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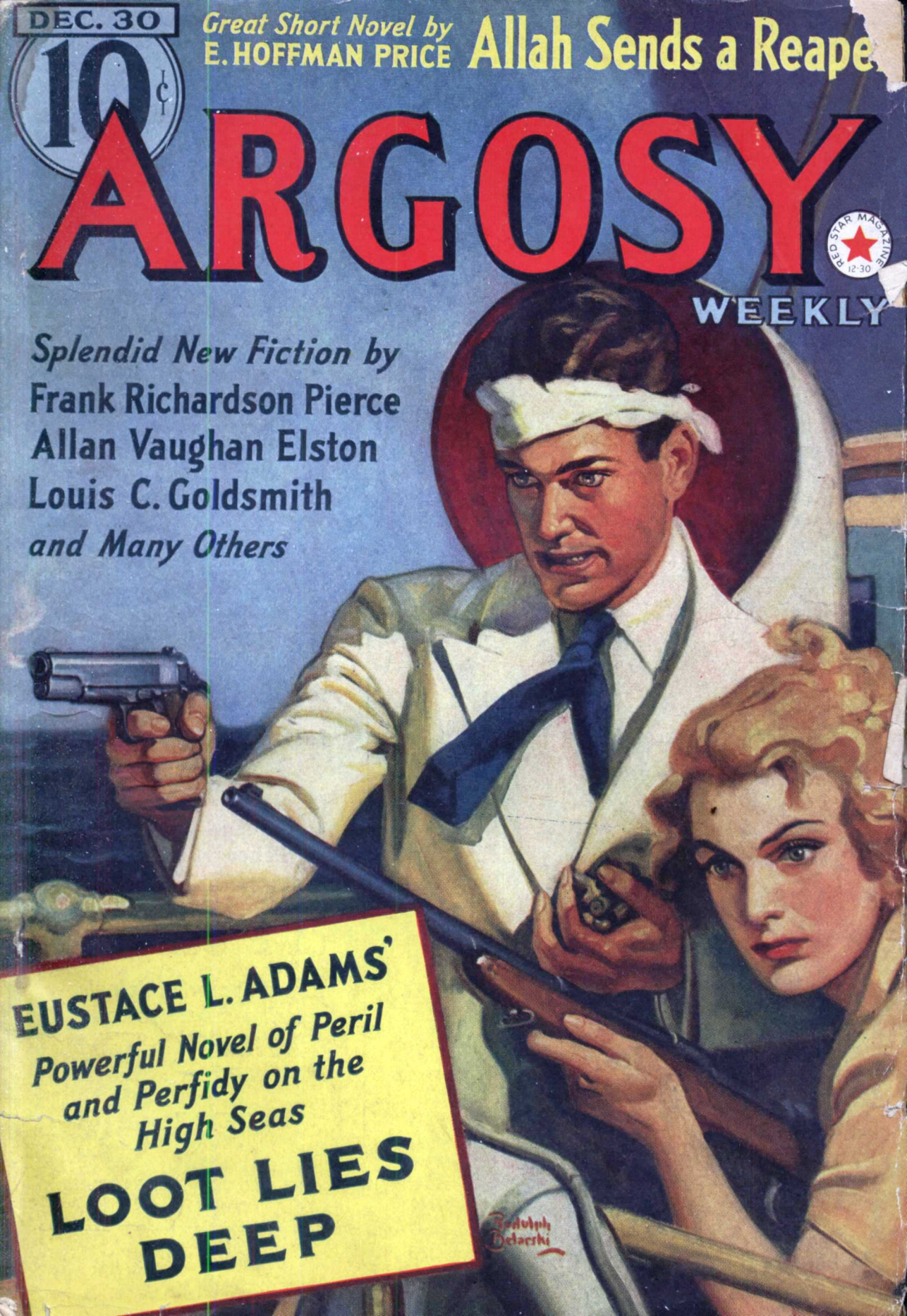

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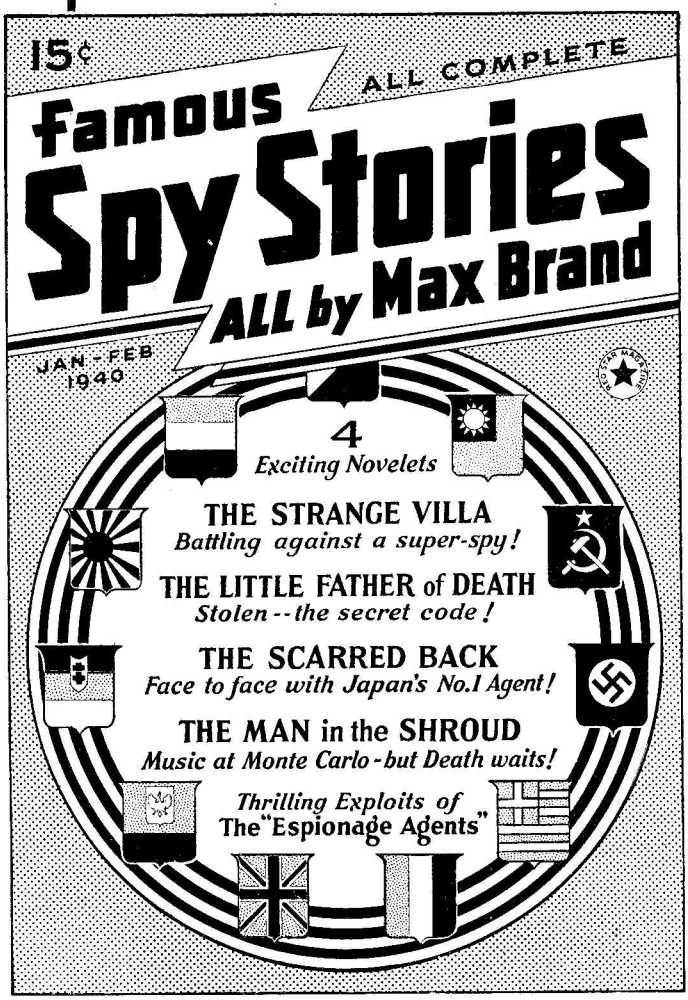

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Illustrating Loot Lies Deep

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Loot Lies Deep

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Dead Storage," "Stunt Man," etc.

Ho for the Spanish Main! Here's the mad and fateful cruise of the ketch *Condor*, southbound in search of sunken gold, with a cargo of glamour guys and gals—and commanded by the second Captain Kidd. . . . Beginning a great new adventure novel

CHAPTER I

SAILORS IN ERMINE

IT SOUNDED like a phoney right from the beginning, but what of it? I am a newspaper man, not a reformer, and if it developed into something that smelled pretty nasty, it would make all the better story for the front pages.

A treasure hunt, imagine that! And I had thought that racket was a turkey before I was dry behind the ears. A sunken ship. Maps. All the props. Boy, do you wonder I pursed my lips and made an unbecoming sound when the managing editor explained it to me?

I tried for an out.

