides and a passel of Injun-dressed robes stored at 'Dobe Walls! With a little luck on this scout I can head for Tennessee ag'in, end o' this year—hello!"

There was the gun again. The dull bang-bang of the heavy load punctuated the July morning like the spaced tick-tock of a pendulum. Someone had a stand on a bunch of buffalo and was making his kill, reflected Rusty. He jogged on cautiously, keeping to the hollows.

The swells of the Texas Panhandle stretched away illimitable and quivering with heat. Rusty Smith mopped his face. He was a tousled hairy giant of a man, long of hair, long of shaggy beard, in weathered, greasy plains costume.

He sighted a team and wagon stationed in a hollow; no gun there. Another shot lured him on until an opening between swells gave clear view. Out on a flat, five

hundred yards ahead, was a ragged brown blotch: buffalo. Halfway to the clump of beasts, smoke jetted. The killer must have crawled a quarter-mile from the wagon to his stand yonder.

To the vicious report an animal, turned broadside, gave a little hop, walked a few paces and stood with head down. Its legs buckled, and it rolled on its side. Nearby animals regarded it, sniffed, drew uneasily away. The killer waited until another buffalo turned broadside. There was the spot, large as a hat-crown, behind the fore shoulder, where a ball would tear through the lungs. It needed a steady muzzle and a good eye at the distance.

Rusty Smith had spotted the killer. The gun was probably a Sharps .50; the fellow had brass cartridges beside him. One elbow shifted when he picked up a fresh cartridge. The animals were restless. A cow started to lead off. The gun belched; the cow hopped, stood, sank down. The bunch smelled blood and began to drift, heads up, tails crooked.

Rusty Smith grunted, flung from the saddle, and ran forward across the breeze, bent low, old Springfield muzzle-loader at trail. If he could find a stand, head the bunch and get in a shot or two, the day would not be lost. At two hundred yards he flattened out. Holding high on a half-turned bull, he let go. The ball plunked a second after the report.

The bull jumped, horned another bull, and the group broke into a blind run with the wounded bull limping. A shoulder shot.

A horseman, until now invisible, came tearing on, drew in on the straggling bull, and a revolver exploded. The bull fell, the rest of the group fled at full gallop.

Rusty Smith ran back to his horse, swung aboard and cantered forward to claim his meat; he was too old a plainsman to risk being caught afoot. The other man had dismounted by the carcass, and peered at Smith from under a ragged hat-brim.

He was a heavy old man, grizzled to the eyesbrows, beard wagging on his chest, narrow black eyes focused in a suspicious squint. His weapon was a Civil War cap-and-ball pistol

"Wall, stranger, I downed this 'un," he said as Smith drew rein.

"My arrow."

"What you mean?"

"First hit gives first choice of meat."

"Reckon I killed him, didn't I?"

"After I'd put my sign on him. That's Injun law and white man's law too. First blood sets up a claim."

"I'm from Missouri, stranger; you can't work Injun law on me. As for white man's law," and he tapped his old revolver, "I got what'll out-talk you on that."

Rusty Smith choked down his wrath; the bull was not worth fighting over. The killer, off to the right, was standing up and watching them. The old man drawled on:

"Reckon we can fit you out with meat if you ask civil. I'm peaceable if not crossed. You'll git better over at the other kill. I don't aim to putter with this bull yet. I'll go fetch the wagon and if you want to lend a hand you can butcher yourself a hunk of cow meat."

RUSTY reined aside and headed for the killer. He heard the squeak of saddle leather as the old fellow mounted; presently he drew rein beside the first stranger, who was squatted and pawing for the scattered brass shells. A peevish voice shrilled up.

"You and your blunderbuss shore set 'em on the run. You got no sense?"

The figure scrambled erect — lank, slab-sided, leather-face under big hat, flannel shirt and overalls. Rusty stared, dumbfounded. A woman in a man's rig, and might have been youngish, if the plains wind and sun and a shrewish cast of feature had not blighted her aspect. She went on talking, a fleer in her voice.

"But you put my old man in the way of downing one, for a brag. I was shot out anyhow. Six kills with six ca'tridges at two-fifty yards. Ain't bad."

She eyed him, taking his measure, and not shy about herself either. Rusty noted

the six empty shells pawed together on the ground.

"No more loads?" he asked gruffly.

"No." Her lip curled. "Six he 'lows me so's I won't waste none. He's plumb lazy and leaves me to do the crawlin' and killin'."

"Hell!" Rusty said from the saddle. "You ought not to come into Injun country scant of cartridges."

"Back there at Fort Sill in the reservation territory they said we'd do all right. My old man aims to make a stake out of hides."

"I'll tell your old man to get you off this range pronto. You're a white woman. He can do his own hide-getting."

"Him?" She laughed tartly with a shrug of lean shoulders. "Dan, he can't line up sights for sixty yards with those eyes of his'n, but he knows I can drive a nail at fifty paces. A young feller taught me back in Tennessee. Had a long squirrel rifle as purty as I was." She tittered, eyeing him with a defiant ogle in her bleached blue eyes. "That ain't only ten years back, mister."

Rusty stared at her. Lean, hawknosed, features brown and weathered up to the line of hair, he looked all of fifty years, but was not.

"Tennessee rifles are right good pieces," he said. "Come from thar myself, pretty close to ten year back. Right after the Civil War. What might your old man's name be?"

"He's Dan Tucker. If you'd ever lived in west Tennessee you'd have heard of me, Sally Burr. My young feller went west on a promise and never come back, the vagabone, so I married old Dan. We scrabbled for a living in Missouri, then we sot out for the buffalo country. Every hide's wuth a dollar'n a half."

"And twice earned," grunted Rusty Smith. His mouth, that had been agape, closed with a snap.

"Right, mister. If ever I ketch up with my feller Tom Lufkin, I'll take his hide too!" She eyed Rusty with dawning approval. "Dan's likely watching us through his spyglass, but don't you mind that. I reckon you're a trader? What name do I call you—oh!" Her gaze flickered shrewdly past him, startled. "Who's them? Injuns?"

Rusty swung about, and swallowed hard. Indians at a free lope as if they had sprung from the clay soil. Eight, ten, riding in silence. Where the devil was that old man with the wagon? He peered briefly; no sign of the team. He heard the woman's sharp tone.

"What you reckon they want? Can you hold 'em off?"

"With my gun? Might, unless they guess your gun's empty. They'll cut off your old man."

"Serve him right for his infernal stinginess."

"You don't savvy," said Rusty. "If I have to shoot and kill, they'll kill him sure."

He did not say what else they would do after they charged in upon his empty muzzle-loader and her useless buffalo gun.

"I got a way with men, no matter who," she said. "You talk with 'em till Dan gits here. I'd admire for them to make him sweat. If he was to give up the buffalo it'll be like pulling his last teeth."

Rusty hurriedly picketed his horse to the pin he carried. The Indians had swerved for the buffalo carcasses; they halted, their voices in a buzz. Under his breath, Rusty cursed the old man; he and the wagon a quarter-mile away, himself and the woman here! Stingy six cartridges in Indian country! Old man Tucker would pay dear for his damned tight fist.

Let him pay, then. But what of the woman? As for himself, he might lose his gun but not his life. His "medicine," as the Indians called it, was strong; his life had always been handed back to him. Then, squinting, he cursed softly. He knew this man.

An Indian was advancing with palm up in the peace sign, fingers making the talk sign. Rusty knew who he was by hearsay, knew that blue blanket, that light-colored face with the gray eyes. Quanah Parker,

they called him; son of a white mother, chief of the Kwahadi clan, the medicine clan of the Red River Comanches.

IT WAS against all treaties to kill buffalo in the Indian country. Quanah meant business; the peace sign was merely a dodge. The others were edging in. They wanted pay for the killed buffalo. Comanches did not hurt women, but they kept them, which was worse.

"Old Dan can argue with 'em," the woman was saying. "Those hides are wuth a dollar'n a half. At argufying over a penny he can out-tucker a Fhildelphy lawyer."

"Argue, hell!"

Rusty Smith started; the idea in her words snapped upon his thought like a wolf trap. He knew when redskins meant business. The Comanches were at fifty yards and were coming warily, ponies held with taut jaw thong for sudden release and the killing rush. They suspected the Sharps was empty, knew the Springfield for a one-shot gun.

He heard a squawk from the woman. "My Gawd! Here comes a passel of Injuns with Dan!" Distant yelps sounded. The idea tugged at him. It was the one chance. With a wild whoop, he sent his hat sailing high, and struck into a jig.

Old Dan Tucker—that was it, to invisible fiddle and bow and gibberish chant! *Old Dan Tucker, Turkey in the Straw, Tennessee Gals*—what mattered how he fiddled on nothing, how he timed his steps to senseless blatter and yappy yells!

Through the dust raised by his hammering boots he saw the woman gawking at him.

"Be you crazy?"

"Aim to be," he grunted. "Hooray! Jine in. Injuns won't meddle with crazy folks."

The bronze figures were paused, sitting upright, craning, black eyes fixed, coppery faces stolid to mask their wonder. Quanah had halted, peering, squinting.

There was the wagon, driven at a gallop, old Tucker on the seat, Indians escorting on either side, the loose saddle horse on a lead rope. Rusty cavorted wildly, jigging in a reek of sweat, his long hair flung to the jerks, his powder flask hopping, bullets and caps in his pockets rasping the skin.

"For land's sake!" cried the woman. "You'll be plumb wore out!"

This drew insane laughter from him. The Indians were dismounted now, toeing forward, sinking in a circle; he could smell them. They stared, unwinking, suspicious, with occasional dart of eye at the woman. She wearily sat down, clutching the Sharps to her lap, breathing with a rapid lift of flat chest, with lips dourly pinched and eyes wide.

An Indian moved, stepped to her, and snatched the Sharps away. He stooped for the muzzle-loader, but recoiled at a chorus of cries. Untouchable, bad medicine, crazy man's gun, Rusty chuckled, with breath short, but the seizure of the woman's gun alarmed him. They meant business. Business meant scalps. He jigged on, desperately.

Here was the wagon and the whooping escort, the old man plumping from the seat with a rasping bellow of complaint.

"What's this hyar tomfoolery? Are ye crazy? I got it fixed for no trouble. I gin up my gun, fixed to call Sal in to cook 'em a meal, then you tolled these other fellers in with your show! If I lose them hides there'll be trouble. . . ."

Rusty paid no heed. The Indians were in a squatting circle now, Quanah at stare. The Spanish word came to him: "Loco!" And, in the Comanche dialect: "One, leave. Woman, good. Old bull no good."

"For God's sake jig!" he panted desperately.

"I jig for no damn' Injuns!" roared the old man.

"You're too stiff, you old fool. Here I go, crazy as a hen with its head off." The woman sprang up, carried by a screech that set every redskin back on his hams. Rusty danced over to her, touched her, moved away. As though springs had been released by his touch, she began to jig, bobbing, swaying, shrilling like a hellcat, her overalls plucked like skirts held high.

"For ol' Tennessee!" she whooped. Off

went her hat, shaken from her head. Her clipped hair was bunched with a low comb. Rusty sighted it and his sweat-bleared eyes lit up. As they circled each other he reached through the dust and snatched the comb. She laughed wildly.

HE WAS staggering now, but saved himself. She flung into it with a vim that quickly wore her down. Rusty was not surprised when she gave in; with a final croak and double shuffle she buckled at the knees and sat flat, heaving with mouth open.

He saw her through the dust, red, grimy, wet and lank, her hair in scraggly locks, breath coming harsh. With a last fling and a whoop he gave in and was down. For a moment the ground and the squatting circle swam in his smarting eyes.

"Sing," he gasped out, the comb at his lips.

"Oh, lordy me!" she wheezed. "I ain't sung for a coon's age."

"Don't talk; sing!"

Old Tucker cut in with angry snarl.

"If you too'll quit yore capers 'fore them buff'ler stiffen hard to skin, we'll talk with these Injuns! It'll take all day if we don't git started."

"Shut up or you'll be skinned," spat out Rusty Smith, and struck into the first tune handy. The woman yowled away at *Oh, Susannah* and he desisted; thank Heaven, she would last for a bit. *Money Musk* came to mind, and *Tennessee Gals.* He rested briefly.

What was next for them was hard to say. No one could tell what was in Injun minds; especially these Comanches, bitterly hostile to buffalo butchers who killed their meat. They were puzzled for the moment, and wary.

If only the devils would not start laughing in ugly fashion, mouths turned down in a sneer, showing they smelled a trick! Then they would demand more and more, with lances prodding, and would start to work on the old man, with the woman watching. Or on her first, with the old man watching.

For himself, Rusty was fairly assured, now; loco, possessed, protected by "medicine." He had them guessing about the woman also, apparently crazy like himself.

"Do we git us off? ' squawked Sal. "Can we quit?"

Rusty was on *Dixie* now. "Soon see," he rejoined, running it into the music.

"You fools!" blared the old man furiously. "You, Sal, git to cookin'! Stranger, take a couple Injuns and butcher some meat."

Rusty ignored him. The crisis was here. Quanah, silver armlets glimmering, tapped his black pate, glanced along the circle, then uncurled two fingers—one, then the other. Two crazy, two gifted with medicine power, two not to be interfered with.

The circle gravely nodded. The Indian with the Sharps got up, advanced with gentle tread, and respectfully laid the gun in Sal's lap, and backed away.

"That thar's right civil to a lady," said old Tucker. "I reckon I'll take my own gun."

He reached aside, with paw extended to the Comanche who held his revolver. The warrior scowled and slapped him across his whiskered mouth. The old man lurched forward, his fist slammed in, and the Comanche measured the ground with his shoulders.

Up like a cat, lips bleeding, knife out. Quanah blocked him, seized him; others jabbered at him. He relaxed. With a grudging grin, he extended his hand. Old Tucker shook it.

"Fair enough," said he. "I don't 'low no hand laid to my face without a swap!"

The Comanche sat down, but Rusty saw his muscles straining and knew his fury was only throttled for the moment. The others were up and moving, restless, eager with purpose. The leader stood up, drew the eyes of Rusty Smith, and signed to him with the two fingers; a motion, a masterful sweep of hand. Go! Freedom!

"What's that 'ar for?" demanded Tucker.

"Sal and me go. You're to stay," said Smith.

"Light out on me and be damned! Hyar I set till I git them hides. Wuth a dollar and four bits each one."

"Give 'em the hides, you old fool," squawked Sal. "Climb into the wagon and light out! We got 'em feared of us and maybe they won't tech you."

Tucker glared at her. "You go gallivanting with that stranger and you ain't no wife o' mine!"

"Shut up, you idiot!" growled Rusty.

The Comanches were listening, curious, very keen, very sharp of senses, trained like wild animals to catch the least false note. They might guess that they had been tricked.

"We got the two hosses," said the woman. "Let's go!" She came to Rusty and wreathed her hard, avid, sweating face with a shallow simper. "I don't care what happens to Dan. You and me will go."

"Take her and git," barked Tucker. "She ain't only a vixen. Tied on to me thinkin' I had money."

"Oh, you blasted fools!" groaned Rusty. "These are hostiles. They want scalps to pay for those buff'lers! One of us stays to be tortured."

"Take her and git." Old Tucker, fumbling at his beard with shaky gnarled hand, had spunk. "I'll make fist to outtough 'em. Git on."

The woman's hand coaxed Rusty's shoulder. Fear was in her voice.

"I tol' you I don't care. Quick, now, while we can!"

THAT broke the spell. The Comanches had lost patience, doubt was resolved. The woman was afraid, not simple, not loco; she called upon a man, not upon her medicine! With one step, Quanah was forward, clutching her arm; he tore her away and whirled her about in a stagger.

Rusty saw the imperative finger pointed for him to go, go, saw the scowl upon the grim face. One to go, two to stay. They knew now he had not killed the buffalo, not with that old gun at long range. The Sharps spoke for itself, and the six empty brass shells.

Terrifying desire plucked at him. He could be of no use here. His luck had held, his life had been handed back to him once again. For these two, he saw no hope; the Comanches were sure of them, would make them die slowly, more ready to be amused at length.

His eyes fell on the spyglass, lying on the wagon seat. He started. There was medicine, there was mystery—making objects far with the one end, near with the other end. It could shrivel or it could enlarge. No redskin could stand to that medicine.

"Look, old man, the spyglass!" he blazed out. "We'll try it!"

"For a swap? That glass is wuth money."

The woman was being rudely held. Rusty took one stride for the wagon, his hot eyes fixed. A Comanche marked the movement and the gaze, and went bounding for the wagon-seat. He seized the glass with a whoop, bounded down, began to examine it curiously.

Old Tucker, bellowing fury, charged with a bull rush that cleared his way. He clutched at the spyglass, wrenched at it; he and the Comanche hauled back and forth, the other redskins jostling around with knives out. The telescope came apart at a joint, old Tucker recoiling one way, the Comanche another.

Rusty Smith cursed bitterly. His chance was gone. Worse, the hand of hesitation was lifted. The woman was flung to the ground, a thong lashing her wrists behind her. She screeched, struggled, and a hand smacked her across the face in warning. She fell quiet.

Old Tucker showed fight until a quirt-handle, long as a club, opened up his scalp. They ripped off his clothes, exposing his gray old scrawny body to the sunlight, while he feebly cursed, the blood running into his eyes.

Voices screeched. Quanah stood giving orders. The wagon was raided, a husk mattress dragged out and ripped open. Picket stakes were being driven; it was settled that the old man would eat fire.

Rusty Smith turned away. He was powerless; he could not relieve the agony, and his own would be added by interference. The Indians avoided him carefully. Then he stopped short, sighting a glitter amid the swirl of moccasins. He stooped and picked up an end joint of the spyglass.

A whoop, and he broke into a jig again, twirling the mounted lens free, dropping the empty joint, holding the lens in his palm. The Indians paused, staring. Rusty jigged up to Quanah, jabbering insane words without meaning. He reached out and seized the coppery hand. Quanah, before the gaze of his men, dared not flinch, but Rusty caught the swift flicker in the gray eyes that told him all he needed to know.

Lens cupped by thumb and forefinger, he focused the light on his own hand, holding that of the chief aloft. The circle of gathered sunlight played harmlessly on his tanned skin. Quanah stood stiffened, suspicious but daring no offense, his gray eyes fastened on the two hands. Rusty continued his gibbering chant. The tumult had lulled. The other Indians stood at stare, the whining whimper of the woman breaking through the silence.

Swiftly, Rusty Smith changed the focus, shifted it to the hand of the chief, drew the focus into an eye of ruddy lurid flame. Through his pinioning grip on that coppery hand, he felt the announcing quiver of pain. The spot bit. The redness deepened; the brown hide curled and stewed, and Rusty caught the stench of scorched grease.

It was too much for Comanche blood. Uttering a frenzied cry of sheer fright, Quanah twitched his hand free and bounded aside, to eye his hand, to eye Rusty Smith. Startled grunts broke from the other redskins.

Quanah was watching Rusty Smith warily, but the chief's face was expressionless and he stood firm. Except for that one cry, his dignity had not deserted him.

Rusty could not stop here; all must comprehend. He jigged on, and stooped to a bunchy twist of sun-dried grass, conscious of the pent breathing, the intent eyes, the wondering and fearful suspense. With gesture and rapid words he hailed the sun as he crouched above the little pile and steadied the cupped lens; he let words escape him that they could understand, a phrase that would reach them.

Medicine fire! Medicine fire from the sky!

The grass spiraled smoke, and charred. Startled grunts again. The lens drilled a hole; the grass, already tinder, flamed to his breath. He straightened up, and stalked straight at the circle of men, blasting hand uplifted, voice uplifted, wild eyes uplifted.

IT WAS too much for them. Quanah strode for his horse with dignity. The others broke in panic. Moccasins thudded as every man scampered for his horse, vaulting to the pad, grabbing jaw-thong, hammering with heels for distance. Dust rose in a veil as the party swept off at a gallop.

Staggering on weak knees. Rusty Smith drew his knife and quickly released the other two.

"Now we'll git them hides after all," quavered old Tucker. "Thank'ee, stranger. You lend a hand, and Sal will cook us a mess 'o hump steak—"

"Streak for Fort Sill and be quick about it," broke in Rusty angrily. The old man wiped the blood from his eyes and whimpered.

"Oh, all right, all right!" he mumbled. The woman stood up to Rusty, level-eyed.

"Leave him be; I'm glad to be shet of him for a better man! You and me'll go."

She came closer to Rusty Smith, and he saw that the strain of excitement in her face made it seem even older, more shrewish.

Old Tucker flung her a snarl. "You was glad enough to tie up with me when I found you livin' off the sojers!"

"Don't you listen to him, mister!" The woman laughed shrilly. "We got a hoss apiece—"

"Take the wagon and get out while

you're alive," broke in Rusty with harsh emphasis. "Both of you!"

Tucker was shambling for the wagon. The woman sneered, picked her hat from the dust, recovered her Sharps, gathered the trampled shells and stuffed them into her pocket. Her thin lips curved at Rusty in vicious scorn.

"You're poorer than we be. I wouldn't 'bide neither of you for long! If you meet up with a feller named Tom Lufkin, mister, you tell him I'm aimin' to ketch up with him. Maybe you know him?"

She peered inquiringly at Rusty Smith.

"Never heard of him," Rusty said curtly, almost defiantly.

"I'll ketch up with him some day or my name ain't Sally Burr!" she said, and turned away to the wagon.

Old Tucker fumblingly tied his horse to the wagon tail, passed to the front, climbed into the seat, and kicked off the brake. He turned the team and waved a farewell hand, the woman sitting dourly beside him.

Rusty Smith, with one eye on the horizon, watched them until they swung out of sight in a dip. His horse whinnied after them. With a long breath of relaxation, he pocketed the lens and reached inside his shirt.

He drew forth a buckskin case and emptied it into his palm. Rusty held up a little old tintype picture, made by a photographer at a western Tennessee fair. A laugh curved his lips under the shaggy beard.

Then for several moments he continued to study the faded tintype; he was still smiling, but there was a queer, distant look in his eyes.

"Reckon I looked mighty peaked in them days! But you shorely was a purty gal, Sally Burr!" he murmured. Crumpling the thing between his fingers, he dropped it, and turned to his horse. "Feels better'n ever to be a free man, you bet!"

Music for Muchacho

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Author of "Brother Cowpoke," "Epitaph in Red," etc.

He crouched deep in the shadows, while the man he intended to kill plucked a guitar

Six-guns are better than serenades when you're chasing horses south of the Border. But a mouthful of good gringo teeth will bring down a buzzard quickest of all

I

THERE was laughter coming from the cantina, and the sound of dancing and drinking and general hoorawing; and a few doors down the street a caballero was strumming his guitar while singing *Mariquita Linda* to his *señorita.*

It was too bad, thought little Johnny Blake, that he had to bust up all this. It was going to be tough on that *señorita.*

He edged on through the blackness, his Mexican sombrero pulled down over his forehead to hide his yellow hair and to shadow the bright blue of his eyes, keeping so close to the crumbling adobe walls he could feel the roughness of them rubbing his thigh.

He was pretty sure now that this caballero who was doing the singing was Jim Wolfe. It was the same song Jim had sung to Johnny's sister back there in Texas, and the same cowboy voice that was so different from the real Mexican's.

Besides, Jim Wolfe was here in Santo Ignacio. After five days of trailing him through the deserts and mountains of Chihuahua, Johnny Blake was absolutely certain that the man he was hunting was hiding out in this little Mexican town.

He stopped, finally, ten feet from the singer, to crouch back deeper into the shadows so that he would not be seen. Jim Wolfe had changed his cowboy outfit for a *charro* rig, big hat and tight spangled pants, with a bright serape over his shoulder. To anybody but sharp-eyed Johnny Blake the disguise might have been effective.

Johnny waited patiently until the song ended, watching the girl leaning over her balcony, watching the man fingering a guitar—the man he had determined to kill. Then the girl laughed and called down to the gringo in quick Spanish that Johnny could not follow. As she did so she plucked a blossom from the vine that curled around her balcony, tossed it down to the man, and ran into her room.

Jim Wolfe caught the flower, studied it a moment while Johnny Blake's lips tightened in a grim line, half determination, half disgust. The way of men with girls puzzled him. You could expect a girl to act foolish over a man—but men should have more sense than that.

Now Jim Wolfe was turning away. Swift as a mountain cat, silent on his Mexican sandals, Johnny Blake came out of the shadows, his six-shooter held straight before him. He ducked across the pale square of light coming from the Mexican girl's window, jammed the muzzle of his gun into Jim Wolfe's back. Jim Wolfe stopped.

"It took some tall trailin'," Johnny said. "But I finally caught up."

Jim Wolfe, hardly moving a muscle, said: "So it's you, huh? Got your finger on the trigger?"

"I sure have. An' I don't mind pullin' it."

"Then I guess you got me just where you want me, huh?"

Johnny Blake was not sure about that. Once Jim Wolfe had been the idol of his life, a man who could do anything, who could be surrounded with six-shooters and still fight his way out. Once little Johnny Blake had worshipped Jim Wolfe, had even thought he would have Jim for a big brother.

Now he had a gun in Jim's back and he was not at all sure that he had this big cowboy where he wanted him.

"I got you pretty near where I want you," Johnny said. "An' I'll pull this trigger quicker than you can wink at a *señorita,* if you don't give me back my hoss."

"So you came down for that stallion I borrowed?"

"You think I came for the ride?"

"I didn't know," Jim Wolfe answered. "Follow me, Johnny, and I'll turn that Geronimo horse over to you. He's fat and sassy and full of life."

"He better be," Johnny said; then he began running after Jim Wolfe who, true to his word, was leading the way down the street, just as if there were no Colt aimed for the small of his back.

IT WASN'T easy to keep up with the long strides of Jim Wolfe as they went through dark alleys, twisting right and left, down a steep cobbled hill to a pink adobe house on the corner of two streets. Here Jim Wolfe stopped, knocked on a heavy wooden door.

A *mozo* opened the door. Jim Wolfe stepped into the dark, covered entryway, waited for Johnny to follow. The kid clutched his gun with a tighter grip as the *mozo* closed the door behind him, scowled at the fast Spanish Jim Wolfe rattled off to the dark little servant.

"If you're cookin' up something," Johnny growled, "just don't forget I still got my finger curled around this trigger."

"I'm not forgetting anything," Jim Wolfe explained. "I just told this *mozo* to go get Geronimo. Didn't you say you wanted your horse?"

"I sure did—and I sure meant it."

The *mozo* shuffled off into the dark patio at the other end of the covered entryway. In the darkness little Johnny Blake could hardly see the blacker bulk of Jim Wolfe. He wondered momentarily if this had not been a fool move to follow this big cowboy into the house. A man who would steal your best horse would be up to almost any kind of crooked work.

"And Geronimo better not be hurt—or anything," Johnny said, trying to sound tough to bolster his courage.

"Geronimo was never in better shape." Jim Wolfe's voice sounded hollow between the adobe walls. "Thanks a lot for lending him to me. And when you get back to Texas tell your big sister I sure appreciated the way she looked after me—and was sorry I had to leave so sudden-like."

"You think she's goin' to believe that, when I tell her I caught you singing mushy songs to a *señorita?*" The talking was drowning out some of the fear that the darkness had brought. "She's dumb enough to fall for a gent like you—but she ain't that dumb."

"I guess she isn't." Jim Wolfe spoke softly. "But tell her, anyway. And tell her that Geronimo stallion is a right good horse. With him you two should build up a real herd."

Johnny was thinking of something the Rangers had told him about this Jim Wolfe. He had not believed what they had said, but he wondered about it now, and tried to figure out some way of trapping him.

"We got a lot of other hosses," Johnny said. "Why didn't you ask Mary for one of them? That gelding, Sittin' Bull, can run as fast as Geronimo. He's got better wind, and ain't so jumpy. Mary was just dumb enough over you so she would give Sittin' Bull to you, if you told her you were in such a big hurry."

"Sitting Bull," Jim answered slowly, "is a steeldust—and I like palominos."

"Yeah—that's what the Rangers told me."

"They told you I was El Zopalote?"

Johnny nodded.

"And I guess they told you I was a bloodthirsty crazy Mexican killer who always rode around on palomino stallions?"

"Yeah—and they told me to look up the best looking gal in the town nearest where you'd been seen last, and you'd sure enough be singing to her."

Jim Wolfe — El Zopalote — laughed. "They sure got me right down pat, kid. Sorry your sister had to find out about it. Guess I better not call on her any more Now I got to go, kid. Be seein' you."

Johnny Blake saw the shadow of big Jim Wolfe move toward the doorway. Johnny had not gotten back his stallion yet; and this big man, whom he had wished once could be his brother, laughed at having stolen Geronimo, laughed at having broken the heart of Johnny's sister. The kid had been stewing for over a week. Now it boiled over and his finger convulsed over the trigger of the heavy .45.

The gun barked spitefully—but big Jim Wolfe ducked past the kid as the heavy slug bit out a chunk of adobe wall. The sharp recoil had almost knocked the gun out of Johnny's cramped hand. Before he could line it up again for the kill, Jim Wolfe had stepped between the great wooden doors and slammed them shut behind him.

The heavy iron latch clanged shut. Then, louder than the ringing in his ears, the sound of horse hoofs on the flag-stoned patio brought Johnny Blake around, crouching against the massive doors, ready to fight it out to the end.

BUT it was only the *mozo* coming across the patio, leading Geronimo by one hand, holding a lighted candle-lantern in the other; and the familiar sight of the fine palomino stallion was more assuring to Johnny Blake than a whole troop of Rangers might have been.

Geronimo, at least, had never let him down, while the Rangers had. They had chased Jim Wolfe to the Border without catching up with him, then had given up.

"We'll get him when he comes back," the captain had told Johnny. "There ain't a doubt in my mind that this gent is the one they call El Zopalote, over there. And Zopalote means buzzard, in our language. Buzzards always come back. So does this Zopalote gent. He steals horses up here and cows down there. Swaps stolen cows for stolen horses, too. We'll get him."

"But how about Geronimo?" Johnny had asked.

"Listen, kid," the captain had said. "This is a man's job. You better go back home before your mother finds you're out."

Instead, Johnny had crept over the border that night in the dark of the moon to continue the chase alone. Maybe he was only about fourteen years old, but he had gotten his horse back—and that was something the Rangers had not been able to do.

He ran forward to greet Geronimo who whinnied at the sight of his diminutive master. He ran his hand over the horse's sleek neck and silky mane, sighed with relief to find him so well groomed. Then he turned to the *mozo* who held the bridle.

"Open the gate, mister. I'm a long ways from home and got to be going."

The little man's dark face was a blank.

"No entiendo, muchacho."

"I said"—Johnny raised his voice as people do when trying to make someone undertand—"open the door. I'm high-tailin!"

The *mozo* nodded. Johnny, thinking he had understood, took the reins, led Geronimo toward the doorway. The *mozo,* however, had started off in the opposite direction.

"Hey!" Johnny bellowed.

The *mozo* stopped, looked blankly at Johnny. Johnny shrugged in disgust, yanked at the handle of the heavy iron latch. It would not move. He yanked at it again, rattled it, but could not budge it. The *mozo* had come back. He touched Johnny's hand, shook his head.

"El señor tiene la llave."

That meant absolutely nothing to Johnny Blake. The *mozo* tried to explain. He pointed to the keyhole, made motion of turning a key, then of putting it into his pocket and of going away.

"El señor," he said.

Now Johnny was catching on. *El señor* meant the mister, or Jim Wolfe. This Mexican was trying to tell him that the door was locked and Jim Wolfe had the key.

"Okay," Johnnie said, "then let me out the back door."

The *mozo* nodded. He put his two hands together, rested the back of one against his face, dropped his head, and closed his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and motioned to Johnny to follow.

Holding the tin lantern before him, the *mozo* led the way across the patio. At the far end he opened a single door—not of heavy wood as was the entrance—and motioned to Johnny to step through.

Johnny looked inside. It was a room, there, not an exit, and there was a great mahogany bed in one corner, bright Mexican serapes on the floor, a fire burning on the arched fireplace. He understood now what the *mozo* had meant by that gesture that ended by closing his eyes. He was giving Johnny a place to sleep.

"I said, I want to go home. I don't want to sleep in this dump!" By now Johnny was waving his arms as wildly as was the Mexican. But to all his waving and all his yelling the *mozo* only looked on blankly.

There was no sense of arguing with this guy any more.

"Okay," Johny said. "Then beat it."

With that he yanked Geronimo into the room and slammed the door in the face of the little Mexican. He listened for the *mozo's* going. And as he held his ear to the door, he heard a voice say in a loud whisper:

"Don't try to get away tonight, kid. Stay in there and you'll be safe. But outside . . ."

He had spoken English! Then he must have understood him when he demanded that the gate be opened.

II

THIS Jim Wolfe was a crafty hombre; craftier, Johnny Blake thought, than he ever could have believed. When he had first run across him up in Texas less than a month ago he had thought he was only a wandering cowboy who had gotten into trouble.

He had thought he was an outlaw, maybe, mixed up with rustling or something, because he had found him riding

a dying crowbait horse and Jim Wolfe was hardly less grievously wounded than his mount. Johnny Blake had brought him home.

The kid's big sister, Mary, had taken the cowboy in and nursed him back to health, and as his strength grew Jim Wolfe had sung to her accompanied by his guitar. All this, Johnny thought, was pretty silly. But it had brought tears to Mary's eyes and she had looked so happy she seemed almost foolish.

Then one night Jim Wolfe had vanished and taken Geronimo, the great golden stallion with which Johnny and his sister were trying to build up a herd. That was when Johnny hit the trail—partly to bring back the horse, partly to even the score against the gent who had treated his big sister so shabbily.

He had gotten the horse, all right, and now he wondered just what good that did him.

Here he was the prisoner of El Zopalote, the Buzzard, a horse thief with a girl in every town, a rustler and crook and killer. It was funny, Johnny thought, that Jim Wolfe didn't look like that kind of a gent at all.

He looked around the bright little room. There was no point in trying the door—it would be guarded. But there were two windows and the chimney through which he might escape. The only trouble was he could not take Geronimo with him.

He tried the window opening on the street, found that he could swing it back, and that it was high enough for Geronimo to jump through. The hooker, though, was that the window was heavily barred as are all windows in Mexico, and that the bars were so close he could not even get his slender body through. But he poked his head out to see what was going on.

To the right was a steep, sharp hill, and at the top of it a man was serenading a girl. It seemed to Johnny that that was about all anybody did in this country and it made him feel a little happy that he was a man who was above such nonsense.

He could not see the singer in the darkness, but he could see the balcony, and he was startled to realize that it must be the same one where Jim Wolfe had been singing to the girl. After all that wandering around and around, Jim Wolfe had brought him back to only one house from where they had started.

Jim Wolfe's trickery again.

He leaned out further to listen and make sure. When the caballero stopped singing for a moment, Johnny heard the music from the *cantina* up the street; then the man was strumming his guitar again.

Johnny now knew for sure where he was—but he was also certain that this particular caballero was not Jim Wolfe. That *señorita* was double-timing Jim Wolfe just as Jim had double-timed Johnny's sister, Mary. And that made Johnny grin. Wouldn't Mary like to hear about that?

The pleasantness of that thought had made Johnny a little careless. A hand touched his shoulder and a voice hissed in his ear:

"Cuidado, muchacho."

He jumped back as if he had been stabbed with a razor-edged machete. It set his heart beating so wildly and the blood to humming so loudly in his ears, it was several seconds before he could think rationally again.

So Jim Wolfe had put a guard out there in the street, too, had he? Well, that made it all the more necessary that Johnny bust out of this place. It challenged him; and Johnny had never been one to throw down a challenge no matter how tough it might be.

He stood in the middle of the room, looking around quickly. After a moment he blew out the candles, went back to the window to listen. Slight sounds told him the guard was still out there. Another song up the hill told him that Jim Wolfe's *señorita* was still two-timing him.

Then he heard laughter from the balcony and quick Spanish as the girl spoke to the man. After that there was silence broken only by the faint tune from the *cantina*—and the shuffle of a man's feet going up the hill.

HE POKED his head out between the bars. The guard had left; he was now plodding up the hill. On the other side of the street was another man; and as Johnny watched, two more appeared from the darkness beyond the girl's house. All four turned off the side street onto the one leading to the *cantina*. It looked as if they were following the caballero.

"Well, that's one on me," Johnny said to himself. "But this is our chance, Geronimo."

Working swiftly, he twisted the strong Mexican blankets into ropes and knotted them together. With a brilliantly colored serape he made a sort of collar for Geronimo, knotted one end of the rope to it. The other end he tied to one of the strong bars over the window.

"Okay, Geronimo, pull that one out."

He took the horse's bridle.