"But look, boss," I said, "the only new angle is the crowd that is going on this treasure hunt. It's probably a publicity gag. Society gals and guys, including Glamour Gal Number One-A! Why don't you send Toots Macdonald, the society reporter?"

"Orders, Bat," said the boss, patiently. "I'm giving you a break. You know that Miami in the summertime is as dead as a mounted sailfish. You know how I have to cut the staff down until fall.

"But this Grace Taver, who is backing the treasure hunt, is a friend of the publisher's. She wants someone to write the thing up for her. Sort of a personal log, understand, which she'll maybe have published in a book, or something. And if there's a story in the voyage, to cover it for us."

"But why pick on me, boss?" I asked.

"Because the big boss liked those yachting stories you did last winter. Because you're the only man on the staff who knows a bowsprit from a propellor. Because you won't get seasick. Because you are known among yachtsmen and your by-line will mean something. So do you go off on a nice yachting cruise—and get paid for it; or do you take a nice vacation until fall—with no pay at all?"

"You put it so sweetly, boss," I told him. "How could I refuse? After all, even reporters have to eat and I need a new suit of sails for my sloop."

So that's how I happened to be aboard the hundred-and-fifty-foot ketch, *Condor*, when it all happened. That's how my name appeared over the newspaper stories you read about the murders and the things that occurred afterward. But at that, I didn't write the whole story.

After all, a cabled dispatch isn't the place to tell what a man looks like with his throat cut from ear to ear, nor how it feels to be fighting for your life amid roaring flames in an engineroom, nor how it sounds when a bullet goes *chunk* into human flesh and bone.

Mrs. Taver wanted a log of her crazy treasure hunt. Well, she will never read it because she is dead. But here is the story just the same.

The trail of blood led us to the rail

I DIDN'T see the captain of the *Condor* until we were just casting off from the slip at the Miami yacht basin. What with getting my gear together I didn't get aboard until just a few minutes before sailing time. If I had known Hoke Scanlon was captain, maybe I would have told Mrs. Taver in time. Maybe. But even if I had, it probably wouldn't have made any difference.

I saw him standing flat-footed there by the taffrail, watching to see that right rudder didn't swing the *Condor's* stern into the bollards. He was a little heavier than he had been at the trial, and I had forgotten what lines of power were in his chest and shoulders. When the yacht cleared the slip he turned to look forward and saw me. His eyes hadn't changed. They hit me like the slap of an open palm. He went perfectly still for an instant.

"Hello, Hoke," I said.

He sucked in his breath as if he were about to command his crew to warp the *Condor* back into the slip. But I guess he knew he couldn't do that without a lot of explanations. And Hoke's weakest point had always been his explanations. It is a tough job to explain away a dead man.

Now he let his breath run out and walked toward me with that curious spread-legged walk I remembered from the courtroom.

"Mason," he said harshly, "what are you doing aboard?"

"Hadn't you heard?" I countered. I kept my voice down so the owner and her guests would not hear. They were all sitting around in deck chairs just aft of the glass-and-steel shelter which is commonly called the dog-house. No, they were not all sitting there. I remember distinctly that Linda Haywood was not on deck. She was below. I had not even seen her yet, although of course the managing editor had told me she had joined the treasure hunt.

Without Linda Haywood it would have been just another half-baked cruise in search of treasure, and worth maybe a couple of sticks on page seven. But Hoke was still waiting for his answer, and Hoke was at best a poor hand at waiting.

"I'm aboard for the duration, Hoke," I said. "I'm covering the treasure hunt for the Miami *Daily Sun.*"

"So you're going to be with us for the whole cruise," he said very quietly, as if speaking to himself, as if thinking to himself.

"Including the treasure hunt, if any," I drawled.

That was rubbing it in. When Hoke Scanlon looked straight at me his eyes were flat and black and hard, like polished gun metal. When I had last seen them like that they were staring at the judge, while he waited to learn if Uncle Sam was going to snap his neck.

"What are you going to do, Mason?" he asked, his thin lips hardly moving at all. "Are you going to give me a break?"

"What kind of a break do you want?" I continued.

"Mrs. Taver didn't bother to find out whether I had served a stretch or not," he said, slowly.

"If she didn't bother," I said, "why should I? After all, I'm a newspaper man, not a parole officer."

Some of the strain went out of him. Some, I say. But not all. So I knew I had to be careful.

The big ketch was swinging in the turning basin, getting her bow headed into the channel. I had been in and out of Miami Harbor often enough so it was no treat to me. I had brought yachts almost as big as the *Condor* into Miami, because the only thing in the world I know outside the newspaper business is boats.

I had been navigator once in the New York to Fastnet Transatlantic Race and was amateur skipper twice on some rich man's yacht in the Bermuda thrash. I've long since lost count how many times I've crossed the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas, Cuba and the Caribbean. So I got no wallop watching the *Condor,* under the slow, steady drive of her Diesel, run close alongside the County Causeway on her way out to Government Cut. I had things I wanted to think about and needed a little privacy to get them straightened out in my mind.

For two cents, right then, I'd have taken a header into the water, scrambled ashore on the causeway and thumbed my way back to the office. With Hoke Scanlon captain of this yacht, and we bound away on a treasure hunt—well, I don't mind a little trouble because it makes a good news story.

But the kind of trouble that usually followed Hoke Scanlon, I didn't want any of. Not any. I like a good barroom ruckus as well as anybody, and can usually hold my own. But Hoke Scanlon played too rough, even for me.

"OH, Mr. Mason!" That was the owner, Mrs. Grace Taver, paging me. She was getting an immense thump out of being under way at last, after she and her guests had been waiting around Miami for three or four days during the final exasperating delays in outfitting.

She was feeling good because she was bound for the Spanish Main, and all that hooey. Already she had one of the white-jacketed stewards rushing up champagne cocktails, and already the tall guy with the scanty blond hair was feeling pretty good. I had been introduced to that one when I had first come aboard. His name was Arthur Hislop. I remembered his name out of Winchell's column, and I had gathered the vague idea that Winchell didn't care too much for him. Come right down to it, I didn't, either, although I couldn't have told you why.

He was sort of a semi-professional rusher of glamour gals, and was always at the right night spot at the right time. And, whenever possible, with the glamour gal of the moment. Well, I thought, the glamour gals could have him.

He was big enough, and his shoulders were good enough. But me, I like a guy

with steady eyes. This Hislop's eyes were far from that. They touched you and darted away, like the flick of a whip, and they left you—or, at least, me—vaguely uneasy and dissatisfied when they had gone.

I paused politely beside Mrs. Taver. A steward offered me a champagne cocktail, and I have yet to refuse my first champagne cocktail. Boy, howdy! Did that Mrs. Taver doll up! Right now, and supposed to be in yachting gear, she would appraise about a quarter of a million dollars on the hoof, what with her pearl earrings, her diamond clip and a ring with a solitaire in it which was as big as the flywheel of our Diesel engine.

She was introducing me as *the* famous journalist, and it seemed hardly worth the effort to explain to them that I was no journalist, but only a working reporter who knew a little more about boats than most. At that, maybe I did look more like a journalist than a reporter because my yachting outfit was pretty good and on my white-topped cap was the disk of the Cruising Club of America.

Bowing to them as I was introduced, I almost laughed when I found myself wondering what they would say if I were to inform them that they had for a professional captain a lug who had almost dropped through the trap for murder on the high seas.

Well—not for publication.

I bowed to a tall, blond number who was stretched out in one of the big deck chairs of Philippine wicker. Oh, she was pretty enough, but she looked as if she had been a debutante a few years too long. She was being gay in a determined, discouraged way, her voice shrill and affected when she laughed, which she did at the slightest excuse. Mostly she aimed her voice and her laughter at Arthur Hislop, who didn't seem to pay too much attention. Her name, it appeared, was Vicky Seymour, and I had heard that one, too. In her year she had been the season's most popular debutante—they didn't call them glamour gals then.

THEN I was shaking hands with a bird I remembered, and the emblem on his white-topped yatching cap placed him. I had met him at two or three regattas up North.

"Hello, Bosworth," I said.

"Well, Bat Mason!" he said. "Imagine you being a passenger on a sailing yacht!"

"Why shouldn't he be?" demanded Vicky Seymour.

"Because he's one of the hottest racing skippers in the country," Bosworth explained.

"You're not so bad yourself," I said, a little embarrassed.

At sailing, I meant. He was good at sailing, and, according to the papers, at polo and at big-game hunting, and at backing musical comedies, and as a defendant at breach-of-promise suits. But he wasn't much good at anything else.

Buck Bosworth was one of the world's finest examples of what happens to a guy who has too much money and too little to do. I had seen a story about him only a couple of months ago. He had been given the heave-o from a New York night club for emptying a plate of scrambled eggs into a bass horn that was *oomping* too close to his table. It was as typical of him as any of the stories I had heard about him around the yacht clubs.

"But I thought you said he was a newspaper man?" Vicky Seymour protested.

"He is," said Mrs. Taver. "He is on the Miami *Daily Sun*. The owner of the paper, who is a friend of mine, assigned him to our treasure hunt. You know how anxious all the papers will be to get news of us. Mr. Mason will see that what gets out is correct. And when we get back he's going to help me write a book."

"How perfectly swell," said Vicky Seymour.

"You really think we're going to find treasure?" I asked Buck Bosworth.

"I wouldn't know," he said carelessly. "But Grace, here, doesn't pull many boners and she's convinced, so it's worth a ten-grand gamble that she's right this time. And if she's wrong, we'll have had a nice

month's cruise that won't cost much more than to run over to Paris on the *Normandie* for a month's bar-crawling there.

Just by chance I glanced aft and my eyes met those of Hoke Scanlon. He was standing beside the wheel, where a quartermaster was feeding spokes back and forth through his hands. But Hoke was not watching the quartermaster. He was watching me, and once again I had that uncomfortable feeling that I'd rather be almost anywhere but here and that I ought to get off this damned yacht even if I had to swim for it.

Damned yacht? I don't often say a thing like that about a boat. It wasn't the *Condor's* fault, the terrible things which happened later. She was a sweet vessel, one hundred and fifty feet of the most beautiful lines you ever saw. Just three or four years old, she was, and designed according to the newest thought on ocean cruisers.

She had hollow spars, immensely tall, and stayed with stainless steel rigging. On her were all the latest gimmicks, electric winches everywhere you could possibly need them, the newest thing in davits, a nice dog-house to give shelter from rain, wind and spray for the quarterdeck crowd. But those weren't the things a seaman really noticed, really loved her for. The important thing was her lines, the fine sheer of her, the impression she gave of being able to drive through anything the sea might have to offer—well, if you have a real feeling for boats you'll know what I am trying to say.

The crew—there seemed to be about fifteen of them, not counting the steward's department—were stripping the covers off the mainsail and mizzen. They appeared to know their work, for the bo'sun was giving them very few orders. I watched them as they brought the main halyard to an electric winch and began to hoist the sky-scraping mainsail. And I suddenly noticed something that made the short hairs lift on the back of my neck.

They were all immaculately uniformed in dress whites, as spick and span as the crew of a battleship at inspection. But in all my life I had never seen a tougher gang of men. If you had taken close ups of them with numbers under their chins, you'd say, "That's the solitary confinement section at Alcatraz."

A steward brought up another tray of champagne cocktails. I took one, but put it down half-finished. I couldn't enjoy the drink, I was so busy wondering why Hoke Scanlon had selected such a hardcase lot. Perhaps, I thought, they had served under him before, and that wasn't so good, either.

I decided to go down to my cabin and unpack. There, inside the four bulkheads of my own room, I would probably feel all right. Getting my gear straightened out for a long voyage might rid my spirits of the nagging suspicions that had ridden them ever since I had first come aboard.

I went down through the dog-house, with its heavy plate-glass windows and its settees and its modernistic furniture of chromium and scarlet Spanish leather. Then down the companionway to the corridor which ran forward all the way to the engineroom bulkhead amidships. The number of the cabin assigned to me was Seven, and I was looking for my door—I knew it was on the port side—when the opposite door, Number Six, was opened and Linda Haywood came out.

CHAPTER II

HO FOR THE SPANISH MAIN

A LOT of things have happened since that moment when I first saw Linda Haywood. Oh, I had seen her pictures often enough. Too often, in fact. I had taken it for granted she must employ a press agent, so frequently did her photographs appear in the roto sections and in the pages of the very shiny-paper magazines.

It is queer, how impressions fade. For example, when I try to remember back I find it hard to recall exactly what Grace Taver looked like. Alive, I mean. Vaguely I can still see her, fattish, fortyish, bespangled with jewels, the lines of her face

strained upward by surgical face-liftings, her red hair so carefully set in an elaborate hair-do that it looked like a wig. These things I can still see, though they have grown dim in the eyes of my mind.

But I can still remember that first glimpse I had of Linda Haywood as vividly as if it had happened only a moment ago. I remember the white slack suit she was wearing. It was made of some coarse material—sailcloth, I think—which somehow accentuated the silken tan of her smooth skin.

I remember the way her glossy black hair swirled down over her shoulders in a cascade of waves that caught the light and broke it into glints that were definitely bronze. I remember, too, the way her long, curved lashes shaded her blue eyes when she looked up at me. She was even lovelier than her photographs and that, as any picture editor would tell you, was saying something.

Her gaze met mine without coquetry. "Hello," she said. "You would be Mr. Mason."

"And you," I agreed, "are Linda Haywood, the glamour gal."

Her high, arched brows leveled out. "How about a little armistice on that, Mr. Mason?" she asked me. "After all, this is supposed to be a vacation."

I grinned down into her smooth oval face. "Don't you like being a glamour gal?" I asked, gently.

"Do we have to start fighting the minute we meet?" she countered. "I thought I was going to like you."

"Why?"

"From the things Bucky Bosworth said about you when Grace said you were coming along."

"I'll ask him what he told you and try to live up to it," I promised.

"Do, please," she said, impudently, and slipped past me, leaving a faint fragrance of gardenia behind her.