"Yank, ol' fellah."

The horse lunged, pulling one of the bars completely out of its adobe anchorage.

Johnny's fingers trembled as he unknotted the rope and tied it around the second bar.

"Yank, ol' hoss."

The second bar broke loose, making such a racket that Johnny was sure it would bring the guards running. If he could only get one more out before they showed up, he and Geronimo could break away.

But the horse had become excited. His feet slipped on the tile floor. Johnny tugged at the bridle and begged:

"Come on, big boy. All you got!"

Geronimo leaned to it, and Johnny ran around to add his own slight weight to the pull. The bar buckled, then snapped, and both Johnny and the horse went down in a heap. There was a big enough opening now, if only they could escape before the guards came—if only he could get Geronimo to his feet.

But there was a slapping of sandals outside now.

Geronimo's hoofs slipped on the tiles as if they were ice, and the effort was bringing up his wild stallion blood. He would thrash himself to death if Johnny could not get him up.

Casting around crazily for anything that would do the trick, the kid thought of a slim chance. He slipped out of the sandals he had been wearing to make himself look more like a Mexican, laid them down under the horse's forefeet, then jerked up on the beast's head.

The leather, between steel and tile, gave him just the added traction he needed. He lunged forward and was standing trembling and snorting while Johnny unknotted the improvised collar, when the door to the patio smashed open and the *mozo*—and Johnny did not know how many more—rushed in.

YANKING out his six-shooter Johnny fired twice over the heads of the wave of Mexicans, stopping them for a precious moment, but so terrifying Geronimo that the stallion plunged for the only exit he could see, the window, dragging Johnny after him.

It was only by luck that the kid managed to catch the horse's mane and jump onto his back, clinging there while the beast jumped through the dangerously narrow opening.

Once out, Geronimo headed up the hill. The Mexicans came after him, yelling, screaming, shooting their revolvers. Somehow Johnny managed to get a leg over Geronimo's bare back and stick to him when the horse turned abruptly at the top of the hill. With the Mexicans on their tail they roared down the street on which the *cantina* stood.

As he thundered past, the walls of the *cantina* seemed to bulge and burst, giving forth another flood of shouting Mexicans. Downhill and around corners he went, followed by more and more Mexicans, many of whom had started shooting; and he wondered desperately for a moment if he would ever be free of them.

It wasn't that Johnny Blake was afraid of being shot. But he had sworn to bring back Geronimo, and he knew that his

sister could never make their little horse ranch pay without this one very special horse.

He leaned close to the animal's neck, whispered in the silky ears.

"Let 'er go, Geronimo, ol' boy!"

The horse responded, stretched out, and the breeze whistling in Johnny's ears drowned the roar of gunfire behind him, Geronimo was the fastest horse in all of Texas—with the one exception of his own town-horse, Sitting Bull.

They clattered on down the otherwise silent streets, searching for the edge of town. Once in the open he could line out for the hills, then turn back when he had distanced the chase and pick up the horse he had ridden over the border—he'd left it with an Indian family half a mile out of town. After that, they could head for home.

Now they were free of the adobe walls, and Johnny pulled in Geronimo to let the horse catch his wind. The racket still reigned on top of the hill, sounding like a fiesta or the beginning of a revolution. But behind them there was no pursuit.

He waited there until the horse had quieted, then went on at a slow walk, circling the town to come out on the northern road from the other side. He took it easy, because there was no hurry now.

"So far so good, Geronimo." Johnny laughed. "We fooled 'em. Now all we got to do is get ol' Sittin' Bull. An' these Mexicans will never catch us on their runty jackasses."

The stallion lifted his head proudly, broke into a trot that took them rapidly on around the town to the place where Johnny had left Sitting Bull. The darkness of the night was still with them. But a faint light from within the cactus-thatched adobe hut showed Johnny that the Indian family was up. He slipped off Geronimo's back to knock on the rough door.

A man whom he did not recognize opened up for him. He was about Jim Wolfe's size, and dressed like a *charro*. His black mustache curled upwards as did his eyebrows, and this gave him a peculiarly devilish look. For a moment Johnny wondered if he had gotten mixed up and picked out the wrong house.

"Ah!" The man smiled with all his big white teeth. "*El gringito*. The leetle wan. So you have came. And you breeng the veree fine *caballo*."

"I came, sure 'nough," Johnny said shortly. "An' who are you?"

"Me?" The big Mexican drew a deep breath. "I am Zopalote!"

Johnny stared at him. It began to look as if the country was full of Zopalotes, so full in fact that he could not take this one too seriously.

"Then get out of my way," Johnny ordered. "I've come for my horse—and it's not a dead one."

El Zopalote the second still smiled, unmoved by the half-pint who fronted him. "El Zopalote," he said, "ees veree, w'at-you-call-heem, veree grateful that the leetle Gringo breeng the *caballo*. That save El Zopalote the trobble."

"I didn't bring you no hoss," Johnny said. "I come for one."

El Zopalote shook his head, put on an expression of mock sadness.

"No, you breeng one, an' eet ees good!" He turned his head so that he was half facing the interior of the shack. "Chico! Pepe!"

Two other Mexicans slouched into the pale light, both heavily armed, and Johnny realized suddenly that he had stepped into a trap. He reached for his six-shooter.

But before his hand so much as touched the comfort of its butt, the man who called himself El Zopalote caught both of his wrists. His fingers were vises.

III

THIS buzzard business was getting him down, Johnny decided, as he kicked and fought with the powerful, unmoved man who held him so solidly.

It was getting so there was a Zopalote

everywhere you looked—and it seemed that they all wanted Geronimo and didn't much care what they did to get him.

Fighting, Johnny found, was a waste of time. This Mexican was too tough for him, and his twin henchmen were already grabbing his legs. So Johnny Blake stopped struggling and let them drag him into the adobe hut.

A single candle flickered in one corner of the room, lighting up the dark faces of two sad-eyed kids about Johnny's age, and their mother and father who stood beside them, backed against the wall, stoic as only an Indian can be.

Two men lounged at the other side of the room, their rifles ready. The Mexican who called himself El Zopalote spoke to them in Spanish. They nodded, herded the Indian family out the front door.

It began to look to Johnny as if something dire was about to happen—and he suspected it was about to happen to him.

The two men who had hauled him inside still gripped his arms. El Zopalote spoke to them, lifted the six-shooter from Johnny's waistband, tucked it into the top of his own tight pants. Then the two men let him go.

El Zopalote said something very brief to them. They shrugged their shoulders, answered, *"Si, cómo no?"* And left.

Johnny was alone, now, standing in the middle of the room, trembling slightly from the excitement. El Zopalote stood by the doorway until the sound of horse hoofs rattled toward town, then he turned back to his captive.

"You are the leetle fool," he said, "to meex een the business of the man!"

Johnny was thinking fast. "Maybe I am," he conceded, "and maybe I ain't."

If there were two Zopalotes, he figured, one of them must be the McCoy and the other must be an imposter. The two, therefore, would be bitter enemies, and his own hide would be safer if he sided with the one who was nearest.

It was an old Mexican trick to change teams before you had to and always to be on the winning side. He had never done that before—but maybe he could succeed at it now. You were never too old to learn a new trick.

"Cómo?" the Mexican did not understand Johnny's answer.

"I was thinking," Johnny said, "that maybe I'm just a dumb kid, after all. The Rangers told me to go home before my mother give me a licking. But I figured on getting my hoss back. Now I'm in a worse pickle than I was before."

"Een the peekle?" The Mexican's devilish eyebrows arched higher.

"What I mean is, I tried to kill the real Zopalote—an' missed. He ducked too quick. Then I ride right into a phoney Zopalote who takes my gun away. I guess I shoulda stayed home."

The big bandit stepped closer to Johnny, hunched up his shoulders and talked with his hands.

"ME IT ees who ees the Zopalote! These Jeem Wolfe ees the fake. I steal the horses of Jeem Wolfe. I theenk I keel heem. He shoot my veree fine *caballo* that I call El Oro, the horse of gold, so like the horse you 'ave. But I don' keel heem yet. He comes to my pueblo and pretand he ees the Zopalote. Bah!"

Little Johnny was beginning to see light. Apparently El Zopalote, the real one, the one the Rangers had been talking about, had wiped out Jim Wolfe's horse herd, had almost killed Jim Wolfe. That must have been when Johnny found the cowboy nearly dead riding a dying horse.

Then when Jim Wolfe had felt able to ride he had come down here to kill the man who had robbed him. But why he had stolen Geronimo, why he had pretended he was El Zopalote, why he had serenaded that Mexican girl were still unsolved puzzles in the kid's mind.

It all looked too good to him. It looked as if Jim Wolf was the real buzzard and this man had decided to cut in on Jim's game when he heard that Jim had been shot down in the States.

But back in his mind was the constant

memory of Jim Wolfe up there at the little horse ranch, of Jim singing to his sister, of Jim's tall tales, of the way he, Johnny, had thought it would be fine to have a big brother like this Jim Wolfe.

"That Jim Wolfe," Johnny said, "Is the real Zopalote, I hope. Because the Rangers said they'd get him. And I hope they do. He stole my hoss—and he treated my sister mean."

The Mexican looked intently at little Johnny. Then he laughed.

"The Rangers! Ha! They weel nevair see these Jeem Wolfe. Tonight, *muchacho,* my bullet of lead weel sleep een Jeem Wolf's heart!"

Johnny felt a shiver run down his spine. This bandit was a crazy devil. He fitted right into the Rangers' description: "A bloodthirsty killer."

"These Jeem Wolfe, he try and steal my *señorita,* my, w'at-you-call-heem, my girl. He weel suffer the thousan' deaths."

Johnny began to tremble again, not from fear, but from excitement. And then horse hoofs rang in the silent night; and El Zopalote walked over to the doorway, smooth as a cat, his gun ready as he stood there, one eye on the street, one on Johnny.

THREE horses drew up in front of the hut. A girl's musical voice greeted El Zopalote, and a moment later the *señorita* of the balcony appeared.

Even Johnny had to admit that she was good-looking and something to sing to, if you were given to such foolishness. But there was something in her dark eyes, in the way she held her mouth that made him immediately distrust her. She did not look like Jim Wolfe's kind of girl —but she did look like just the sort for this Zopalote gent.

They talked together in rapid Spanish, the only words of which Johnny understood were "Jeem Wolfe" repeated several times. In the middle of it a look of satisfaction began creeping across El Zopalote's face. When the girl finished talking he was almost beaming.

Then she saw Johnny, there by the rear wall, and turned her flow of Spanish on him, smiling broadly. He failed to be charmed, and gradually her look of pleasure turned to one of bewilderment. She cut her flow of Spanish short.

"The same to you, miss," Johnny said, then to El Zopalote: "What's she been saying?"

"She say"—El Zopalote laughed unpleasantly—"that you are the preety leetle baby weeth the veree blue eyes. An' she want to geeve you the kees."

He turned to the girl, said something to her in Spanish, and she smiled again. "I tell the *señorita,*" El Zopalote explained to Johnny, "w'at you have say for the answer. The same to you. The *señorita* ees veree hoppy you weesh to geeve her the kees."

He roared, and Johnny, who had not been especially afraid so far, began to feel real terror. He glanced around wildly, hunting some avenue of escape, no matter how slim. He could face gunfire and dark alleys—but he could not stand there and let a woman kiss him.

He thought he saw his chance as the big Mexican swayed on his feet from the laughing. Ducking low, he dodged between the man and woman, and plunged out the door.

He was small and wiry, and his sudden move had taken them all flatfooted. With fear prodding him on, he slipped between the two guards, unhooked Geronimo's reins from the cactus on which they were looped, and flung himself up on the palomino's strong back.

Behind him El Zopalote was screaming Spanish, triggering his gun. It was more effective than spurs for Geronimo. He bunched his hoofs, shot off down the dark street toward town before the guards could get ahorse.

Then Johnny reined in. He was far enough away from that Mexican girl to feel a little foolish over the way he had acted, but near enough to the whole affair in memory to become flaming red in the face.

She had a lot of nerve, that girl, to call him a little blue-eyed baby and say she wanted to kiss him. But girls were crazy, anyway, and he guessed it was his own fault for trying to be smart and saying "The same to you" when he didn't know what she had said. That, Johnny decided, was what people called experience.

He had reined in hoping to lure these Mexicans away from the adobe shack where Sitting Bull had been stabled. He was firmly confident that he could outrun them. But now it came to him with a shock that they were not even chasing him.

Was that because they knew they had him no matter where he went?

Or did they have some more sinister scheme that would be spoiled if they came after him and the great golden stallion?

IV

JOHNNY put things together. These two Zopalotes both singing for the same girl. The Mexican Zopalote calling Jim Wolfe an impostor, a fake Buzzard. The Mexican finding that shack where Sitting Bull was stabled and being on hand so soon after Johnny's escape from Jim Wolfe's prison.

The *mozo* talking English when he had pretended to know only Spanish. The girl coming to the shack, talking Spanish to the Mexican Zopalote, mentioning Jeem Wolfe, and all looking so happy about it. And the big Mexican saying to him: "The Rangers! Ha! They weel nevair see these Jeem Wolfe. Tonight, *muchacho*, my bullet of lead weel sleep in Jeem Wolfe's heart."

It made a picture for Johnny Blake, and it was an ugly picture. These bandits were going to bushwhack Jim Wolfe, and mean as Jim Wolfe might be, he was not as mean as the bushwhackers.

Now Johnny could just go on and let them play out their string and hope to pick up Sitting Bull in the middle of the excitement. Or he could try to hunt up Jim Wolfe, to whom he owed no favors, and warn him of what he was getting into. He could do that—and maybe lose Geronimo again.

He sat Geronimo's back and tried to think. Once, years ago when he was only a kid of about seven, he had gotten bucked off a hammer-headed horse who was just naturally mean. He had landed so hard he started to bawl and his old man had caught him at it. His old man didn't have much sympathy with his hollering; he had only said:

"It takes a tough man to ride a tough hoss. But a baby can ride a rocking chair."

Johnny had stopped howling and had gotten right back on that bucker. He had ridden that horse for years, and felt like a man when he did so. He had not taken the easy way out, and he wasn't going to this time. He would take the hard road, would break this mystery—ride back into town to tell Jim Wolfe that he was going to be bushwhacked. He would do that even if Jim Wolfe had stolen his fine stallion and broken his sister's heart.

Digging his bare heels into Geronimo's silky ribs, he guided the big horse back into the town, along the silent streets down which he had fled not so long ago, back past the *cantina* where the singing had become a drunken brawl, by the girl's balcony which now showed no light, down the hill where the window still gaped like a jagged-toothed open mouth, and around the corner.

HE FOUND the heavy door with the wrought iron latch, leaned down from Geronimo's broad back, and pounded on the hard wood. The sound echoed hollowly against the adobe walls of the entryway. A moment later a sliver of light showed through a crack, then the door opened just enough for the *mozo* to look out.

His white teeth gleamed as he recognized Johnny Blake.

"Buenas noches," he said.

"Listen," Johnny said. "Stop talking that Spik to me. I don't like it, see! I want to see Jim Wolfe."

"No comprende," the *mozo* answered.

That got Johnny mad. He leaned over so far he almost slipped from the back of Geronimo, shook his small fist in the *mozo's* face.

And shouted, "Where's Jim Wolfe? That Zopalote's got a bushwhack trap laid for him. Where is he, stupid?"

The *mozo's* eyes opened wide.

"He's gone! He went ten minutes ago to see that Mexican girl, that Maria. He should have had more sense than to mix up with Zopalote's sweetheart."

"Why didn't you say so?" Johnny was still yelling. "They got two men on each side of the street, all with rifles. And the Zopalote, too."

"Move over," the *mozo* said, "we're riding."

He caught Johnny's belt, almost yanking the kid off his seat as he swung up.

Johnny turned his head.

"Say! Which one of these birds is the real Zopalote?"

"Not Jim."

"Then why's he riding around pretending?"

"El Zopalote,"—the *mozo's* voice was grim—"wiped him out, almost killed him. Jim went a little crazy, I guess. Figured if he pretended to be El Zopalote, the man he wanted would come out into the open, would try to get him. That was the only way he could get hold of him. But El Zopalote always has guards following him, and Jim hasn't had the chance to shoot it out."

"Oh," the kid said. "Then that's why he stole my hoss."

"Sure—to go with the rest of the rig. To make him look like the real article. El Zopalote always rides a palomino stallion."

Johnny ran his heels over Geronimo's flanks. "Let's go," he said.

"Seguramente," the Mexican answered. *"Vámonos."*

THE chances of catching up with Jim Wolfe in time were very slim indeed. So Johnny and the Mexican, who told him his name was Joe, cut back up the hill to the *cantina*.

They might, they had decided, be able to delay Jim Wolfe long-distance by rousing the town. At any rate, another good racket like the one Johnny had caused earlier in the evening would tell Jim that something was up, and it might even set the plans of El Zopalote awry.

In front of the *cantina* Joe shot off his gun and howled, *"Baja, El Zopalote!* Down with the Buzzard!"

Then to be sure they got out both sides they yelled, *"Viva El Zopalote!"*

The results were immediate. The *cantina* gave forth its flood of shouting, shooting Mexicans, drunk enough for anything. But Johnny and Joe were on their way, clanging down the cobbled street, shooting into the sky.

"Baja El Zopalote! Viva El Zopalote!" Until their voices could no longer be distinguished over the din, until the whole town had joined in on the free-for-all, starting the burros to braying and the roosters to crowing, and the babies to crying. Setting the dogs to running around and howling dismally.

And then the high-tempered Geronimo went wild.

He thundered down one street into the next, cutting corners so sharply his fore hoofs rocketed sparks, running like some locoed beast who was trying to escape from his tail. He hit the flat country below the hill—then lined out for home.

Johnny tried to pull him in, but it was all the boy could do to hang onto the horse's bare back. He finally had to give up, lie over Geronimo's neck and cling with his heels while the wind whipped against him and Joe clung to his waist.

It was in this fashion that they tore down the road to Texas, whipping past a rider on a bay horse, skimming the flank of a second mount just as they lined by the open door where El Zopalote was waiting to set off his trap on the man he would bushwhack.

From the corner of his eye Johnny glimpsed the tall Mexican, holding his

six-shooter in his hand—and the beautiful girl who was to have been the deadfall lure standing in the lighted doorway dressed in a very low-cut blouse and spangled *china poblana* skirt, her dusky face a mask of puzzlement.