I stood there for a moment looking after her as she made her way up the companionway to the deck. And, watching her, I found myself thinking of Hoke Scanlon, and of our crew, as sinister a looking outfit as I had ever seen on a vessel.

I had counted about fifteen sailors. There would be a mate, a bo'sun, four or five stewards, a couple of cooks, a messboy and a pantryman, at least one engineer and, since I remembered seeing a single-strand aerial strung between the masts, a wireless operator. Quite a bunch, that. Two pretty girls and a woman loaded down with jewels until she looked like a Christmas tree. All bound to the hot, violent tropics on a treasure hunt, of all things.

Was Grace Taver completely crazy? If not, how had she come to hire a man like Hoke Scanlon when she could have had a hundred applicants for the job just by notifying a few yacht brokers, boatyards and outfitters? Any one of them would have supplied captains they could personally recommend. And not one of them, in their wildest dreams, would have recommended Hoke Scanlon for anything. Except, perhaps, as jail bait.

I WAS too restless to stay long in my cabin. The *Condor* was heeling hard to starboard under the fresh southeasterly trades. I could feel her, vibrantly alive under my feet as she drove sweetly into the groundswells of the Stream. They had shut off the Diesel after she had rounded the flashing 1-A bellbuoy and headed down along the Florida coast.

Curious, I left my cabin and made my way back to the lounge, where I could look out of the starboard portlights toward the shore line. We had already changed course a trifle. Key Biscayne was on our starboard quarter and we were heading on a slanting course which was taking us away from the palm-fringed coast.

That meant we weren't following the Florida peninsula down toward Havana and the west end of Cuba, possibly to enter the Caribbean through the Straits of Yucatan. Instead, the captain was cutting off in a southeasterly direction which would take us across the Great Bahama

Bank and in the general direction of the Windward Passage between the eastern end of Cuba and Hispanola.

Was the treasure hunt, then, to be off Haiti, or Martinique, or one of the Virgin Islands? Anywhere along there, I guessed, for those waters had all been stained blood red by Henry Morgan, Bluebeard and the rest of those pirates whose swift ships had once plowed the Spanish Main.

Well, it didn't matter. True enough, there were uncounted millions of dollars at the bottom of the sea—and encompassed by the geographical limits of the Caribbean—but this expedition of Grace Taver's wouldn't find any of them. The chances, I told myself, were a thousand to one against. But now I was glad I had come.

The lounge was a beautiful room, paneled in some very light and delicately grained wood. There were old-fashioned maps and charts framed against the bulkheads. The chairs and built-in settees were upholstered in blood-red leather. Blood-red.

I was standing there, restless and uneasy, watching Fowey Rocks slide slowly into the horizon off our starboard quarter, when a shadow moved along the wall toward me. I turned swiftly, my nerves suddenly a-jangle. But it was only the owner, Grace Taver.

"Your cabin is quite comfortable, Mr. Mason?" she asked me in that flutey voice which she had so carefully cultivated.

"Very comfortable, Mrs. Taver," I murmured politely.

"If you want anything," she said, "just ring for a steward."

She stood there, fidgeting. I knew she had not come down to ask me if I were comfortable, nor to tell me there was a call bell in the room. So I waited. Her nervousness seemed to build up until I was almost sorry for her.

"Do you know the Caribbean well, Mr. Mason?" she asked after a while.

"Fairly well," I admitted. "I've slatted around in it quite a lot."

"Yes, Bucky Bosworth told me," she said, still not coming to the point. "He says you've cruised almost everywhere. How can you afford it on a journalist's salary?"

"I have an inexpensive boat," I told her, amused by her fooling around. "I cruise in that. Then, because I have the knack of sailing, I get an occasional berth as an amateur sailor on the big boats, and I've gone a couple of times as amateur skipper. When you get fairly well known in yachting, invitations come fast."

"I see," she murmured, not seeing at all because she didn't care. "Have you ever been on a treasure hunt?"

"No," I said, trying not to smile. "I've never been able to spare the time or the money to indulge in a treasure hunt."

"This one," she said, her voice suddenly tightening, "isn't a luxury. It's a business trip—for me, at least. We are going to find the treasure. There is no way we can miss. No way at all."

"That's just fine," I said, politely.

She caught the note of disbelief in my voice. Her faded eyes came sharply to focus as she looked at me.

"You don't believe it, do you?" she challenged.

"Well, now you've asked me, I don't. But that doesn't matter. It will be a fine cruise, and I'm tickled pink to be aboard."

Color appeared under the patina on her rouged lips. She found a call button on the wall, jabbed at it with a be-ringed and brightly manicured finger. Almost instantly a steward appeared.

"Please ask Captain Scanlon if he can come down," she directed.

CHAPTER III

GOLD LIES TWELVE FATHOMS DOWN

A DOOR slammed in the passageway forward and Buck Bosworth, impeccable in blue yachting jacket, white slacks and white-topped owner's cap, came strolling aft into the lounge. His powerful body swayed easily to the sweet motion of the ship. Whatever else this Broadway playboy might be, he was a sailor.

"How does it feel to be at sea again, Bat?" he asked.

"It feels swell," I said, and meant it.

"Mr. Mason doesn't think we'll find our treasure, Buck," said Mrs. Taver, bluntly.

Bosworth turned a narrowing gray eye at me. "Would you be having any special reason for thinking that, Bat?" he asked.

"No reason whatever," I assured him, "except the law of averages."

"You might be right," he murmured. He glanced at Mrs. Taver. "Grace," he said, calmly, "we're at sea."

"So we are," she agreed. "It's nice, isn't it?"

"Remember the agreement?" he asked her. "As soon as we got to sea, you were to show us the charts and explain everything to us? Well, I, personally, have held my curiosity back just about long enough."

Not many things astonish me, but this did. "Are you telling me," I demanded, "that you bought a ten-grand interest in this thing without any details—or any proof that treasure exists?"

"Aren't you forgetting your place, Mr. Mason?" asked Captain Scanlon, coming down the companionway and into the lounge.

Well, that practically threw me. Here I knew enough about this lug to cost him his nice job and he puts the blast on me like that. I decided to wait to see what ap card he might have to make him that sure of himself. He hadn't been that sure in the yacht basin in Miami, so what had given him this confidence now?

"When I want you to remind me of my place, Captain," I said, levelly, "I'll let you know."

For a long, long moment I expected him to move right in on me, and I got myself set. But Buck Bosworth was watching. He eased up beside me, and that broke the tension.

"Bat," he said into that thin silence, "we formed this little syndicate because it sounded like a lot of fun and we were all pretty tired of 52nd Street and the World's Fair. But just the same, we would like to find that treasure."

"Find what treasure?" I asked, still looking at Hoke Scanlon.

"We'll call the others," said Grace Taver, brightly, "and explain everything now. After all, I did promise to give you all the details as soon as we got to sea, so that word of it couldn't spread around the way such things so often do. Captain, would you mind asking the others to come down?"