And it was then that trouble really began breaking. From each side of the road rifles spoke spitefully. They smashed the night to bits with a second volley, and Johnny felt Joe's arms tighten around his waist, felt rather than heard the little Mexican's gasp.

Geronimo's insane charge had carried them out of gunshot before the bandits could trigger another load. And Johnny, not daring to turn, yelled over his shoulder:

"Get you, Joe?"

"Por Dios!" Joe did not sound like one who had been seriously wounded. "It was Jim Wolfe, that second man we passed. It was Jim! And I saw him fall from his horse. They were shooting at him, *chico*. He is dead."

Johnny pulled in on the reins until he thought his arm would break, until he was afraid that the bit would tear Geronimo's tender mouth. Still the horse stampeded on, away from that terrifying noise behind him until he was far out in the desert and the hullabaloo in town had died to a murmur. There he let himself be pulled down to a trot, and finally to be turned back to Santo Ignacio.

"You sure that was Jim Wolfe?" the youngster asked Joe.

"Si. The horse Jim went on to see that devil of a girl. The sombrero, the *pantalones,* the serape. It was Jim, and he flew from the horse as if the hand of God had thrown him away."

Johnny's throat choked up until he could not speak.

"Jim and me started his horse ranch up there in Wyoming," Joe said sorrowfully. "Then Jim helped me start a hacienda in my home town, in Santo Ignacio. It was there he became the enemy of El Zopalote, and I with him. It was my fault."

Johnny found his voice finally. "Joe, it was my fault. I guess I'm just a kid who shoulda stayed home. My sister said Jim was a good man. She said if he took Geronimo it was for a good cause, and we should be glad he had the hoss. She said Jim would come back some day and explain to us.

"But me, I just thought my sister was silly—like all women. And when she cried, I got on Sittin' Bull and I said I'd shoot Jim Wolfe and get back Geronimo. Now he's dead, and I guess I ought be happy. But I ain't. I wish I'da stayed home. Jim—he coulda handled this if I didn't go an' stick my bill in."

"Jim was a great man—and my best friend," Joe said simply.

"You got another gun?"

"No. Only this one."

"Then give it to me," Johnny said. "Me, I'm goin' to kill this Zopalote."

He kicked his heels into Geronimo's side and the horse broke into a trot toward Santo Ignacio.

V

THE racket was still flourishing on top of the hill when Johnny and Joe slipped from Geronimo's high back and looped the reins over a spine of organ cactus about a quarter of a mile from the deadfall shack.

Joe, they had decided, was to keep the gun because he was the best shot and familiar with the weapon. Johnny was to act as a sort of rear guard, to raise a noise when Joe got into position in order to distract El Zopalote's henchmen.

If possible, Johnny was to try to find a weapon when and if Joe shot anybody down. Otherwise he was to keep out of the way.

Johnny did not like this plan as it gave him no chance to prove his worth. But it seemed better than anything he could think up so he agreed to play along with it.

There was no sound ahead at the shack

as they crept on afoot so as to surprise the bandits. But by the time they drew in sight of the shack some sort of commotion had started. The girl was talking in a high-pitched voice. El Zopalote was swearing, and though Johnny could not understand a single Mexican cuss word, he could tell by the way El Zopalote rolled them off that they were the best the language could offer.

"What they sayin', Joe?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know. Too many talkin' at once."

They went on. When they were within forty or fifty yards of the shack they saw two of El Zopalote's henchmen drag a body up to the door. El Zopalote and the girl leaned over the body, pulled back the sombrero. The girl screamed, and El Zopalote cussed some more. Joe nudged Johnny.

"Now," he whispered. "Look."

He lifted his six-shooter, steadied the barrel over his left arm, tightened his finger over the trigger. The hammer snapped down and it was as if a lighted bomb had dropped in front of the shack. The girl and three men plunged for the door.

The bullet, though, had missed. Johnny could see the little spray of adobe bits an inch from El Zopalote's head.

"I coulda done better," he muttered.

Joe was bellying his way up to the shack. Johnny followed, silent on his bare feet, his eyes on the body lying in the square of light from the open doorway. It looked kind of queer to him, twisted up as if every bone in the body had been broken by the fall. It made him a little sick inside.

Now they were only ten feet away. Joe stopped, signaled to Johnny to work over to the right and raise a commotion at the side of the shack. Johnny nodded, edged into the darker shadows. Joe was near enough to the door now to pick off anybody who showed his head. Johnny opened his mouth to shout.

His teeth came together with a sharp click. A hand had suddenly gripped his shoulder.

FOR a brief moment Johnny knew more terror than he had ever felt in his entire life before that night. The hand on his shoulder was firm. The man who held him was directly behind, and Johnny was absolutely helpless. Then a voice whispered in his ear:

"Got Joe with you kid?"

Johnny gulped.

"Jim?"

"Yeah. That Joe out there?"

"I thought—" the youngster's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. "That man—I thought they killed you."

Jim Wolfe chuckled, deeply but almost silently.

"A dummy," he whispered. "Stuck my fancy *charro* outfit on a scarecrow. I knew they had the trap all set. Figured that would bring them out and I could close in from the rear. But you come by, and that racket started in town."

"Joe and me," the kid stuttered, "started that. Geronimo spooked."

Joe was edging up to the dummy that he thought to be Jim Wolfe's corpse. Inside the shack the silence was a deadly thing. Off to the east the first streaks of gray light were showing. They had to work fast before it became bright enough to give away their positions. Jim Wolfe whispered:

"You stay here! I'm bustin' up this party, pronto."

Then he stepped over to the doorway, keeping out of line of fire from inside, and called: "Come on out, Zopalote—or I'll come and get you."

There was no answer.

Johnny could see Joe's eyes popping in the darkness of his face as he came to his knees not five feet from the resurrected Jim Wolfe. Then Jim crouched. Like a panther, he leaped across the open doorway so that there would be one of them on each side; and as if it were the trigger to the deadfall, a blast of lead tore through the opening behind him.

Then there was only silence again. Jim was talking to Joe in sign language, and Johnny was beginning to fidget. It

was a tough break for a man to come all this way and then be cut out of the excitement. It did not seem fair that he could only look on and take no part in the hostilities.

Well, Joe had told him that since he had no gun he should raise a commotion to distract the people inside from concentrating on their killing. This, he decided, was as good a time as any to get going, and he was figuring on doing a thorough job of it.

Joe and Jim were balanced on their toes, ready to close in. Johnny opened his mouth, screamed like a soul in distress. He had found a couple of five-gallon oil cans on a yoke that the Indians used for carrying water. These he threw into the cobbled street when Jim and Joe stepped into the doorway with their guns flaming. Then, kicking the cans for good measure, Johnny followed his two *compadres*.

He tried to tackle El Zopalote but found himself going right past him and plunging head on into the Mexican girl, who started screaming. At their abrupt meeting the girl collapsed and the screaming shut off as if she had been dropped headfirst into a rainbarrel; and Johnny found himself in the most terrible of all predicaments. He was sitting on her soft knees while she clutched him to her bosom as if he were the only hope she had left of living.

The bellow of guns was deafening and the acrid odor of gunsmoke was in his nostrils, but he'd rather be down the mouth of a cannon with the wick touched off than sitting on the warm lap of a plump girl. Through the haze Johnny saw a pair of *charro* pants flash by. He reached out, grabbed one of the legs, knew instinctively that he had caught El Zapolite, and hung on.

The big man, running like a rabbit for the door, wrenched Johnny out of the girl's frantic grip. And Johnny, not able to think of anything better to do, clung on and bit with all his strength through El Zapolite's tight *pantalones!*

The man howled. There was one more shot. And El Zopalote collapsed on top of the kid.

JOHNNY crawled out from under the dead bandit. The girl was crying hysterically. Joe was laughing. Jim Wolfe was looking worried. And the two henchmen of El Zopalote were piled in one corner of the room, motionless. Then, from outside, the rattle of hoofs told Johnny that the other guards were deserting.

He said: "Hey! They got away!"

Jim Wolfe stopped looking worried when the kid showed undoubted signs of life. "Kid, when you busted in here I thought it was a locoed wolf let loose. You sure upset the pot for El Zopalote!"

Joe was laughing so hard he could hardly keep his English straight.

"The leetle wan—the little Don Juan! Did you see how he went for our Maria?"

"Bah!" Johnny said. "Nuts. The heck with women. You know what she said? She said I was a blue-eyed baby and she wanted to kiss me. I guess I showed her."

"I guess you did," Jim Wolfe agreed.

Johnny got to his feet, straightened his back, glanced around.

"Well," he said, "guess I better be goin'. My sister'll be wondering where I'm at!"

Jim Wolfe got to his feet also.

"Can I ride along with you, kid? I been figuring on going that way, and was wonderin' if you'd sorta lend me Sittin' Bull. Or do I have to steal him, too?"

Johnny Blake bridled.

"I still don't savvy that, mister. Mary was just crazy enough to give you the whole ranch if you ast her for it. You didn't need to steal no hoss."

Jim Wolfe smiled at that.

"Kid, you gave me the answer to that question yourself when you said the heck with women. I did ask Mary for the loan of that horse and she said she wouldn't let me have it. She said I'd get myself killed if I came down here."

Johnny studied his bare toes. "Me, I hadda sneak out, too," he admitted. "Women just don't savvy us men!"

The Greedy Touch

By RICHARD SALE

An Argosy Oddity

WHEN we hear of crime and punishment in this modern day, we are apt to consider it only in terms of cops and robbers, and forget that there is justice out beyond the seas in far places.

I am thinking particularly of a story which was told to me by Captain Blenham at the colony of Tuakara in the Sporades, those islands of the southern seas. It is not, you think at once, a detective story at all, and yet it is.

Time was the detective.

In those days, some twelve years ago, there was a white man who owned a ramshackle sloop named *Aradith,* a typical little copra vessel of wide beam and blunt bow and squat transom stern.

He called himself Captain Tomlinson and he was a young, sleek-faced adventurer with cold furtive eyes and a perpetual expression of distrust upon his shiny face. In the islands, there were rumors that he was a murderer, a *one-who-had-killed,* and the guesses said that he had shot one man in Australia, killed the constable who sought to take him, and then fled to the range of the commissioner of the Western Pacific where he took a new name and entered the copra trade.

That may have been nothing but rumor, for certainly the police of the various ports where he touched could find nothing to hold him on.

For some time, there was nothing more suspicious about him except that he avoided white men and communed only with natives at various ports, particularly with pearl and shell divers who worked naked in the lagoons where they had found out lucrative beds. But as far as anyone knew, his own business was shell and copra and not pearls.

After a year, Captain Tomlinson bought a new boat, and in Papeete that spring, the waterfront was stunned to see it coming in, for it was a beautiful craft and it had cost a lot of money, more money indeed than could have been had in copra and shell in a single year.

And soon everyone learned that Captain Tomlinson was going into the pearl business. For upon his decks was diving equipment, pumps and skin helmets, and it became known that Captain Tomlinson and the *Aradith II* were going north to the Duro Islands to seek great pearls. But no one in Papeete would sign on with him. The natives are not stupid.

At the Duros, however, unaware of his reputation, two Japanese divers, disgruntled with their pay with another ship of an American pearl company, signed with Tomlinson as divers, were offered half the pickings and, delighted, proceeded to take him to one of the richest beds they had ever found—one which they had been holding secret so that someday they could take advantage of the shells themselves.

Unfortunately, one Jap was lost in a storm on the way back to Duro, washed overboard, and the other Jap, as Captain Tomlinson testified before the authorities at Duro, had failed to return to the sur-

face after a naked dive, which is to say, without a helmet.

"Those particular waters around the Manoa atoll," said the captain, "are alive with octopus, y'know. Very dangerous waters. I warned him to be careful."

It was, of course, rather difficult to deny the first contention, or check up on the second.

The authorities questioned the native crew, but they knew nothing. That was the truth. They *didn't* know anything.

THAT night Captain Blenham met Tomlinson, and they both drank but did not get drunk. Blenham told me that Tomlinson could drink an amazing lot and stay sober, but that he always took melon juice in his drinks.

They talked. "I am going," Captain Tomlinson told him, "to be the richest man in the Pacific some day. I am going to clean out every decent pearl on the bottom, and when I'm rich—and I mean indisputably *rich*—I'm going back, back to the States and live like a king the rest of my life."

"That's all right," Blenham replied. "If you can do it."

"I can do it," said Tomlinson. "Every native diver has a favorite pearl bed, a place where he has seen the giant shells with the giant pearls, the white cherries. They take me there, under inducement of sorts."

Blenham dared to say: "But they don't come back, eh?"

A leading question without doubt; and a dangerous one. Yet it evoked not even a change of expression.

"Diving," replied Tomlinson, "is a dangerous profession."

He worked the lagoons of the Malakis, those palm-studded sandpits to the southwest where the sharks and groupers abound. It was said he lost three divers down there, but there was no manner of checking because no one seemed to know who had signed on.

All that was nothing more nor less than grand larceny and murder.

Finally he worked the *Aradith* north to the Monday group. There were stupid and dirty peoples in those spits, but there were many pearls, not seed pearls but large perfect gems; and in the town of Raritea Captain Tomlinson heard the fame of Nato the diver, who was the best of his clan. He had been called Nato, or trout, because he was a fish in the sea. He had killed many sharks, many octopi. The deep had no terrors for him.

Captain Tomlinson showered Nato with magnificent hospitality. The diver was made drunk and he talked, spoke of the pearl beds he knew of where the pearls grew black, the size of marbles, or bullets.

He signed on, and next morning the *Aradith* went after the treasure. What fine terms Tomlinson had given the man! For himself, he would take a mere twenty-five percent. For Nato, the remaining three-quarters. Was not that a fair bargain? Nato thought so.

Only after they were at sea did Captain Tomlinson realize that Nato was peculiar. He had sensed something was odd about the man; but, his mind's eye firmly fixed on incalculable riches, he did not pay much attention. Nato was, to him, not so much a human being as a tool. The fact that the tool occasionally displayed out-of-the-way traits was only mildly disturbing and did not materially damage its usefulness.

Nato felt no pain, for instance. He had seen Nato touch the hot stove in the galley below, and not cry out, nor even remove his hand until the scent of burning flesh filled the room.

But it made little difference who gained black pearls. A wizard would do as well as another. Just so the pearls reached the decks of the *Aradith* safely.

And there really seemed to be no doubt on that point.

However—

At the end of the first day's diving, Captain Tomlinson realized that he was up against a shrewd native. For Nato did not surrender the pearls of the day. Instead he kept them deep in his diving belt within an oilskin pouch, and said, "This

way, Cap'm, I trust you, you trust me. If I give you pearls, you kill me when you have 'nuff, and you sail. You be square with me, we split pearls like you say, one-quarter for you three-quarter for me. But we only split back at Raritea when trip is done. I sleep lightly and carry a strong knife."

Tomlinson took it well. He instantly smiled, and said, "Of course, Nato, if you wish it that way."

The weather held, and Nato dove for three days. Captain Tomlinson was always pleasant and courteous with the native and made no attempt to cow him. Nato enjoyed the deference. They understood each other completely, he felt, and he was going to live and go back to Raritea and be rich.

ON THE evening of the third day, when Nato rose to the surface for his last dive, Tomlinson stretched out a hand to help the man aboard. Nato took it. That was a mistake. He extended his right hand, his knife hand, and as soon as it was gripped, Tomlinson buried a knife between the brown shoulders and hauled the struggling native aboard to rifle the pouch of its pearls.

Now this was a simple expedient, and one with which Tomlinson was presumably not unacquainted.

But some men take longer to die than others, and Nato was not dead. In his frantic struggles as he expired, he gouged Tomlinson's face badly with his nails, scratching him so deeply as to leave permanent scars, finally collapsing on the deck and stiffening in the rigor of death.

Captain Tomlinson got the pearls, gorgeous pearls, then disposed of the corpse.

He made no attempt to return to Raritea; instead he set sail for the Hawaiians, two thousand miles away. He was stocked and ready for such a voyage, and it was strange that, when he finally made a landfall, he was alone on his ship, his crew had disappeared, and there were pearls worth a quarter of a million dollars upon his person, his booty of three passing years.

He was rich. Indisputably. And he was going to the states.

. . . But he came back, Captain Blenham told me. Tomlinson came back, six years later, dead broke. He came back to try for more because he needed money desperately. But this time he couldn't even get started because no one in the islands would sign with him, and the reason was very obvious.

HERE, in his telling of the tale to me, Captain Blenham stopped, and when I asked him what the ending was, he suggested we walk about the place at Tuakara for a bit.

Within a squalid little shack, we came upon a hulk which lived and breathed and had being, but was no longer a man, a vile and rotten thing whose stench filled the air about itself. Here we paused, and I looked upon the poor soul with mingled pity and disgust, and Captain Blenham turned to me and said, "You will notice that the cigarette this wretch holds has burnt down to his fingers and is burning away his flesh and he cannot even feel it, nor can he smell the stink of his own burning skin. Such is leprosy. It is almost doubtful if he can hear me when I warn him." And he faced the hulk and shouted, "Tomlinson! The cigarette is burning you! The cigarette!"

I gasped in horror.

Blenham nodded. "Nato was a leper, you see. Anybody but Tomlinson would have spotted the symptoms at once. But Tomlinson was too busy figuring on ways to get rid of Nato to figure that maybe Nato had ways of getting rid of him. . . . Tomlinson, drop that cigarette, you fool!"

The hulk heard, stirred, took away the cigarette from its fingers, now worn down to flat stumps, and Blenham and I were quickly on our way, both of us unconsciously holding our breaths until we were clear of the place, and Blenham staring at me grimly as if to say that there was the end of his story. . . .

MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

RETO BANTAM BOBBER

WEIGHING ONLY 120 IN A SPORT GEARED FOR 200-POUNDERS, HE BECAME KNOWN AS THE MOST DARING BOB-SLED PILOT IN THE WORLD.

RETO CAPADRUTT DIDN'T LIKE HIS FATHER'S BUSINESS, BANKING. PREVENTED FROM BEING AN AVIATOR, HE TOOK UP BOBSLEDDING AT ST. MORITZ AND IN A YEAR WAS NATIONAL CHAMPION AND HERO OF SWITZERLAND, AT THE AGE OF 16!

RETO STEERED WITH A ROPE INSTEAD OF A WHEEL BECAUSE IT INCREASED HIS SENSITIVITY OF TOUCH, REFUSED TO WEAR GOGGLES, AND MADE UP FOR HIS LACK OF WEIGHT BY SHEER COURAGE. 19-YEAR-OLD RETO'S MAD DUEL WITH J. HUBERT STEVENS IN THE 1932 OLYMPICS IN WHICH THE RECORD WAS BROKEN 6 TIMES STANDS AS THE CLASSIC OF BOBSLEDDING....

.... CAPADRUTT HAD TO BE SATISFIED WITH SECOND BECAUSE OF HIS CAUTIOUS TEAMMATE'S PERSISTENT USE OF THE BRAKES.

COMPETING IN THE GRAND PRIX AT ST. MORITZ LAST YEAR, RETO'S SLED LEFT THE SLIDE, CRASHED INTO A TREE, AND HE DIED OF HEAD INJURIES.

The Swede lifted the big bartender and hurled him galley-west

Hook, Line, and Tinker

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "Fly High, Fly Tough," "He Flies Through the Air—" etc.

What's draglining? Well, it's an art, like fly casting. A philosophical Scotsman said that, and then proceeded to prove his point—to the complete dissatisfaction of a soft-soap construction boss

I KNEW very little about fishing but it made a good enough excuse for getting away from the gloom of the Trigger River Dam community.

Art Sander's and Hugh Dagley's outfits had buried the hatchet, except for small bickerings, and were ready to work together on the main dam construction. But now the congressional ax was about to descend; three thousand men saw their livelihood imperiled, a cold moneyless winter ahead.

Went Brady was directing a gang of muckers on the west abutment, taking time out occasionally to curse Hugh Dagley and his congressional trestle, as he called it. It was the elevated railway over which certain high dignitaries and congressmen would ride in state to inspect this federal hydro-electric dam project.

"Fishin'?" Went questioned, when I broached the subject. "You better talk with Artistic McLart, skinner on that big dragline up there." He pointed, and grinned in a way that put me on my guard.

"Artistic McLart," I repeated, doubtfully. "You wouldn't kid me?"

"Course not. Real name's Tumas McLart; Scotchman. But we call him Artistic McLart. Know's all about fishin'."

I plodded the narrow pathway that led upward to where a great six-yard Huckarus

dragline poised its hundred-and-fifty-foot boom over the cutbank. It grew in size as I approached, dominating the scene.

I watched it for a time tossing its great bucket far out into the sand and gravel, hoist and draglines paid out cunningly to direct the fall. This Artistic McLart seemed to knew his business as a dragline skinner.

As I drew nearer the big dragline stopped its grinding labors and, nearer still, I heard the sounds of verbal battle. " 'Tis a most unusual request ye're makin', Mister Dagley," a burred Scotch voice stated.

I came around the left tread of the monster; saw a lean, smart-looking man in khaki frowning down on a stumpy, bow-legged figure in faded dungarees. The tall man with the thin, hatchet face I knew to be Hugh Dagley, sometimes referred to by old construction men as the "boy wonder" or "soft-soap Dagley". At thirty-six he had inherited one of the biggest construction outfits in the west.

"I'm not making any requests," Dagley said. "That's an order, you fool. You're working for me now, just as much as you are for Sanders."

"Not only is it unusual," the Scotchman continued calmly, as if the other hadn't spoken, "but 'tis most inar-rtistic."

"Artistic, my eye!" Dagley exclaimed petulantly. "What's art or the lack of art to do with a dragline? Sanders has babied you men along until you're like a bunch of grand opera singers."

The Scotchman patted the great, grooved treads of his monster with an affectionate hand. "Ye'd make a mock o' Betsey here. That's what ye'd do. Any mon wi' gumption 'uld ken 'twas a mere show-off."

Dagley's face reddened. He had seen me and knew I was a witness to this questioning of his authority.

"For the last time, McLart," he snapped, "I'm telling you to have this dragline down there on the north face of the abutment. And when the officials' car starts across the trestle you'd better have it busy."

McLart stood with short legs spread, shaking his head disapprovingly at the departing boss. "Tis most inar-rtistic," he said. "Art Sanders 'uld ne'er ask a thing like thot."

I began to understand how Artistic McLart had gotten his nickname.

His sad face brightened when I mentioned the subject of fishing. When I suggested a try of one of the small branches the following day I thought he would hug me.

ARTISTIC McLart knew his fishing, all right. Or at least he knew how to handle a rod. He loaned me a bait-casting outfit, more suited to my limited knowledge of fishing, and we whipped that branch almost to its headwaters.

McLart pushed through the underbrush, short legs apparently strangers to fatigue. I followed along behind, trying to stay near enough to avoid the back-whip of tree branches.

At first it was all fine, the morning cool and bright, earthy odors sweet to the nostrils, every pool we came to in the creek promising some good sport.

We ate the lunches we had brought and continued on. It was hot now. I was getting a blister on my left heel. Doubts began to grow in me. McLart certainly knew how to handle a rod and reel; but did he know how to catch fish?

" 'Tis a guid spot," McLart commented, at one of the pools on the way back.

I sat down disgustedly on a rotted stump and watched him balance like a chipmunk on a rock and shoot his fly far out under a snag. I had been watching him all day, trying to get the hang of that superb, unerring wrist snap. I made another try now and snarled my line with the backlash.

"Mon, mon," he reproved. "Ye're boom work's all wrong. Thot an' the hoist line an' handlin' o' ye're drum brake."

For a moment I didn't understand these dragline terms used in reference to casting.

"Look 'ee. Ye get distance wi' tha boom." He started a whipping of the sup-

ple rod. "But tha proper handlin' o' tha hoist line is ver-ry impor-rtant. Ye'r drag ye use merely for the catchin' o' fish."

"*Merely* for the catching of fish," I exploded. "What in thunder did we come up here for if not fish?"

He shook his head sorrowfully, wiped the sweat-streaked brindle whisker stubble on his face. The enthusiasm left his eyes. I realized, startled, that he was tired, a woebegone little old man with a haunted look back of his steady gray eyes.

He reeled his line in and sat down to load a thickly caked corncob pipe—the kind with a bone mouthpiece.

" 'Tis na guid to deceive ye langer, Mr. Brant. There is na fish in this stream nor in any o' these streams for miles above Trigger Dam. 'Tis due to tha blastin'. I came merely for the ar-rt o' it. 'Tis m' last time."

"Your last time?" I questioned, trying to control my temper. This old fool had dragged me fifteen miles, through heavy brush, just to practice fly casting.

McLart nodded. "I'll na make a mock o' Betsey. That Hugh Dagley wants me to show off wi' her tomorrow, when them brasscollars come snoopin' around."

"That's business, McLart," I told him. "Dagley wants to give them an idea of things being done; lots of activity. That's why he's built that observation trestle—so they can view the whole thing so they'll favor an additional appropriation for Trigger Dam project. There's not many six-yard cat draglines in the world."

McLart grunted. "Soft-soap Dagley. A ver-ry smart mon for gettin' contracts, but not so smart for doin' 'em. Fraw! Thot concrete car they'll ride in, a' covered wi' buntin an' flags—like a painted brawdy wench. 'Tis na the way o' an honest contractor. 'Tis na the way Art Sanders 'uld do."

I WAS on Dagley's side of this argument. If more money was appropriated for Trigger I'd get my structural steel order. If not I'd have three weeks of unproductive time to account for.

"Men are human," I told him. "Even congressmen, and especially Russell Hawley. He'll have the say in this and if Dagley puts on a good show for him, Trigger Dam may get the money."

McLart nodded. "An' Art Sanders'll do the work, an' Hugh Dagley'll take the credit. A'ready I hear him say '*my* trestle, *my* this, *my* thot'. I'll na work for such a mon."

"Then how come old Betsey's down on the abutment, where he ordered her?"

" 'Twas na my doings," McLart protested. "Dagley fired me. Sam Wagner's the mon who'll debase the ar-rt o' dragline runnin'."

"Fired you!" I repeated. I knew then the reason for that haunted look in McLart's eyes. He was truly an old man and there are not many draglines needing operators. "Art Sanders won't stand for that," I said.

"Ye must na tell him!" McLart cautioned me sharply. "There is a 'ready enough trouble betwixt the two outfits."

What McLart said was true enough. Art Sanders had twelve hundred men, Hugh Dagley about eighteen hundred; and they were like two packs of wolf dogs, eyeing each other, grumbling under their breaths.

Dagley's men were on the defensive because of Hugh Dagley's reputation. But like most old construction stiffs they were loyal to their outfit, to their big boss. The word "soft-soap", spoken near them, would have been like a cap to dynamite.

In the saloons and pool halls of Graham, the construction boom town, they herded into groups. You were a Dagley man, a Sanders man, or an outsider. I was an outsider and I decided to remain entirely neutral.

HOW wise this decision was I didn't entirely realize until that evening when I was having a quiet beer in the Silver Dollar. At least that was what I intended having.

A squat, broad-shouldered man elbowed to a place beside me at the long bar.

"Juice," he ordered, distastefully.

That was fortified wine, the strongest drink that could be served in barrooms of the state, but plenty potent, mixed with an occasional stein of beer. Only a cast-iron stomach could retain an evening of the mixture.

"Where's Artistic?" the man asked me, squinting with bloodshot eyes at a group of Dagley men who had just come in.

I recognized him then as the oiler on old Betsey.

"He's down at his shack, getting packed up," I said.

"Damn 'im, firin' Artistic . . . best dragline skinner in the West." He gulped his wine, wiped his lips with the back of an oil stained hand. "Old coot ain't got a cent . . . kept his wife in one of them fancy T.B. sanitariums eight years 'fore she kicked off."

I heard another Sanders man repeat the oiler's words. "Fired Artistic McLart?"

"Who fired McLart?"

"Dagley fired 'im," the oiler told them. 'Wanted 'im to show off with old Betsey. Artistic told him off."

"Old fool always was crazy. Calls draglinin' an art." It was a Swede who said this, a giant of a man.

"He's our outfit."

"That's right, boys."

"Pipe down! Want to tear things loose just 'fore them brasscollars get here?"

The Sanders men quieted. A job was a job these days and there was a bare chance that Russell Hawley might look with favor on Trigger project and back it with all his political might. He certainly wouldn't, though, if he came on the scene to find the construction outfits warring.

The Sanders outfit closed up after that "pipe down" warning, or if they talked any further about Artistic McLart and his troubles it was done in mumbles too low for me to hear the words. And I was between them and the Dagley men.

Everything would have been all right, if Sam Wagner hadn't come into the Silver Dollar at that critical time.

He was a tall, husky man with a big laugh and hearty manner. He had an unusually long thin neck and prominent Adam's apple. I didn't know him. I heard the oiler mutter his name vindictively.

"Line up, boys," Wagner shouted. "Drinks on me. I got old McLart's job, skinnin' the six."

The Dagley men fronted to the bar. Deliberately the Sanders men turned their backs to the mahogany.

"Here's to the art of draglinin'," Wagner proposed, raising his beer.

That brought forth a big, good-natured laugh from his friends. Artistic McLart was one of the characters of Trigger Dam community.

IT WAS too much for McLart's oiler. He slammed his heavy wineglass to a far corner of the room and stepped out to face the new dragline operator.

"You, Wagner . . . you swivel-necked hick! You'll never see the day when you can handle a dragline alongside McLart. There's sure no art to the way you drag a bucket."

"Art! You call shovin' levers on a dragline, art?"

"I call it art," stated the big Swede, who had just named McLart crazy for having the same view. "I call draglinin' an art, you long-eared ape."

"Keep outta this, Benson," the oiler commanded. "I'll take care 'a my own fights."

Frankly, I was getting scared. The Dagley men were crowded around the door, cutting off any graceful retreat in that direction. And the Sanders men were back of me. I knew that, from the rising grumble of their anger.

My attention went to the bartender. He was a huge man, with a chest like a rain barrel. "Stop it!" he shouted. "Stop it, or I'll murder a bunch of you dirt bums."

He had his apron off, had a two-foot length of inch lead pipe in his hairy paw. He charged around the end of the bar and the lead pipe came down on the skull of a Dagley man with a solid *klunk*.

"Club a workin' man will yuh, yuh dirty bungstarter?"

A beer stein, in the hand of a Sanders man, dropped the bartender in his tracks. The man looked with appreciation at the heavy glass stein in his hand. With an air of further trying its powers he hurled it at the bar mirror.

The stein crashed into the row of display bottles. A bloody purple froth covered the mirror.

Things were happening fast. I saw the oiler go down under a heavy bombardment of Sam Wagner's fists.

The Swede made for Wagner, fists knotted. He went forward onto his face. The bartender, prone on the floor, had gripped the Swede's ankles, tripping him.

The Sanders men charged in a body. I flattened myself against the bar, gripping the suds groove, as a sailor hangs on to keep from being washed overboard.

The long room was filled with a bedlam of shouts and curses. Small sounds emerged from this background of noise.

"Yuh lousy beer swabber! Trip a man, will yuh?"

The Swede lifted the bartender, big as he was, and hurled him clear over the bar. Then, still enraged over his lost chance at Wagner, he started a methodical destruction of the room, pausing as chance offered to flatten a Dagley man.

Two Dagley men lent their weight to the Swede's efforts to uproot the bar. It crashed over into the prone body of the bartender. The Dagley men turned and by mutual consent ganged up on the Swede.

Bottles and mugs were sailing through the air. Ducking low I made for the back entrance. Two men stood in the narrow way, chest to chest, slugging. One of them wilted under the smashing swings. The other one sighed noisily, sat down on his adversary's body to rest.

Out on the open street my panic left me. There were the normal sounds of night life in a construction town; sounds of amplified phonographs, the chant of a pitchman on the corner . . . "grow hair on your head, chest, or the smooth cheeks of a baby, the sovereign hair tonic of the ages . . . but that's not all I'm offering you, gents. I have here . . ."

APPARENTLY the Dagley-Sanders fight was confined to the wrecked interior of what had been the Silver Dollar saloon.

Three doors further I glanced in at Pete's Place. Everything was quiet there, though the occupants were grouped into the distinct divisions of Dagley and Sanders men. I went in and ordered a beer.

It tasted good to me, that beer. I ordered another.

The screen door slammed open, so violently that it parted from its hinges.

It was the Swede, though I wouldn't have recognized him but for his shock of yellow hair. Blood made a veil-like pattern down his face from a horizontal groove above his eyes; blood made a steady stream from his nose.

He blew a spray of red from his lips. "Draglinin's an art!" he shouted defiantly at the silenced room.

Men in the Dagley group exchanged puzzled glances. The same thing happened among the Sanders men. What if dragline operation was or wasn't an art?

"That's what Artistic McLart claims," a goodnatured voice called. "Have a drink, Benson."

Benson held his place. "McLart's been fired. Soft-soap Dagley fired him. Give the job to that chicken-necked Wagner. I say draglinin's an art, you soft-soapers."

The Sanders men caught it up like a battle cry. "Sure draglinin's an art."

The Dagley battle cry was in the negative.

The little Jew bartender reached nervously for a weighted billiard cue.

"Better not," I advised. "The guy in Silver Dollar didn't get very far with a lead pipe."

The bartender seemed to take my advice. He scooped money from the cash register into a big canvas sack.

He almost beat me to the back door. . . .

THERE were only three automobiles filled with the congressional party. Some had their wives with them. But by noon, when they arrived, the town was filled by visiting cars.

News of the Graham battle had gone abroad. This jam of automobiles and people helped a little in concealing the damage done along the single main street.

Hugh Dagley rode in the back seat of the first car and Russell Hawley was one of the men with him. Tall, rawboned Art Sanders rode in the last car. It was the first time I had ever seen him without a straight-stemmed pipe clamped in his big, humorous mouth. He looked miserable, sitting between two chattering females.

The Triger Dam Brass Orchestra greeted them, on the west abutment of the dam. Beating viciously on his suffering snare the trap drummer, a Dagley man, glared from two blackened eyes at the Sanders cornetist, who was suffering tortures from a fist-battered mouth.

Dawn had seen the Sanders-Dagley fight still waging in the street of Graham. Benson, the Swede, of all men, was the first to propose a truce. He represented the Sanders group. Sam Wagner represented the Dagleys.

It was agreed that there was to be no more fighting until the congressional party left in the afternoon. After that, the sky would be the limit. Once and for all time they would settle this question of whether dragline skinning was an art.

The wonder of it all, to me, was that no one had been killed the night before. The second wonder was at the naïveté of these men in thinking they could cover up the signs and rumors of that fight.

Sanders and Dagley men, eyeing each other like cats and dogs, pretended to labor in the deep excavations, on the forms, with the structural iron and reinforcing. Old Betsey, with Sam Wagner on the stool, tossed her huge bucket out on the up-stream side, reeling it in with the metal hardly soiled with muck.

I saw Artistic McLart, the unconscious cause of the night's battle, standing in the background, eyeing this pretense with heartsick disfavor. I remembered his words to Dagley: " 'Tis most inar-rtistic."

The concrete car was shunted onto the observation trestle. Clean pine seats had been built into it. The sides and the big overhead bail were decorated ridicuously with bunting and flags.

Standing near the group of visitors I heard Russell Hawley's crisp, chopped words:

"What's that dragline doing down there, Mr. Dagley?"

Dagley's voice had the smooth quality of grease, or soft soap. "There's a backwash just this side of the big spill gate. Brings in a lot of silt."

"Handsome machine, Dagley." Hawley's rough-hewn face softened in a boyish grin. It wasn't hard to understand the magnetism, the force of this man.

"Y'know, I could sit here all day and watch that big girl scooping up the mud. It's machines like that, Dagley, that make this nation great. Rather, it's such wonderful inventions and combinations of inventions and achievements, such as this dam, that represent the soul of this great nation."

Hawley looked about as if wishing a larger audience for those words; as if there was the unconsious hope of a microphone being within reach.

HE FROWNED then. "Not getting much mud, Dagley. Hate to see a machine like that wasting its time."

"The car is ready," Hugh Dagley said, a little worried by Hawley's shrewd comment.

"Fine. Fine," Hawley approved. But he remained for a few minutes, watching the magnificent swing of the hundred-and-fifty-foot boom. He turned finally toward the dam. "The whole river's diverted through this spillgate now, eh?"

Dagley nodded. "The extreme east spill is poured to a ten-foot higher level. Next move is to gate this spill and divert to the east way, then to the center, then back here again, each time raising the river

level back of the dam from five to ten feet. That is—er—"

Hawley smiled. "That is, if Uncle Sam'll dig deeper into his pockets. Eh, Dagley?"

"We're keeping a lot of men at work here, Mr. Hawley."