The captain tore his sultry eyes away from mine and climbed the companionway steps. Mrs. Taver's bejeweled fingers fumbled with the knob of a wall safe, cleverly camouflaged in the panel of the forward bulkhead. Out of it she produced a large red cardboard envelope and a rolled-up chart. These she brought to the table on the port side.

The others came down: Vicky Seymour, more vivacious than the occasion called for; Linda Haywood, young and slim and possessed of some quality that held your eyes like the pull of a magnet; Arthur Hislop, blond, a little foppish and looking as if he had been too many places and seen too many things.

They sat down around the table where Mrs. Taver was spreading out her papers. Bosworth leaned idly against the bulkhead. And this I noticed particularly: Hoke Scanlon deliberately moved around the table to take a position so close to Linda Haywood that his starched white sleeve was almost touching her shoulder. I blinked, the thing was so obvious. I looked up, met Buck Bosworth's amused glance. He had seen that, too.

"HERE we are," said Grace Taver, a little breathlessly on account of the tightness of her dress. "And it was wonderful of you to trust me all this time. As I told you, I had to promise that I wouldn't tell the location of the treasure until we were at sea. But now I can do it. Now I can tell you the whole story that has brought us here—and will put us back on Easy Street."

An odd phrase, I thought. They all had nice big houses on Easy Street, according

to the things you heard. Linda Haywood, for example, was the only daughter of a stock broker who had his own office building in New York and a place as big as a Texas ranch out on Long Island.

Vicky Seymour's father had found oil somewhere in Texas and according to Winchell the girl couldn't spend her allowance as fast as it came. Buck Bosworth's old man made something out of coal tar —plastics, perhaps—and according to the gang around the yacht clubs, he could just about buy the *Queen Mary* for a private yacht if the idea pleased him.

Art Hislop I didn't know about. But the fact he highballed around with this free-spending cafe society set was adequate proof that there were plenty of potatoes in the family bag. And Grace Taver—well, she hadn't picked the *Condor* up at the dime store, and the assorted ice she was wearing would certainly keep her off the relief rolls for a month of Christmas Days.

But she was talking and I didn't want to miss anything.

"Eight years ago," she was saying, "Pancho Costa, who had been dictator of San Lorenzo for three years, decided to get away while he still had his health. And while he still had control of his country's treasury."

"A good old Central American custom," Captain Scanlon said.

"There was a lot of unrest in San Lorenzo," Mrs. Taver went on, "and Costa figured a revolution might come this time that he couldn't beat. So he put about four million dollars in gold in a lot of trunks and got ready to take himself to the happy hunting ground of all retired South and Central American dictators, Paris."

So far, I thought, this sounded like the real McCoy. Vaguely I remembered about the disappearance of this lug, and of the major portion of the San Lorenzan treasury which disappeared with him.

"Well," Mrs. Taver was continuing, sorting out a lot of papers and newspaper clippings with a pudgy finger, "General Costa had a really bright getaway scheme. About a dozen patriots were in the plot with him. He had to have them to move the gold, and everything.

"He told them they would all sail for France on the Pacific Mail liner *Orduna*, and I have here a photostated copy of the reservations list showing fourteen bookings for that sailing. Incidentally, not one of the fourteen actually sailed; I have the mail line's letter proving that. Here it is.

"Costa had those specially-built trunks delivered at the Pacific Mail Line wharf two hours before the *Orduna* was due to arrive. But an hour later the gentlemen who were going to leave with Costa—and share the loot—discovered that the dictator had vanished, and so had the trunks of gold.

"They found that a large and very fast motor boat had loaded the gold aboard and raced away into the Caribbean, with Costa and his wife safely aboard. Here are the newspaper clippings which tell about the scandal."

She took a long breath and her eyes lifted from the papers to sweep the intent circle of faces around her. They were all listening eagerly. All, that was, except Hoke Scanlon. He was watching Linda Haywood. For a moment I almost lost the thread of Mrs. Taver's story.

"JUST four days later," she continued, "a West Indian hurricane drove across the Caribbean. Among a number of ships which foundered was a tiny Norwegian freighter, bound from Callao to Bordeaux with a mixed cargo. The name of the freighter was the *Ulvik*, and in her captain's cabin were Costa, and his wife. And in the supercargo's cabin was—and is—four millions in gold!

"The motorboat had made contact with the *Ulvik* fifteen or twenty miles offshore, and Costa and his wife had gone aboard with their gold. When the hurricane hit her she was driven on a reef, and she sank. We know where she is, and that's where we're going!"

We all stood quite still, just looking at her and waiting for her to go on. But she was enjoying her moment of triumph and was dragging it out as long as she could.

"Well," said Art Hislop, wetting his thin lips with his tongue, "go on, Grace, go on."

"This *Ulvik*," Buck Bosworth asked, quietly, "where is she supposed to be?"

"Right here," cried Mrs. Taver, jabbing a pudgy finger at a small inked cross on the chart. I bent across the table and glanced at it. The cross was just off the northern coast of Venezuela.

"The *Ulvik* lies right here in—in—" She lifted her triple chins and looked appealingly at Hoke Scanlon, whose eyes seemed to be busily appraising our expressions. "Captain," she said, "you tell them how deep she is."

"She is in twelve fathoms, Mrs. Taver," said the captain, his tone very positive.

But Buck Bosworth hardly glanced at the captain.

"How do you know this story is true, Grace?" he asked, his voice still critical.

"Because," said Mrs. Taver, "I have seen a whole handful of the gold coins brought up from her.'

"If anyone brought up some of the coins," Bosworth persisted, "why didn't he bring them all up?"

"Because the one man who now knows where she lies didn't have money enough to finance an expedition."

Now it was beginning to smell. I had hard work keeping myself from smiling. But after all, I hadn't put up ten grand to buy this pig-in-a-poke. I hadn't put up anything at all. I was being paid for taking this cruise, so it was no skin off the end of my nose. The paper was paying me for taking this ride, and for writing it up later.

Which I hoped to do.

But the others were beginning to look doubtful. They were no longer looking at the chart. Their eyes were straying from one face to another, each trying to find out what the others thought about it. Grace Taver was not dumb. Far from it. She saw that she was not doing a very good selling job.

"Grace," Buck said, quietly, "I don't like this. You told us you *knew* where the treasure was."

Mrs. Taver said, "I *do* know where it is!"

"How do you know?" Buck insisted.

"Because there," she said, pointing her manicured finger up at Hoke Scanlon, "is the man who brought up that handful of gold!"

"Maybe," said Hoke Scanlon, "it's time for me to speak my piece. "I was in that storm down there. I was hove to, riding it out, and saw this guy floating past on a cargo boom. He was the only survivor of the *Ulvik,* and he told me all about it.

"A month later I found the wreck, right where he told me it would be. I went down there all alone from Trinidad in a twenty-three-foot sloop. I dragged around with a grapnel for nearly two weeks before I found her right where that cross is on the chart."

"Mrs. Taver said you showed her some of the gold *pesos,*" Buck Bosworth said. "How did you get them up?"

"By skin diving," Scanlon said. "A boss stevedore at Port of Spain, Trinidad, had unloaded the *Ulvik*. I found him and got him to draw me a chart of the freighter. He remembered where the supercargo's cabin was on account of being paid off there.

"It was easy to find. It's on the main-deck just aft of the funnel casing, and the door is on the starboard side. That's a break, too, because she's lying on her port side down there. It took me three or four dives—being all alone the way I was—to get the door open. Then two or three more to get into the cabin itself and to find the trunks.

"They're there, all right. They're all stacked up against the forward bulkhead, except one, which had fallen to the deck and split open. I got a good pocketful of those gold *pesos* before a nor'easter came up and drove me away.

"I knew I could never get all those

trunks up without regular diving equipment, so I've never been back."

"THAT was eight years ago, Captain?" Linda Haywood asked in her warm, husky voice.

"Yes."

"How is it you've waited all this time to organize an expedition?"

"I've been too busy with other things. Private things."

I knew how busy he had been. Breaking rocks, or whatever it is they do at Atlanta and at Alcatraz.

"Too busy," Buck Bosworth asked, quietly, "to lift four million dollars out of seventy-two feet of water?"

"Yes," said Scanlon, looking straight at him. "I ran into a spell of bad luck after that. I never met anyone I dared tell the story to."

Linda Haywood lifted her glossy head. "How do you know this other survivor—this man you rescued from the water—hasn't told anybody?"

"He and I were going after it together when we got enough dough," said the captain. "But he died. If he had told anybody, they'd have found the wreck."

"How do you know they didn't?" Linda asked.

"There'd have been something about it in the papers," the captain said. "They couldn't keep a haul like that quiet."

I wondered when someone would ask how that survivor had happened to die, but it wasn't up to me.

"There isn't much danger of anyone finding that sunken wreck," Scanlon went on. "The location is off the ordinary lanes of travel. It's bad water and everyone stays well away from there. I wouldn't have been there except for that storm."

Vicky Seymour looked at Art Hislop. "I'm entirely satisfied," she said, unexpectedly. "After all, Grace warned us that it was a gamble that we might not find the treasure, but that we'd have a lovely cruise and a lot of fun hunting for the gold. If we don't find it, I won't blame her at all."

"That goes for me, too," said Art Hislop.

Buck Bosworth laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh and Art Hislop flushed beet red. He glared up at Bosworth.

"Anything personal in that?" he demanded.

Bosworth was still grinning. "Did my laughing disturb you?" he asked, drily. "Are you going to be upset whenever we happen to laugh? If so, perhaps the rest of us better chip into a pot to buy your ten-thousand-dollar share in the syndicate. Or didn't you put up your ten thousand, Art? I've wondered."

Vicky Seymour gasped and went white. Linda Haywood glanced thoughtfully from Bosworth to Hislop and said nothing at all. Mrs. Taver tapped her scarlet fingernails on the chart.

"Bucky," she said, sharply, "if you're going to continue to make remarks like that, you'll spoil the whole affair. I have ten thousand dollars from each member of the syndicate. Everybody has paid except myself. You'll remember that I was to charter the *Condor* to the syndicate instead of putting up cash."

"Okay, Grace, okay," said Buck Bosworth, carelessly. He turned away, went to a locker and opened it. Behind the panel was a miniature bar, lavishly equipped. He poured himself a generous slug of Scotch. "I agree with Vicky," he said over his shoulder. "It'll be a nice ride, whether we find anything or not."

"Are there any more questions?" Mrs. Taver asked, a little uneasily.

"Just for the record," I said, quietly, "I'd like to ask this: How did Captain Scanlon happen to come to you with this project, Mrs. Taver?"

"He applied for a job as captain of this yacht," she said in her asthmatic voice. "I told him that I'd probably not put her in commission this season because of the expense. I've had some financial setbacks this year, Mr. Mason. He told me he knew how we could put the *Condor* in commission and make a fortune out of it, too."

I COULD feel Hoke Scanlon's eyes putting pressure on my back, but I didn't even look at him. I was standing right beside the table, so I reached down and picked up several of the yellowed newspaper clippings which she had taken out of the red cardboard envelope.

They were about General Costa and his looting of the treasury. Three or four spoke of his mysterious disappearance, and hazarded guesses upon where he might be hiding—and spending his millions. Here were a dozen or more about the hurricane, and the dates matched with Costa's disappearance—and with Hoke Scanlon's story.

And a very small one, apparently clipped from the shipping news department of an old New York paper, told in one brief paragraph of the Norwegian S.S. *Ulvik* being reported missing, probably foundered in the storm. There were, however, no clippings about Hoke Scanlon. I guess he had neglected to furnish them to Mrs. Taver.

I looked up from the old clippings and met Scanlon's stare. His face was impassive, but the muscles at the corners of his jaw stuck out like bunches of string under the skin. He looked as if he were holding his breath and would go on holding it until he knew whether or not I was going to ask more questions. I did, but not the kind he was fearing.

"Have you diving equipment aboard, Captain?" I asked.

He let his breath out in a long, quiet sigh. "Yes," he said, "and one of the crew is a Navy-trained diver."

"I think this is all simply marvelous," said Vicky Seymour, looking at Art Hislop for confirmation.

Right then I noticed something. This gal was in love with that blond-haired, uneasy-eyed bird so badly she could hardly stand it. Well, that was all right. All right except for this: I had already noticed that he hardly responded to her glances, to her sidelong looks.

Did this, I wondered, have anything to do with Buck Bosworth's crack a little while ago? There was no telling—yet. But it looked to me as if there were enough conflicts aboard this yacht to stir up a witch's brew before this treasure hunt was over. Well, that was all right. If these people wanted to play like this, they could certainly afford to.

CHAPTER IV

WINDJAMMER FROM ALCATRAZ

THAT was Monday afternoon, and it was Wednesday night before the holystoned deck of the *Condor* got its first baptism of blood. Its first, I say. You will see for yourself that it was not to be its last.

We had been getting a grand break from the wind. Almost straight out of the east it had been blowing, and the *Condor* was making good a course to the southeastward. In fact, we were making racing time as we slanted down across the Great Bahama Bank toward the eastern tip of Cuba and the Windward Passage. We overhauled and passed several tramps and coasting steamers as if they had been dragging their anchors.

Hoke Scanlon, whatever his faults, was a born windjammer man. He knew exactly how hard he could drive this sleek black yacht and get the most out of her. And his mate, a tall, hard-eyed, bristly-chinned man named Garside, was almost as good.

Tuesday night, late, Hoke Scanlon came down to my cabin. Without being asked, he sat down in one of the big chairs, pulled a cigarette out of a crumpled packet and lighted it.

"It's time," he said, bluntly, "we had an understanding."

I didn't say a word. I had been writing a news story about the first day of the cruise and had planned to file it with the wireless operator before I went to bed. I pushed my chair back from the desk and worked it around to face him—and where it would be easy to get out of in a hurry.

"Are you going to tell them about me?" he demanded.