"Um-m. I've been noticing things, Dagley. Are these men working or brawling? I've seen a lot of black eyes around here."

Dagley frowned. Both he and Sanders had left camp the night before to go and meet this party. But the evidences of last night's battle were too numerous and conspicuous to be missed. This sight-seeing trip seemed to be getting off to a bad start.

"The car is waiting, Mr. Hawley," he said, almost pushing the other in that direction.

I watched the bunting-decorated steel car with its load of men and women move slowly off across the trestle. Hugh Dagley was doing all the pointing, all the explaining. Art Sanders looked as if he would like to crawl into a dam gallery and hide his shame.

As I watched I saw a big gap open between the joining of two twelve-by-twelve timbers. At the time I thought nothing of it.

I went over to where Artistic McLart was sitting on a boulder, puffing moodily at his corncob, still watching the dragline's operation.

He greeted me absentmindedly.

I hesitated broaching the subject uppermost in my mind. These old construction men have a fierce pride, a suspicion of outsiders.

"McLart," I said, as casually as I could, "I'd like to have your address."

"M' address?" he questioned.

"Yeah. Where you'll get a letter, in case I find—well, I get around quite a few construction jobs . . . good dragline skinners don't grow on trees."

"M' address," he repeated. There was a wistfulness in his voice. "Lad, I dinna ken what m' address'll be."

That gentle, wistful answer—the implication behind it—struck into me like a sharp blade. Here was a man well along in years, a skilled man who had worked hard all of his life. He was alone now, without home or family; even penniless.

Yet he sat there, his thoughts all for a great man-made machine that was being used in what he considered a disgraceful, inartistic manner. At that moment I could understand and agree with him.

His oiler came up, ignored me, stood in silence beside his former boss. His lips were cut, swollen away from his teeth. Three of the front teeth were missing. He had a taped nose, a bandage on his left ear; and by the way he held his right forearm I judged there must be something broken in the hand or wrist. He stared malevolently at the car of sight-seers.

I don't know how long that outgoing trip required. Frankly, I was disgusted with the whole thing. Why should those complete outsiders have the say as to whether three thousand men would or would not have a job this winter? Why should a smooth tongue, a silly display like this, get Dagley a job and force a man like Art Sanders to consolidate with him?

The oiler's sharp, explosive words broke into my thoughts.

"Mac—she's cavin'!"

The trestle seemed to wilt, like dampened cardboard.

THE driver of the concrete dinky must have seen it before the rest of us. His Diesel growled out an angry bellow. For a bare instant it seemed that he would get the car past where the trestle sagged toward the spillway.

They were so close to us that when the twisted coupling snapped the released dinkey charged forward, derailed on the abutment curve.

The concrete car, with its load of men and women, slanted, balanced sickeningly over that white, rushing torrent of water.

For minutes, it seemed, we all stood paralyzed. Complete silence was broken only by the sound of failing timbers.

Uproar broke loose:

"Get a line to 'em!"

"Stay clear of that trestle, you fools!"

"Get the barge down. Murphy, tow the crane barge over!"

These and dozens of other orders and counter-orders. And all the time that heavy car slanted lower.

A small cross-brace splintered, exploding like a gunshot.

It broke into the shouts, brought a dead silence of futility. Given time, these construction men could bridge between mountains, or rip them to their bases. But there wasn't time enough even to tow the gate barge out and try to ease it down on cable into the seething spillway.

An order came from Riley, one of Sanders' superintendents: "Get a crew on that east hammerhead. Hoist the launch and put her downstream."

It was an admission of their helplessness. What would the launch do on the down-stream side? What but fish out the drowned bodies, after they had been churned in the backwash below the spillway. The people in that car were doomed.

"Mon, look alive! Gie me a crew for them power cables."

McLart shouted commands, racing toward the big dragline.

The control stool was deserted. I don't know where Wagner had gone.

McLart's oiler followed his instructions in blind faith, by habit of obedience. He stood by on the clutch bar, throwing his weight on it from side to side as the Scotchman motioned.

The mighty cat treads bit into rock and earth. A crew of men wrestled with the power cables that fed life to the great motors.

Slowly the great dragline outfit mounted the abutement slope, swung with grating of steel against concrete, moved outward. The great length of its boom shoved ahead, like a pointing finger.

Men were busy unshackling the bucket, which would be no use to anybody now. They looked like ants, tussling with the huge whirly crane-hook they dragged over from the nearby workshop. That hook replaced the bucket, was readied for a job of pulling.

"Gie me weight," McLart shouted from the control cab.

They gave him weight above the hook. Turns and turns of arm-thick chain, lashed to the hoist-drag shackles with heavy Manilla. Like a lead weight on a fish-line.

Suddenly a remembered picture flashed into my mind. A stubby figure, balanced on a rock, shooting a fly far out over the water . . . McLart's words: "Ye're boom work's a' wrong. Thot an' the hoist line an 'handlin' o' ye're drum brake."

Artistic McLart was going to fish this day as he had never fished before!

HE BOOMED down for distance, swung with a chattering of gears, let his cable drums go almost free. Almost, but not quite. There was that treacherous backlash of cable to guard against.

With the release of the cable, the hook clumped down, two hundred feet back and to the right of the dragline house. It was done as a man tosses fishhook and sinker to the rear, preparing to cast.

McLart caught the swing short. The big house, with its direct current, heavy-duty motors, started the opposite turn.

It seemed slow. The boom point was more than a hundred and fifty feet from the house balance. It caught up the dead weight of that big hook, with its burden of chain, whipped it through the air. Like a fisherman's cast from behind, aimed at a definite spot.

We could see McLart through the windows of the control cab. He was a mere nothing in comparison with the gigantic machine he controlled.

He missed with the first cast; was many feet short of the bail—that hoop, like a basket handle, attached to the car's sides and arching over its top. Again the boom swung around, whipped to the left, lines swooping free from whirling drums. Again it was short.

Riley's voice came out—quiet, compelling: "Jensen, take over on that east

hammerhead crane. Get the launch downstream!"

Splintering timber made a continuous, nerve-rasping sound. The car slanted lower, so that we could see the inside of it now. A woman crouched in the forward part, both hands squeezed tightly over her eyes. One of the men had his arm extended trying to reach her.

The picture remained with me, as the sudden flare of a match in darkness leaves its image.

That remaining trestle structure couldn't last many more minutes. It had been Dagley's idea, that trestle. He had insisted on taking all of the credit for it. I wondered what he thought of it now. He was out there among that silent group that waited, hoping for a miracle to save them.

McLart took in lines. He paused, seeming to study the problem. I saw the cat treads moving, very slowly, inching the big Huckarus to its last possible reach out on the abutment cement. Now the boom was swinging.

Again I saw him as he had been the day before. At the time I had thought him an amusing character, a little queer perhaps, with his ideas of art. I saw the supple whip bend of his fly rod, heard his words: "Ye get distance wi' tha boom. But tha proper handlin' o' tha hoist line is ver-ry impor-rtant."

I saw it now, the back-and-forth swing of the boom point, the timed payout and stop of hoist cable.

One of the men standing before me shouted, pointing. An upright timber sagged. The concrete car tilted sideways. Its occupants, most of them, crowded in the upper end, clung to the metal edge—a row of desperate, clawing hands. I watched the arc of the bail over their heads.

There was the woman in the other end, shutting out the sight of what was below them. The man trying to reach her threw all caution aside, leaped recklessly down the slant and picked her up bodily in his arms. The man was Art Sanders.

It was a futile thing, that unconscious act of bravery. But we cheered him as if he had actually saved the woman's life.

There was no safe place in any part of the car. A few more inches of sag and it would plunge into the spillway, carrying all of them with it.

McLart's deliberation of movement was a maddening thing. He must see what we were seeing! He must know what a slender margin of time remained!

His hands moved with calculated speed over the controls. For all the emotion we could see about him he might have been working on a daily, routine shift.

But the arc of the boom swings was increasing. Back and forth, back and forth, and ever a lengthening of the cables.

THE payout was timed beautifully. Perhaps it was imagination but it seemed I could hear a low humming as that cable with its weighted hook sliced through the air.

Then, with one final left whip, the hoist and drag drums rolled out their oily, snake-like lengths of cable. The half-ton weight of hook and chain shot through the air, straight at the arch of the concrete car's bail.

McLart caught that hurtling mass of destruction—the boom, the hook, the chain—I'll never know by what combination of skill and instinct—when it seemed certain to smash every person in that perilously balanced car.

The hook made a whipped half-turn around the car bail, low on one side. He started the hoist, carefully bringing strain against the hook. The car was teetering from the hook's blow. The cable tension slackened by tiny jerks, releasing side strain which threatened to tip the car.

The hook scraped upward along the curved bend of the metal arch; turned on its swivel; caught the bail at the top, ready to lift.

I felt as limp as a wet rag. I think there were others who felt the same.

The men did not make a sound, but you could feel the sudden relax of tension; and I saw several of them turn

and grin at each other, almost apologetically.

I watched and waited while McLart geared his machinery into the treads under the outfit and backed the Huckarus, keeping a delicate strain on the hoist cable. All the time I had an insane urge to shout directions.

"Swing 'em clear!"

It was an echo to my own thoughts. It was Sam Wagner, standing a few paces from me. A yellow-haired giant stood beside him. Swede Benson.

"Maybe you better let Artistic handle that load," Benson advised.

"That's right," a man said. "It's goin' to take art to get that car swung clear of the trestle."

The speaker was a Dagley man—the cornetist of the brass orchestra who had had his lips smashed for denying that there was art in dragline ng.

Treads placed to his satisfaction, Artistic McLart settled down on the control stool. I saw the slackened dragline coming slowly in.

Again came one of those memory backflashes: "Ye'r drag ye use merely for the catchin' o' fish."

McLart had sunk his hook. Now he had to play the fish; catch its weight on the hoist, swing it up-stream with drag, to avoid what remained of the trestle.

We watched that play. I saw Dagley and Sanders men standing together, shoulder to shoulder, their enmity forgotten. I saw Wagner point out a bit of nice drum work to the Swede as the car threatened to snag a cross timber.

They were no longer Sanders or Dagley men. They were too busy pulling for that little bow-legged monkey in the control cab of old Betsey.

There was no shouting from them, though, while Artistic McLart imperturbably maneuvered his giant machine. If the men spoke it was in low voices.

McLart set the concrete car down gently on the curve ahead of the dinky, now lying helplessly on its side. By a freak of pure luck its flanged wheels grooved themselves to the rails.

He eased slack to his cables, cut the main switch and climbed down the short ladder to the ground. He wiped both hands up and down the legs of his dungarees. He stood for a moment, hands resting, palms down on the wide metal tread shoes. It was an affectionate gesture of farewell to old Betsey.

I FELT sorry for Hugh Dagley in the quarter or half hour that followed. He didn't seem to realize what had happened. He tried to explain that trestle failure, tried to swerve Russell Hawley's attention to the concrete plant . . . he was like a small boy who shouts to attract attention to himself, good or bad.

He talked continually and with a kind of frenzy to Hawley, who seemed not to hear him, and to the others in the party. None of them listened.

Nobody was interested in Hugh Dagley. They were all trying to get near a sour-faced, bow-legged little man who glared at them with bitter contempt, eyes seeking an avenue of escape.

. . . " 'Tis a strange thing to me," Artistic McLart puzzled over it, two days later.

We were practicing fly casting on Miners' Creek, the same branch we had struggled along a few days before. He was clamping a tiny nub of lead to his fly snell, a fraction of an ounce heavier than the one he had been using.

He was happy to be fishing, but something bothered him.

He closed his pocket knife. "One day this mon Dagley is giein' a' tha orders. The next day he gies ne'er an order wi'oot askin' tha advice o' Art Sanders. They say we'll ha' tha money to finish up wi' an' tha lads ha' a' took to bein' guid friends. But why, I dinna ken."

He stood up. "Watch ye, noow, lad. I'll show ye tha proper manner o' handlin' tha boom. Mind, 'tis much tha same as a dragline . . . 'tis an ar-rt, lad."

The Stars Spell Death

By JONATHAN STAGGE

CHAPTER XL

CLAWS OF THE CRAB-STAR

IN the deep, charged silence, Robin picked up the photograph of Dawn, opened the back of the frame and took out the horoscope.

"There!" He handed it to Max with a slightly derisive smile. "That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

If the man felt any surprise, he showed no signs of it. In complete composure, he turned the pages until he reached Dr. Barker's penciled notes and considered them carefully.

"Yes," he said at length. "This would seem to be what we want." He glanced at Robin. "In a short time, when we are ready, you will be prepared to assist my wife in making up some of this compound?"

Robin nodded.

"Excellent. I am so glad we have come to see eye to eye at last."

With a faint, incongruously courteous bow, he went out of the room, shutting and locking the door behind him.

Robin pushed himself round to face me. His eyes still hinted at the bitter contempt and hatred he felt not only for Max Wolf but for himself too.

"Well, Hugh, they've got it. In spite of everything, that damn swine beat us." He made a little, helpless gesture. "It—it was just that I couldn't stand the thought of Sydney and your daughter . . ."

"You don't have to explain to me," I said. "It's easy enough, I guess, to be a hero when it's only your own life you're playing around with. It's quite a bit different when heroism gets mixed up with the lives of people you love. I'd have done the same thing myself."

He lay there, staring up at the ceiling. "And I've got to help them make the compound!" He laughed savagely. "That's the ultimate humiliation, isn't it? Me with all my lofty ideals, I'm going to help them bring something into the world that has the power to destroy and—and blind untold thousands of people."

I found myself desperately sorry for him. I could tell he was going through a hell far worse than anything Max Wolf could devise.

I said, "I suppose there's no way you could somehow phoney the formula so they'd think they had the compound when they hadn't?"

"Not on your life. Wolf said his wife was a distinguished chemist. He wasn't exaggerating. I knew quite a bit of her reputation when I was abroad. She's about as brilliant as they come. You might as well try to fool Madame Curie with bum radium."

He added, "They showed me the lab

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she'd fitted up here, before they brought me in to you. She's got about everything there that's needed to make up the stuff, too."

"Then there's nothing we can do any more?" I asked, relieved in a way that at least there was no more of that crushing responsibility on our shoulders.

"Nothing more we can do," echoed my cousin grimly. "From now on they pay the piper and play the tune."

It was about five minutes later that Carl came in and, without speaking, loosened Robin's arms and legs and half lifted him to his feet.

My cousin tried to walk a few steps unaided but crumpled to the floor.

"Guess I've forgotten how to walk after all these days," he said, smiling weakly.

Carl had finally to help him out of the room. In my last glimpse of him, leaning on Carl's arm, there was something infinitely pitiful about Robin—the boy who had set up for himself such immensely high standards and who was crushed now by the realization that he could not live up to them.

AFTER they had gone I lay for what seemed like hours listening to the vague sounds which every now and then trailed to me from some nearby room. Occasionally Robin's voice, crisp and authoritative, filtered through to me. There were arguments, ejaculations in a foreign tongue and, for short periods, the droning of machinery.

I suppose I should have been thinking how awful it was that, there in that improvised laboratory, was being prepared one of the most ghastly weapons of destruction ever imagined by man. I should have had long, cosmic thoughts . . . humanity . . . civilization . . . life . . . death . . .

Instead I found myself wondering about trivial domestic things. I wondered what time it was; what Dawn was doing and whether she had made my absence an excuse to abandon her homework; I wondered whether I had been missed yet and how Cobb would feel when he heard that his wife's "fourth" had been used to lure me from home.

Finally, out of sheer exhaustion, I drifted into sleep to dream once again of a vast map of the heavens across which roamed in gigantic human form the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

There was Virgo, this time suggesting Dawn, a young girl with short skirts and flying hair, running across the starry arena of the sky. Plodding after her, white-haired like Dr. Heller, came Aquarius; while in their wake, hand in hand, moved Gemini, a boy and a girl who might well have been Robin and Sydney Train. All of them were progressing toward one focal point whether, like a huge, heraldic monster with cruel, waving claws, crouched the constellation of Cancer.

Frantically I tried to call to those moving figures, warning them of the danger ahead. But no sound came from my lips. I tried to wave them back—but my hands were tied.

I stared in horrified fascination as they drew nearer and nearer the orbit of that monster. Why didn't they realize what was there in front of them? Why couldn't they pay any attention to me?

And then, just as they were on the verge of being caught up into the vise-like claws of the Crab, they glanced in my direction and with the ghastly clarity of nightmare I knew what was the matter with them.

The stars that should have been their eyes were dull and lifeless. They were—stone blind.

I AWOKE drenched in perspiration. And yet I felt cold and shivery. As the recollection of where I was trailed back it seemed merely like waking from one nightmare into another. From the room nearby I heard a rhythmic whirring sound; then Robin's voice coming nearer.

The door was thrown open.

I heard Robin say, "You don't need me any more now. Mrs. Wolf can do the rest. I want to get some sleep. When you

have a clear liquid, you must centrifuge it for two hours and the residue is what you want. Two hours, mind. Then you can wake me up for the identity tests. But for God's sake leave me alone till then."

My cousin looked terribly tired and drawn, but he seemed to have regained the use of his legs to some extent. Carl was with him, however, and helped him to the couch where, methodically, he tied his ankles and wrists with stout cord.

"You're wasting your time. Too tired to move, anyway," grunted Robin. But he made no effort to resist. After Carl had tested the cords to make sure they were tight, he added: "When you go, turn out the lights, will you? Head aches like hell."

Carl turned out the lights and then left the room. I heard the scratch of the key in the lock.

I did not speak for a moment. Then I said, "Well, Robin, you've made the stuff?"

He did not answer. In the unfamiliar darkness I could make him out only as a vague form beside me. He seemed to be staring straight up at the ceiling.

"Hugh," he said suddenly, "you didn't really believe him when he said he'd let us go free after they'd made their getaway, did you?"

"I guess I wouldn't believe much of anything that man said unless it was unpleasant."

"That's the way I figured. I knew they'd never let me stay alive. Of course they couldn't afford to have me going around knowing that formula. I knew from the start I was done for. But now I—I think the same way about you. You know much too much."

I had gone beyond the stage where my own chances of remaining alive particularly exercised me. I thought what Robin said was almost certainly the truth. But it no longer seemed important—one way or another.

"I'm saying this for a reason," my cousin continued and his voice had a queer, tentative note in it almost like a little boy's. "You see, I don't want you to—to hate me too much when you hear what I've done. In a way, I suppose I'm murdering you. That's why I'm trying to show that you didn't have any real chance anyway."

ODDLY enough, I was more curious than anything else. "You mean you've done some phoney business in there in the lab?"

"Yes. The idea came to me while I was in there with them, Hugh. Greta wasn't there. I think they're keeping her right out of it. But the other three were all there—Wolf, his wife, and that man, Carl. I worked with them; I told Mrs. Wolf what to do.

"It was appalling being there with them, knowing just what they were doing. I loathed them and I loathed myself more because it was my fault—it was all my weak, sentimental fault that it was happening. And I hated myself worst because I felt so helpless. That's when it was that the idea came to me."

He lowered his voice. It was now a rapid, urgent whisper. "I told you I couldn't fool them about the actual formula. Mrs. Wolf is far too smart a chemist for that. But there's one thing the smartest chemist in the world couldn't know about that compound unless he'd worked on it before. It's impossible to calculate just how highly explosive it is.

"I've had them make up a certain quantity. And they'll make it all right. But they think it's a safe amount for laboratory experimentation. In fact, they're going to have enough to blow this house off the face of the earth—if it happened to explode."

"But it wouldn't happen to explode. They'd be far too careful."

"Oh, sure, they'll be careful enough all right. But there's something else about the compound I didn't tell them." Robin's whisper was surer of itself now, almost triumphant.

"As I told you, it starts to decompose at a comparatively low temperature—at

a temperature where no one would ordinarily suspect an explosive of being dangerous. As the final step in eliminating any liquid impurities, I told them, quite unnecessarily, to centrifuge it for two hours.

"The revolutions of the centrifuge automatically generate a certain amount of heat. By the most elementary piece of manipulation I've stepped up its heat production. The drum of a heavy centrifuge with its thick lining is the ideal place for an explosion."

He paused. Then, very distinctly, he said: "In about half an hour after they start centrifuging there's going to be about the biggest bang anyone's heard around these parts. And that'll be the end of this building, the horoscope, the formula, our charming friends and—us."

While he whispered to me that incredible story which virtually and permanently sealed my death warrant, I felt amazingly little fear or horror. Some of his almost exultant sense of achievement became transferred to me.

With a strange twinge of excitement, I thought: So they haven't beaten us, after all. There they were in that other room, thinking they had achieved their purpose, priding themselves on the successful end to their fantastic and callous quest. And, in fact, they had failed. We were all of us going to be blown to hell.

The last, grim laugh was on them.

CHAPTER XLI

STAR OF HOLOCAUST

PARADOXICALLY enough, I had only one regret. A vision of Greta Barker had slipped into my mind. I saw her, lovely and gracious as she had been that first night at my house when the candlelight had started a thousand different sheens in her hair; I thought of her, gay and friendly, playing with Dawn; I thought of the wistful sadness in her eyes that afternoon in the summer-house and, later, the warmth of her lips on mine.

Greta was a spy, something the world condemns; she had fooled me to the top of my bent; she expected and deserved no quarter from us or from the world. But she was very beautiful.

It seemed an awful waste—to have her die.

Robin was speaking again. "I'm sorry you had to be in on this, Hugh. I'm darn sorry any of my messy affairs had to run over into your life. You've got to understand that if there'd been any other way—"

"I understand," I said gruffly. "And if it means anything to you to know it, I think you're about the spunkiest kid I ever knew. In fact, it's a privilege to die in such admirable company."

"Thanks," he murmured. "I—I feel the same way about you."

In the deep silence that followed I tried to compose my mind to face the inevitability of death. I tried to straighten out my emotions so that peace should banish fear; I even tried to pray.

But the major issues seemed unable to command my full attention. All the time I was straining my ears to pick up sounds from the laboratory—listening for the whirring noise which would tell me that they had placed the nearly finished product in the centrifuge. Soon that sound would come and, about thirty minutes later, there would be a second sound—the dull roar of an explosion which would be the last sound I would ever hear.

I don't know exactly when it was that I heard that soft, steady drone. It slipped unobtrusively out of the silence. One second it had not been there; the next it seemed as if there had never been a time without it.

"They've started," breathed Robin.

All the world then seemed to be engulfed in that faint, pulsing sound. It seemed to ripple over me like waves; it seemed to be inside me too, the throb of my own heart, the gnawing burr of a dentist's drill on my tooth. I lost all track of time. There was nothing but an agonizing suspense—the suspense between the lighting of the fuse and the upward zoom of the rocket.

I SUPPOSE I was so completely attuned to that distant drumming from the laboratory that I did not immediately hear the other, closer sound in the room behind me. In fact, I was completely unconscious of any change until a cold draught of night air swept over me and I heard a voice in a hoarse, urgent whisper, close to me, say:

"Hugh . . . Robin. . . ."

"What—"

The word came from Robin, but instantly that urgent whisper cut in again: "Hush. Don't say anything. For God's sake, keep quiet."

In the darkness I could make out a vague form bending over me. There were cool fingers on my face, sliding down my body to my ankles; then the faint rustle of cut cord. And miraculously my legs were free.

"Roll over. Let me get at your hands."

I pushed myself painfully over, not letting myself believe too much, in case what was happening should be some mirage of imagination.

Fingers were playing around my wrists. And once again that breathless whisper:

"It's no good. They're handcuffed. I haven't a key. I'll—I'll untie Robin now."

The dim figure slid into the darkness. For a second I lay perfectly still, letting life slip back into my numbed legs. Then I tried to bend my right knee. Clumsily it reacted. I swung my legs sideways; my feet felt the floor; a great effort and I was standing up, my hands still fastened behind me.

And in those seconds the reality of this miracle came over me in a rush. It was true. Someone had loosed me. I was standing up!

Until then I had made no conscious effort to recognize that shadowy form or the soft, breathed whisper. But now, as a faint movement from the other couch sounded and there were two presences close to me in the dark, I realized, of course, who our deliverer must be—and the realization brought with it a sharp, almost hurting exhilaration.

There was a small hand on my arm.

I breathed, "Greta! It is you, isn't it? It is Greta?"

The fingers tightened their pressure. "The window, Hugh—go to the window. There's a ladder outside. And your car—Dawn's wonderful new car—it's down there on the drive—close."

Greta was drawing me toward the window and the cool night air. Tiptoeing, uncertain footsteps behind told me that Robin was following.

We reached the window. I saw the vague outline of the ladder propped against the sill; I saw the impenetrable darkness beyond; I saw, gleaming in the shadows, like some pearly oasis in a black desert, the silhouette of the dove-gray sedan.

A car . . . freedom. . . .

Greta said, "Go quickly—before they hear."

"You've got to help us down the ladder." It was Robin who spoke for the first time, his voice low and vibrant. "Hugh's handcuffed. I'm weak. You've got to help me get him down."

"I—" began Greta.

"Come."

And, in the fraction of time, while the three of us stood there silently, there trailed back into my consciousness, the faint throbbing from the laboratory behind us.

WITH a sickening acceleration of my pulse, I understood the reason for the urgency in Robin's voice. I had forgotten. It seemed incredible, but I had forgotten the thing which neither Greta nor anyone but Robin and me knew. The compound had been in the centrifuge—how long?

Any minute now there would be that rumble, that ominous muttering rumble and then. . . .

"You go first, Greta!"

Robin's voice was fierce now. In the darkness he seemed almost to lift Greta from the floor and sling her out of the window onto the ladder.

She did not protest.

And then, somehow, Robin was struggling to help me, with my handcuffed wrists, to scale the sill.

"Greta, hold him from below. I'll be behind."

I felt utterly helpless perched there on the head of the ladder without the use of my hands. I felt helpless and infected suddenly with a cold, gnawing panic.

Nothing was real any more except that steady, insistent drumming in the house behind me.

Vaguely I was conscious of hands on my back; and again, hands from above, steadying my shoulders. I was moving downward, down that ladder, rung by rung.

The sound from the house behind was dimmer now. And yet, in my thoughts, it seemed all the time increasing in volume, crashing, screaming like an automatic road-drill.

At some time I fell. I felt my foothold give way; felt myself crash to the rough stubble of the ground. There was a burning pain in my ankle. But somehow I scrambled to my feet and was stumbling forward—away from the house.

Ahead of me, I was conscious of two running figures, Robin with Greta's hand gripped in his.

We reached the car. Someone threw open the door of the back seat. I half climbed, half fell inside.

The others were standing by the door.

I heard Greta say, "The key's in the car, Robin. I put it there. Drive away—quickly." Then again, "Let go my hand, Robin. Let me go. I've got to be back there in the house."

"You're coming with us." It was Robin's voice.

"No, no—I can't."

"You're coming with us. You fool! Don't argue. You're coming with us."

"Robin . . ."

Then I heard the door of the car wrenched open. I heard a little stifled cry from Greta; then she was thrown onto the back seat beside me.

Robin was in front at the wheel. I heard the brake grind free. I heard the purr of the starting engine.

The car was lurching forward.

I TWISTED around to stare at the house beyond. It loomed long and squat in the darkness, a few windows showing lights, the rest of it shrouded in gloom. There was no sign of any other human habitation for miles around—nothing but trees and, ahead, this one winding track, leading, it seemed, even deeper into the woods.

The car was careering forward now, swerving around tortuous bends, sliding sometimes off the track, skirting trees by crazy, reckless hairsbreadths.

Robin's voice sounded from in front. It was taut and yet held a kind of wild exultation.

"Any minute now, Hugh!" he cried. "It'll happen any minute now."

The track suddenly stopped at an intersection with some road. The brakes screeched; I was hurtled sideways as Robin flung the wheel around; and drunkenly we were on the road itself speeding to—anywhere.

Greta was close against me, her soft hair brushing my cheek. She seemed completely stunned by this sudden, delirious dash into the night.

"Lucky no one seems to live around this district," Robin called. "It's not going to do much—"

He cut the sentence. With that same mad impulsiveness, he jerked the car to a harsh, skidding halt.

"Listen!"

His ears had caught that faint sound before mine had. The three of us sat there in the car, tense, straining our ears.

Yes—it was not my imagination, that faint rumble, that muttering like a distant but vast truck trundling toward us.

To me it seemed as if that ominous growling lasted an eternity.

Then, suddenly, it was swallowed up into one gigantic, breathtaking roar.

Gradually, like slowly falling snowflakes,

silence descended once more onto that dark, desolate countryside.

Greta's hand was pressing convulsively on my knee. "What—what is it?" she whispered. "What has happened?"

It was Robin who answered. He swung round from the wheel, his young face alight with a savage satisfaction.

"That," he said, "is the end of Father's compound. The end of your pals. And a slap in the eye for each and every Sign of the Zodiac. . . ."

CHAPTER XLII

GOLDEN STAR FADING

FOR a moment we sat there in the car still listening to that deep silence which, after the thunder of the explosion, seemed oddly fragile as if at any moment some other sound might rear up to shatter it.

But no other sound came.

A strange sensation of peacefulness spread over me. Vaguely I felt pain in my left ankle. But it troubled my consciousness no more than the bite of a gnat. We were free—miraculously free. The whole ghastly melodrama of the past hours had vanished like the nightmare it had been.

My young cousin's voice, grim and curt, broke into my thoughts. "Better be moving along. I don't think the gas can seep this far but I'm not taking any chances. Thank God it won't do much damage around this lonely neck of the woods."

He switched on the engine and we started forward again down that narrow road which led away from the barbarity of that unknown house to some sort of civilization.

Greta's hand still rested on my knee. Robin had switched on the light in the back of the car and I glanced at the woman sitting there close at my side.

Greta Barker's blond hair was ruffled and wind-blown; her lovely face was white as a gardenia. But, in spite of the amazing sea-change she had undergone that night in my knowledge of her, she looked extraordinarily the same as the sympathetic house-guest who had, during the last week, sat opposite me at the breakfast table. There were the same indestructible poise, the same calm, perceptive eyes, the same faintly enigmatic smile on her lips.

After a long period with no speech, she said: "So they're dead, Hugh?"

"There's very little chance of their being anything else," I said. "Robin fixed it for the compound to explode in the centrifuge."

"You knew the place was going to be blown up. I was going to stay there. You made me come with you. You—you saved me."

She turned to look at me, her eyes perplexed and curious. "Why did you do that? I'd fooled you; I'd cheated you in every possible way; I'd deliberately put both of your lives in great danger. I must be everything you think most contemptible. Why did you save me?"

From the wheel Robin said gruffly, "I don't believe in blowing up stepmothers—however wicked."

I HAD been too dazed in those last minutes of danger at the house to do or think anything. But now, although I knew everything Greta said about herself should be true, I could not feel any personal rancor.

That she was saved, in fact, seemed to me an occasion for rejoicing. She had fooled me abysmally. And yet there was something exciting still in her presence, warm and close, at my side.

I said, "There's something far harder to understand than that, Greta. You rescued us. It was against everything you said you stood for, but you let us get away. Why did you do that?"

"Don't really know." Her lips moved in a faint, self-mocking smile. "It just happened that way. I—I just had to do it. That's all."

The smile went. "Until tonight, Hugh, I never knew exactly what we were under orders to obtain. I knew, of course, that it was something to be used in wartime

and, with all the world in arms against it, I am prepared to do anything to help my country in its urgent need to defend itself.

"But this evening Max told me that this was a poison gas, a gas that would kill thousands of people and blind thousands more." Her face was very grave. "He told me it was something my husband invented and then tried to destroy. I found I agreed with my husband.

"A thing like that—it should not be let loose on humanity, not for any reason. And then, there was something else."

She paused. "Later this evening, Hugh, I went into the laboratory after Robin had left them. I heard Mrs. Wolf say they would need experimental animals to test the gas on. And I heard Max say—" She broke off, a little shiver running through her.

"I heard what they were planning to do. They were going to use you—you and Robin. You were going to be the experimental animals. That's why I did what I did. That's why, whatever happened to me, I knew I had to let you escape."

I did not break the silence that followed. There was a sort of horrified chill around my heart as I contemplated the destiny which had so very nearly lain in store for us.

"Yes," said Greta suddenly, "I am glad they're dead, those Wolfs. They were mad fanatics. They were not human. No one had a right to be the way they were and live. The world—yes, and my country too—will be a better place without them."

The car drove on down that dark, narrow road which still showed us no visible sign of human habitation.

The Wolfs, I reflected, had chosen their hideout with a very efficient eye for privacy.

Greta had leaned back against the upholstery and was staring straight ahead of her.

"Well?" she asked at length. "What are you going to do with me? I am a spy. You have captured me. It is your duty to turn me over to the authorities."

A smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. "I have only one request. If there is any choice of policemen, I would prefer to be put in the safekeeping of Inspector Cobb. I have grown quite fond of him."

I TRIED to cope with this problem which had so suddenly been thrust upon me. Once again, every word Greta said was true. Even if she had saved our lives, she had been responsible for our lives' being in danger. She was a spy; my duty did point in a very definite way. And yet . . .

"I'll be a lot safer in prison, Hugh," she put in drily. "Spies with humanitarian scruples are not particularly popular with my government. If ever they find out that I betrayed them tonight"—she shrugged her shoulders—"it will not be pleasant for me."

Still it seemed impossible to think reasonably. Greta Barker, in spite of her logic, her sense of humor, her serene, poised loveliness, had become for me a creature from an entirely different element. I might just as well have been asked to decide the destiny of a Grecian naiad or a mermaid.

She was saying, "Robin, you've surely got a point of view on the wicked stepmother, haven't you?"

In the driving mirror I caught a glimpse of my cousin's young face. There was a slight, crooked smile on his lips.

"To hell with my point of view," he said. "I've done enough deciding for one night. It's up to you and Hugh."

I turned to her. She was pushing her golden blond hair back into place and she was smiling at me almost gaily.

"It's worth twenty years in jail to see your face," she said. "You—you look like Solomon just before he cut the baby in two."

"I'm wondering," I said, "if you can take a sporting chance."

"My life's been one long chance, hasn't it?"

"Okay." Suddenly it seemed to me there was only one thing to do. It is not often that one has the fate of a beautiful spy in

one's hands. I felt a kind of story-book excitement.

I called to Robin, "Stop the car."

He drew up at the side of the road.

"Get out," I said. "Both of you."

They obeyed. I limped out too. Robin squatted down on the rough grass at the roadside, studiedly apart. Greta and I stood facing each other.

The excitement mounted into a compound of feelings that I couldn't separate or define. I talked quickly.

"All right," I said. "Here's the judgment of Solomon. I don't trust you an inch and I guess you're going to do a lot of damage to a lot of other harmless, domesticated males like me before you're through. But the horoscope's blown to pieces and the formula with it. You can't do any more damage to us. Get in that car and out of our lives. If you make a getaway, you make a getaway. If you get caught—don't blame me."

She was staring at me with a long, steady gaze. Her lips, very red and soft, were half parted.

"You're really going to do this?"

"Sure," I grunted. "The age of chivalry is not dead."

She did not speak. She just stood there looking at me. Then, very quickly, she leaned forward and kissed me on the mouth.

The touch of her lips was warm and sweet. It crystalized that moment for all time. Warm and sweet with a romantic fragrance. An unreal kiss out of a dream.

And then—

She was in the car. The engine purred. Her hand fluttered.

"Goodbye, Robin!"

The car moved forward.

"Goodbye, Hugh. And give my love to Dawn. Tell her not to worry about the dove-gray sedan. Wherever I go, I'll see it gets back to . . ."

The rest of her words were lost as the car slipped away into the darkness.

I watched the rear light, a miniature red eye, growing smaller and smaller, and vanishing. . . .

CHAPTER XLIII

THE STARS ARE CLEAR TONIGHT

THE hours that followed my Quixotic gesture of giving Greta the car were humiliating and distinctly anti-climactic. At Robin's suggestion we planned to walk along the road in the hopes of getting somewhere, but, after a couple of paces, my ankle, forgotten in the heat of the moment, completely gave out and made it impossible for us to abandon the spot where I had voluntarily stranded us.

For what seemed like several eternities we sat there at the roadside on very damp grass with no cigarettes and very little small talk. When finally, in the dawn's early light, a car did appear and react to our frantic flagging, I further disgraced myself by trying to dash toward it and giving a last violent wrench to my ankle.

I remember stumbling forward onto the road; I remember excruciating pain; and then nothing more . . .

After that there were vague recollections of a jogging car, strange faces, ceaseless talking. But it was all hopelessly blurred until sometime, much later, when I opened my eyes to see a familiar crack in a familiar ceiling and knew that I was in my own bedroom at home.

I felt peculiarly wide-awake.