"Hoke," I said, quietly, "that seems to

worry you. You asked me that when I first came aboard. If Mrs. Taver wasn't curious enough about your record to look it up, why should I enlighten her?"

"I told her I'd been in trouble, but that I was going straight now."

"Did you tell her you had been up for murder and had been convicted in the second degree? And that if one witness hadn't happened to have been run over by a car—that was nice work, Hoke—you'd have hanged as sure as God made little green apples? Did you tell her those things, Hoke?"

I got my feet ready under my chair, but Hoke didn't move. He just sat still, looking at me with little yellow lights behind the blackness of his eyes.

"No, Mason," he said, levelly, "I didn't tell her any of those things and she didn't bother to look them up. Are you going to tell her?"

"Not unless I have to."

"What would make you have to?"

"Well, for one thing," I said, giving it to him straight, "If I see you making any passes at Linda Haywood. I've watched you giving her the eye ever since we left Miami."

SCANLON tipped his head down and stared at his hands, which were big and thick and hairy. He opened and closed them slowly, watching them carefully the while. At last he lifted his face.

"You're making me take a lot from you, Mason," he said, a little unevenly.

"Well, don't stick your neck out, then," I said. "Miss Haywood doesn't run with your kind and you know it."

"Listen," he said, through set lips, "playing around those 52nd Street joints she meets up with a lot worse than me, and you know it. The only thing is, they wear evening clothes and are worried about the amount of vermouth they get in their dry Martinis."

"Do we have to sit here arguing about that?" I asked him. "If so, I've had enough already."

"Okay, we stop arguing about that," he said in a labored voice. "So what's the other thing that would make you tell Mrs. Taver about me doing time?"

"If I see you doing anything that makes me believe you're up to your old tricks," I answered.

"Listen, why should I bother to be up to anything on a trip like this?" he retorted hotly. "All I got to do is go straight to the wreck—"

"Is there a wreck, Hoke?" I asked him.

"You're damned right there is!"

"And is there really gold in it?"

An earnestness came into his eyes that even I, who knew him for what he was, almost believed.

"In my time, Mason," he said, levelly, "I've done a lot of things. You know that. But I'm telling you straight, Mason, that gold is there. Unless of course, it's been lifted while I was doing my stretch, and nobody heard of it. But I don't believe that."

He stared at me, studying my expression. "So why should I be pulling a fast one?" he went on. 'All I got to do is go straight to that spot, lift up four millions in cash money and get my share. Or, rather, my two shares."

"What two shares?"

"I get two shares for knowing where the treasure is and for taking it out of the water. Mrs. Taver gets two shares for organizing the syndicate and the other members each get one share apiece for the ten grand they put up. And one other share is split up amongst the crew of the yacht, here."

"Mrs. Taver is doing pretty well, isn't she?" I said. "There was forty grand put up. She buys the supplies, pays the crew and puts in the yacht here for a month or so. Ten thousand, perhaps, it costs her, plus a certain depreciation on the yacht and its gear. Thirty thousand profit to start with. Not bad, not bad."

"Why wouldn't she do all right?" Scanlon countered. "She did the work of getting the gang together, didn't she?"

"So if the gold is there," I continued, "and if it amounts to four millions, and

you get it up and safely to a bank somewhere, your share of it will be about $850,000?"

"About that, for my two shares," he admitted. "So why should I take a chance on pulling a fast one?"

"I don't know, except it's your nature. Remember, I covered your trial. I heard the things the D.A. proved on you. You ran liquor, aliens, and even dope. You were a high-jacker. You got just one job that was on the level, when you got the mate's berth on the freighter *Goldwich,* and you had to go and ruin that by killing the third engineer in cold blood."

"Not in cold blood. He came after me with a spanner. It was self-defense."

"The jury didn't say so."

"If they had thought it was in cold blood they'd have stretched my neck. They gave me second degree. The President didn't think so, or he'd never have pardoned me after only seven years."

"The President probably never heard your name. Probably never saw your name until it came on the paper he signed. That was politics, Hoke. You probably had something on somebody and blackmailed him into getting the pardon through."

There was no rancor in his grin now. "You know all the answers, don't you, wise guy?"

"What I don't know I can sometimes guess at," I admitted. "One more thing I don't like, Hoke. Why did you have to ship a crew of plug-uglies like this one?"

"Listen, Mason," he said, earnestly. "With four millions aboard would I take a chance with a bunch of violets for a crew? Suppose somebody down on the coast there finds out what we're up to and tries to buy a hand in the game. Suppose a bunch of hard guys starts reaching for the jackpot? I want a crew that can take care of themselves, and of the gold, too. Anything unreasonable about that?"

As a matter of fact, there wasn't. But that did not mean he had sold me a bill of goods. The man was—or had been—a law-breaker by trade and a killer by instinct. I would trust him no farther than I could spit against a gale of wind. But just the same, he could well afford to behave himself for three-quarters of a million in gold.

HE STOOD up. So did I. He started for the door, but just as he was reaching for the handle, I stopped him.

"Scanlon," I said. "When we were talking about this thing—you know, all of us up there in the lounge—they forgot to ask you a question. It wasn't up to me; I'm only working here."

A guarded look came into his eyes. He let go the doorknob and turned back into the room.

"What question did they forget?" he demanded.

"Whatever happened to the sole survivor of the *Ulvik?* The one who told you where the treasure was?"

"He died," Hoke Scanlon said, his gaze probing through me.

"That was convenient, wasn't it?" I murmured. "How did he die?"

"Got in a fight in a saloon on West Street, in New York."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Smith."

"A queer name for a sailor in a Scandinavian ship," I said. "Was there anything about it in the papers at the time?"

"I wouldn't know. I was at sea, myself."

We stood very still for a moment, just looking at each other.

"Listen, Mason," he said after a while, and his voice was low, flat, menacing: "Mrs. Taver was satisfied with what she knew about me. I told her I had been in trouble and she didn't bother to find out how, or when, or why. So if she doesn't care, is there any reason for you to stick your face into it? No, there isn't. Now, stop asking questions, stop shooting off your yap, and be a good boy, or—"

"Or what?" I asked.

"Call your own shots," he said.

"If there could be anything that would make me want to stick my face in," I told him, "it would be that."

"It would be that what?" he asked, hardly above a whisper.

"Your threatening me. I'm funny that way. Always have been. Whenever anybody threatens me, I always get the itch to find out whether or not he has the hole cards to back up his bet."

"I have," he said, crisply. "So don't call for a showdown unless you really want it."

"Interesting, if true," I retorted, holding my voice down. "I'll remember it. But if I ever do call your bet, be sure you have what it takes."

He opened his lips to answer that, then clamped them shut again and moved swiftly to the door. He jerked it open, slammed it smartly. It was a good thing he went when he did. I was getting pretty sore.

And that brings up one of my very worst faults. When I get sore I usually take a swing at the nearest puss I see before me at the moment. Even if it doesn't make sense. And with a bird like Hoke Scanlon, of course, it wouldn't make any sense at all. Far, in fact, from it.