"Hello!" said a very cheerful female voice.

I looked down to the end of the bed. Sydney Train was doing something cool and comforting to my left ankle.

"What are you doing?"

"Cold compress," he said. "And the neatest bandage I've ever done."

She hurried up to the head of the bed and kissed me impulsively. She looked very flushed and pretty.

"It's all so marvelous," she said. "You're marvelous. I've never been so marvelously happy in my life."

"From which I gather that Robin is restored and in his right mind," I said drily. "I also gather that you've heard what a high-powered piece of destiny deflecting

we did between us. We fooled those stars of yours—by the skin of our teeth."

"You're a darling!" exclaimed Sydney whose mind seemed to be ecstatically elsewhere. "Robin's downstairs talking to Inspector Cobb. He's a darling, too. And there's a man from Washington who—"

"Is he a darling?" I asked.

"No." Sydney Train shook her head. "I wouldn't call him a darling. His ears are too big. He— By the way, do you feel well enough to talk to Inspector Cobb?"

"Sure," I said with the smugness of a pampered invalid. "Show him up."

She hurried to the door, but paused on the threshold, her face suddenly solemn. "Oh, there's a message from Robin. I don't know what it means. He said to tell you what a pity it was that Greta should have been—been killed with the others."

"All right," I said, then added hurriedly, "Yes, it was a pity."

"Then there's Dawn," Sydney added. "She doesn't know a thing. She thinks you were out all night at the hospital taking care of Mrs. Cobb. And it did happen after all, you know. I mean Mrs. Cobb did have her baby last night. It was a boy."

BEFORE I had recovered from this sensational news, Inspector Cobb himself was at my bedside. The empty pipe, as usual, was between his lips and his shrewd, blue eyes twinkled with genuine pleasure at seeing me. I was glad to notice that the haggard lines of the past few weeks had smoothed themselves out.

"Well," I said, "I hear the happy event did actually take place while I was—otherwise occupied."

"Yeah. Fine, strapping young boy, too." Cobb's beam was paternal. "It was a funny thing. Just about half an hour after that phoney call that lured you away, the hospital really telephoned through to get you. That's why we didn't realize anything was wrong for some time. The nurse that called thought one of the other nurses must have beaten her to it and that you were on your way."

He sucked at the pipe. "That's the first young Cobb you didn't help into the world, Westlake. But I guess we ought to feel lucky we've got you alive to be a godfather. Had a pretty wild time last night, didn't you?"

I assured him that I did.

He went on to tell me that he and the man from Washington had just returned from visiting the scene of the explosion which had been about forty miles away in the wildest section of the Ploversville Hills. The house, an old farmhouse, had been utterly destroyed and no one in the building could possibly have survived. There had been, however, no other houses near enough to have suffered from the explosion.

At length he drew from his pocket a small pot of something that looked like a cosmetic or cold cream.

"By the way," he said casually, "know anything about this stuff? Supposed to cover face blemishes, I believe."

I took the pot and examined it. "Sure, I know it. It was invented a short time ago by an American woman. They had a booth of it at the last medical convention I went to. They say it's about the only thing that's completely successful in covering birthmarks and— Say, did that fellow Max use it?"

Cobb nodded. "I found this at his house."

I stared. "I thought you said that place was blown to hell. You're not trying to tell me you found a pot of face-cream in the ruins!"

"Oh, no. I don't mean that house, Westlake. I mean his other house—his house in Kenmore."

"Max Wolf had a house in Kenmore? Are you nuts?"

Cobb was looking at me, his eyes very wide. "You don't mean to say you never knew who the man with the purple birthmark was?"

"Sure," I said irascibly. "His name was Max Wolf."

"I don't mean that. I mean the name he went under here at Kenmore. You must have seen him last night. Didn't you recog-

nize him—his face or—even his voice?"

"W-why, he was smallish and baldish with a sallow complexion and blue eyes. But . . ."

"So you were fooled up to the end—just the way I was fooled all along. I guess those guys have to be smart at changing their appearance and their voice. He was certainly smart all right and about as nervy as they come. Think of a guy having the nerve to set up house right next door to you and—"

"Next door!"

"Sure. Imagine the way that man Wolf would look, Westlake, with this pink cream all over his face, covering the birthmark and—say, a snow-white wig."

I SUPPOSE by then that revelation should have been screamingly obvious to me. But in a way it came as the biggest shock of them all. I thought of that very benign pink face, that almost too perfect white hair.

"Dr. Heller!" I exclaimed. "Max Wolf was Dr. Heller all along."

"Exactly." Cobb smiled ruefully. "That's about my only contribution to this case, Westlake, and I stumbled on it when it was too late to do any good.

"I started being suspicious when the old boy suddenly decided to take his son up to that hospital in New York. Struck me he was happening to leave just a little too co-incidentally with the disappearing act from your house.

"I went round to his house but by then all the birds had flown—leaving this pot of face-cream behind them. I'd got the right idea, of course. They used that hospital gag as a reasonable excuse for packing up and transferring to the hideout where they entertained you last night."

I was still mildly dazed. "But you'd checked up on them days ago, Cobb. You'd found Dr. Heller listed in the Medical Directory. He was a respectable physician who'd practiced in the same place for forty years. And he did have a son who'd been in an airplane crackup."

"That's right," agreed Cobb. "There is a perfectly good and authentic Dr. Heller and he does have a son who was smashed up in a plane accident. But he didn't happen to bring his son to convalesce in Kenmore.

"The California police have just informed me that the Hellers are living a harmless, unimportant life in Santa Barbara. That's another bit of Wolf's smartness. He knew enough to realize that, if you want to take an alias, it's much safer to assume the identity of a real person—who happens to be a nice long distance away."

It was all beginning to make sense to me now. "And Wolf's wife—she must be the woman who called me out that first night to the phoney accident on Hill Road, the woman who called me again yesterday pretending to be the maternity nurse at the Grovestown Hospital. And she must have been at Cedar Hollow all the time, posing as that—that trained nurse."

"That's the way I figure it." Cobb shook his head. "Of course, now we know the setup, it's obvious how they had to stick around in the neighborhood. They had to be close at hand to keep in constant contact with Mrs. Barker and the phoney Robin. We might have guessed the night they tried to scare you with that face at the window.

"As soon as Wolf was sure you'd seen him as the man with the birthmark, he just ran back next door, put on his wig and his cover-cream and became Dr. Heller again."

I felt a kind of crazy light-headedness. "Max Wolf was Dr. Heller. Mrs. Wolf was the trained nurse. But who on earth was Brian Heller?"

"Brian Heller," said Cobb slowly, "gave me quite a few dizzy spells before I had him figured out." He paused, wagging his empty pipe at me. "Remember, Westlake, when your relations first arrived you met them coming out of the Hellers' house. Mrs. Barker pretended they'd hit the wrong place by mistake. That wasn't true, of course. She'd just dumped the real Robin there and picked up the false Robin,

the boy called Carl, who filled his place."

He added, "Taking on the identity of the Heller family came in very handy for the Wolfs because it gave them a young man in a plaster cast to play around with. A plaster cast and an eyeshade and a bandage over the jaw make a pretty swell camouflage, Westlake.

"The Wolfs needed that boy, Carl, around before the time came for him to put on his act with Mrs. Barker as the false Robin. As Brian Heller, the guy in the cast, he was perfectly disguised. You could meet him, chat with him as a neighbor, and yet it was a thousand to one against your recognizing him later when he turned up at your house as your cousin."

THAT was ingenious, of course. Even then I felt indignant at the superb brashness with which the Wolfs had gone out of their way to make my acquaintance in their harmless role as Hellers. They had deliberately persuaded me to meet their so-called crippled son and later they had even fooled me into believing they needed my professional advice for him.

"So Carl Wolf was Brian Heller before he became the false Robin," I said weakly.

"Yeah." Cobb grinned. "And he became Brian Heller again after he disappeared as the false Robin. All he had to do that day when we thought he'd been kidnaped, was to go on the paper-chase and end up at the house next door, get back into the cast and be Brian Heller.

"Remember how we went over there to borrow the Doberman pinschers? That's kind of amusing now you look back on it. We borrowed those dogs to trail the actual man who was lending them to us."

I gulped. "No wonder the Dobermans made such a good job of that hunt. They were just following their own master's scent across country!"

I remembered that morning, just after the Barkers had arrived, when the Doberman pinschers had come over to our house and greeted the false Robin so affectionately. Of course they hadn't been willing to leave their master—even if, for reasons of his own, he had been palming himself off as somebody else.

Then a sudden thought struck me. "My God, Cobb, this is all very bright, but it won't work. Carl Wolf couldn't have been Brian Heller. One morning when Carl Wolf was with me we both went over to Cedar Hollow to take the Dobermans back—and I saw Brian Heller there on the lawn with my own eyes."

Cobb was still grinning. "Can't you figure that one out? Why do you suppose Dr. Heller handed you that line about Brian's doctor recommending long periods of narcotic sleep? As soon as Carl Wolf moved out, they had another use for that prop of the man in the plaster cast.

"By that time they'd snatched the real Robin Barker and they needed a safe way to keep him prisoner in the house without anyone being suspicious. Swell way to keep someone prisoner—slipping him into a plaster cast where he can't move."

I began to understand. "So—so that time when I saw what I thought was Brian Heller in his narcotic sleep, I was really seeing the real Robin, doped and made to masquerade as—"

"That's it, Westlake." Cobb had stuck the empty pipe back between his lips. "That's the secret to the whole business. There were two Brian Hellers just the way there were two Robin Barkers. The one that talked to you was Carl Wolf; the one you saw that morning in a dopey sleep was the real Robin Barker."

HE MADE a little grimace. "Next time you attract any big-time crooks around this place, Westlake, I wish you'd pick a bunch that doesn't go in for all this fancy personality switching. They make my head ache."

I said, "At least we'll have no more trouble from those babies. They're all blown higher than a kite."

"Yes. They were blown higher than a kite—all of them." The inspector's expression had changed. There seemed to be an oddly quizzical gleam in his eyes as he

added, "Can't say I'm heartbroken about the Wolfs. But it seems kind of too bad about Mrs. Barker, doesn't it? She was a darned attractive woman."

Very casual, his voice: "A darned attractive woman."

"She was," I said guardedly.

"Cut off in her prime!" mused Cobb. Once again his eyes flicked to my face. He had pulled a tin of tobacco from his pocket and moved as if to open the lid. But to my mild exasperation he changed his mind and thrust the still empty pipe back between his teeth. "By the way, Westlake, we've traced that dove-gray sedan of yours."

"You have?"

"Guess you're glad to have it back, particularly since you'll be getting that two-thousand-buck legacy now and you'll be able to pay for it." After this thoroughly dirty crack, he continued: "Funny thing, Westlake. That car was picked up about a hundred miles from here at the Eastaway airport."

"It was?"

"Kind of odd how it got all the way to that airport, isn't it—when you and Robin didn't use it and when everyone else in that farmhouse was blown higher than a kite?"

Once again his fingers fumbled with the top of the tobacco tin, but he did not open it. He added suddenly, "The police talked to the clerk at the airport. He said the car was left there by a woman—a beautiful woman with no hat and very blond hair who drove up and booked for the southbound plane just as it was set to go. Who d'you suppose that beautiful woman with the blond hair was, Westlake?"

It was a decidedly awkward moment. I faltered, "Probably the Wolf gang dumped my sedan somewhere on a public highway and some girl picked it up—a girl on a late party, maybe, who was in a hurry to fly home."

"Maybe." Cobb's smile suggested that I might have thought out a more plausible explanation. "It just occurred to me, Westlake, that perhaps Mrs. Barker survived that explosion in some way. Perhaps we should have that girl on the plane traced at the next airport."

"That's crazy," I cut in. "Absolutely crazy. Mrs. Barker was killed with the rest of them. I can swear to it, so can Robin." I added firmly, "Put that in that darn unlit pipe of yours and smoke it."

Cobb shrugged negligently.

"All right, all right," he said. "Have it your own way. Mrs. Barker is dead."

He opened the tin at last and started packing tobacco into his pouch with an air of finality. But, as he did so, I noticed an unmistakable lowering of his left eyelid.

There was no question about it. Inspector Cobb had winked.

AFTER Cobb had left me, I lay back in bed, feeling pleasantly relaxed. Through the window I could see out into the garden where the late afternoon was beginning to merge imperceptibly into the perfection of a spring evening. Idly I watched Hamish exploring holes of his own making for imaginary rats. I saw Robin and Sydney, completely absorbed in each other, walking toward the summerhouse where, such a short time before, I had sat with Greta.

Looking at them, remembering Greta, I felt rather elderly and rather lonely.

Perhaps I sighed.

But I was not lonely for long. In a few minutes the house was shattered by the daily hurricane of Dawn's return from school. And soon she was at my side, breathless and excited, kissing my ear and bouncing perilously near my sprained ankle.

She took care of everything.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry about your poor foot and you've almost grown a beard and isn't it too bad Cousin Greta isn't coming back, and isn't it wonderful about Mrs. Cobb having another baby; and there's a young man in the summerhouse holding hands with Sydney and he says he's my cousin Robin Barker and he's going to marry Sydney and it's awfully

strange because he isn't Robin Barker at all. I mean he isn't the man who was Robin Barker. And—oh, it's terribly muddling." She paused and then added solemnly, "Daddy, do I have two Cousin Robins?"

I tried to figure out the answer to that one. "Yes," I said vaguely, "you have two Cousin Robins, brat. You see, it's this way—"

But fortunately my daughter did not seem interested in any further explanations.

"You know," she said reflectively, "my first Cousin Robin was bigger and handsomer, but I think I like this one better because he says he's going to marry Sydney and the other one never did. So I'm all for this one."

Her eyes lit up with a smile of ecstatic anticipation.

"And they say maybe they'll have the wedding in Kenmore. Wouldn't that be fun, Daddy? Except for the new car, there hasn't been anything really exciting happening around here for such a very long time. . ."

THE END

LOOKING AHEAD!

RAWHIDE ROAD

Young Thad Breathea came down from Wyoming in his new store clothes, wanting to see the world. But the dogie kid blundered into a snarl of skullduggery with his eyes shut; and it took a red-haired bandit, a judge and several hundred rounds of ammunition to head him finally toward his heritage. A fine, exciting new novel of the West, by

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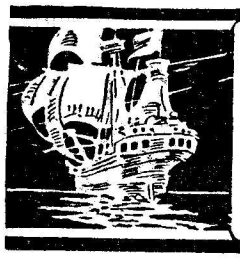
COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—DECEMBER 16th



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THE rumble of cannon has begun on this front. Back a few weeks a Mr. Corydon Snyder wrote us, you remember, to express his displeasure with Jack Mann's "The Ninth Life." The suggestion in the story that there were "other gods" seemed sacrilegious to Mr. Snyder. At the time, we asked for further discussion of the subject.

Well, we got it. There is a gentleman down in Kentucky who believes that authors may possibly be hop-heads but insists on their right to say whatever comes into their curious minds. If they want to talk about "other gods," it's all right with him. He makes this point with such a show of vigor and at such length that we've got to get right off this page and let him speak for himself. Introducing

D. M. RHOADES

In the November 4th issue Corydon Snyder breaks into print and tries to inject religion into ARGOSY.

Now if that bird wants to go to church every Sunday and live a very model life, can't he do it without trying to make the authors write stories that conform to the doctrines of his church?

I buy ARGOSY because I enjoy all the stories that come in it. I like some better than others. I know there are thousands of people that like the stories I don't care so much for, and I enjoy their enjoyment of things I am not strong for.

I have on file in my home ARGOSIES back through many years without one missing copy and I think that proves I like good stories. I frequently go to the back numbers and reread the ones I liked best.

But by heck, I never had the effrontery to try and tell a writer not to say anything that would belittle my religion. There *are* other gods. There are or have been eight hundred and sixty-seven religions, and they all had their priests, temples and people; and there are thousands more in several faiths than in all the Christian sects put together. Are we to say that those millions are wrong because they do not see it our way?

You know, there is a raft of people who go about the country and try and force their idea of God down everyone's neck at every opportunity. I demand that I be let alone by those cranks and allowed to live my life as I please. I don't care whether their cant is verbal or written, I won't be continually disturbed, and I want the reading matter I buy to be as the authors wrote it.

I am in business. I have the usual thousand worries that fall to the lot of every business man. When I go to my home, I don't carry my business home with me, and I read ARGOSY and some fantastics to rest me from the daily strife. I like unusual stories. I know they are not based on facts and wouldn't read them if they were.

But you find a bunch of hombres who dig out an atlas and promptly try and pin the author down to facts. Why don't those people just read history, which is often as wrong as these stories? I don't get mad very often, but this continual nagging of authors by the so profound intellects is disgusting. Why in Sam Hill do they buy fiction magazines if they want all fiction to be facts?

It strikes me that if Snyder is so easily offended, his faith doesn't amount to very much; it can't, if every fiction story with a divergent god in it leads him to look at the Devil with more tolerance.

So he doesn't like demons, hey? Well, I am seventy-eight, and back when I was a kid his same pastors just stood on a stump and whaled away at you for hours. Not on God's goodness, but on the fact that if you weren't good and didn't give your tithe to the church, the Devil would get you and burn your pants off. People have progressed intellectually since those days.

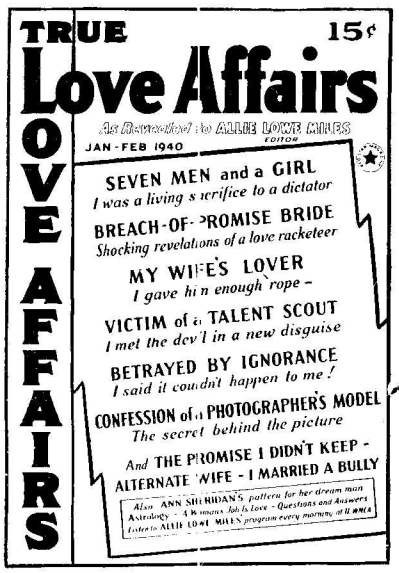
Well, Snyder may think that the suggestion "there are other gods" is such an offense. But I want to tell him, and the million of ignorant others who believe as he does, that a good course in ancient history would astonish him and might make him more tolerant.

I want every durn lie the author can think of and I won't dispute his statements.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

P.S.

Don't miss this one!!



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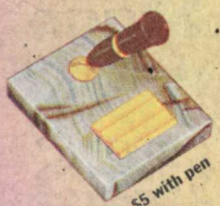

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