CHAPTER V

MURDER WITH THE LIQUEURS

WE HAD just finished dinner when it happened. Some of the others—Vicky, Mrs. Taver and Art Hislop—I think, said they were going to write some letters in the lounge. Buck Bosworth, Linda Haywood and I drifted aft into the dog-house. We sat down on the comfortable red leather settees. Buck called a steward. Linda and I ordered Cointreau, Buck a double Benedictine and brandy. And then, through the open portlights, came that scream.

It was, believe me, one hell of a thing to listen to. Starting with a low wail, it lifted and lifted until it became a screech that tore at your eardrums and echoed against the innermost recesses of your brain. You thought a scream like that couldn't go any higher. But it went even higher until it became intolerable, until you thought if it did not stop you would die as you knew someone was dying at that moment.

A queer thing, that. I know Linda Haywood had never before heard the death cry of a man. Yet a glance at her told you that she understood what she was hearing. She was white and motionless, staring round-eyed at me.

I was out of my seat before the echo of that shriek had died away. I went up the companionway steps four at a time. Somebody was pounding after me, but there wasn't time to see who it was.

As I plunged through the door to the deck I could see the man at the wheel sharply silhouetted in the light from the half-moon. But the scream had come from somewhere forward. I rounded the dog-house and sprinted forward on the high side.

The *Condor* was driving hard. Tiny dollops of spray were whipping aft along the port side. I slipped on the wet planking and almost fell, but recovered and raced on.

I could see nobody for the full length of the port side until I reached the forward skylight. Then I saw the white figures of sailors simply pouring out of the companionway which gave entrance to the fo'c'sle. They milled around uncertainly on the slanting deck, working their way down toward the starboard rail, which was almost under water.

I slipped on the spray-wet deck and skidded down to them. And just as I got there a wedge-shaped beam of light carved a slice of whiteness out of the semi-darkness and I heard Hoke Scanlon's voice, hard and cutting.

"What happened? Speak up!"

"Someone started to yell," replied a sailor. "It sounded like it was right outside the fo'c'sle, and then it sort of went away."

"Who was it?" Scanlon snapped.

Nobody seemed to know. Two or three names were mentioned, but each time a voice spoke up, saying, "No, sir, it wasn't me."

The captain dropped the beam of his torch. It brought a quick gasp of breath from the down-staring sailors.

Directly at Scanlon's feet was a long, almost continuous stain of blood. It ran from the companionway downward across the deck, making a trail as plain as a marked highway. It faded out in the wetness of the sea-washed gunwale, but there was a smear of it on the stainless steel lifeline.

"My God!" someone murmured. "He went overboard."

"Get ready to jibe her!" Scanlon called.

The group of seamen abruptly vanished, some of them running aft to the sheets, some racing for the backstays. They knew their jobs, all right. Scanlon, following them aft, hardly gave an order.

I TURNED and went down the iron ladder of the companionway. Shining crimson globules spattered each of the metal treads beneath my feet and there was a telltale ribbon of them leading away across the steel plates of the deck.

I heard footfalls behind me as I reached the bottom of the ladder, and I spun around, my nerves tight. It was Buck Bosworth.

"Go ahead, Bat," he said, quietly. "I'm right with you."

We steadied ourselves for an instant as the deck heeled, leveled, and then went slanting down to port; the *Condor* had jibed and was racing back on her course to try to find the man who had gone overboard.

We were in a tiny lobby there at the foot of the companionway. The forward door gave into a vee-shaped fo'c'sle, empty now of men. Pipe berths against the sides of the ships, a reading table under a drop light, a couple of overturned chairs, all gave evidence of the haste with which the men had stampeded out of that room when they heard that death cry.

To port were a pair of small cabins. They belonged, I assumed, to the captain and to the mate. Aft, on the port side, was a succession of doors which I later learned led into the steward's quarters, the mess room, galley and pantries. The last of them, at the extreme after end, opened in the watertight steel bulkhead which separated this part from the engineroom.

But the bloodstains bore witness that the tragedy had occurred on the opposite side. The trail curved away from the captain's door and led to a short corridor on the starboard side. Silently Buck Bosworth and I followed it, wondering how a man could lose so much blood and still move.

A dozen steps and we reached the tiny cubicle on the starboard side which served as radio shack. Beneath the empty chair in which the radio man had sat at his instruments was a bright crimson puddle. The desk, too, was splashed.

"Look!" Buck Bosworth gasped, pointing a shaking finger at the set itself.

Bus bars and wires had been yanked loose and were all tangled up across the transformers and condensers. The sending key had been pulled or pried from its place. The place was wrecked.

"Timmons!" Bosworth muttered. "I had him put aboard. A nice kid!"

"It was Timmons, all right," said Hoke Scanlon's voice from behind us.

Both Buck and I started. Hoke was standing in the doorway, his small black eyes studying the room.

"See if the main switch is off," Buck snapped. But he did not wait for me to find it. He found it himself. "Good thing," he murmured. "There'd have been a fire already with all those shorts if the switch hadn't been pulled."

"And look at that wireless set," Scanlon said. "Two or three thousand bucks worth of stuff ruined."

"It can be fixed," Buck snapped. "But the man can't."

"Let's go up on deck," the captain said.

Buck and I were loath to go. "Timmons got it right here," I said, pointing to the chair. "He rushed frantically top-side, maybe thinking somebody could help him. He slipped on the wet, slanting deck and went overboard. Why didn't the bow lookout see him?"

"I've already found that out," the captain said. "He was soldiering. He was aft with the quartermaster."

"Why didn't some of the men in the fo'c'sle see him when he came screaming out of here?" Buck demanded.

"The whole crew was at mess, down the other passageway."

"Everybody?" Buck asked, sharply.

"I suppose so," said the captain, "everybody except the quartermaster and the bow lookout. And, of course, the men in the steward's department who were serving the meals forward, here, and aft in the guests' dining room."

The deck heeled again and there was a slatting of canvas from above.

"We're coming about," Hoke said, turning away. "We're going to zigzag back and forth here, looking for him." He rushed for the companionway.

CHAPTER VI

SOUTHBOUND FOR DISASTER

WE FOLLOWED him to the deck. A group of sailors were standing in the bow, staring over the sparkling expanse of moonlit water. The *Condor* was on the port tack, with all sheets well started, and moving slowly through the seas. The captain hurried aft to be near the quartermaster.

The tall, saturnine mate, Garside, was interrogating one of the men in the bow.

"You say you didn't see a thing, Hatz?" he demanded.

"No, sir," said a thickset, long-armed man. "As I said, I had gone aft to talk to the man at the wheel. I heard the shriek, but we couldn't see a thing along the starboard side on account of the belly of the mains'l. The boom was over the starboard rail and the sail shut off everything forward of it."

"You didn't see him in the water?"

"No, sir. We both were looking forward, sir, and I was running forward on the high side, the port side. He must have gone by to starboard. He never made a sound, sir, after he hit the water, or we'd have heard and seen him floating past the stern."

I swung on my heel and made my way aft. Buck Bosworth was close behind me. The quarterdeck crowd had all come topside. We could see the light dresses of the women in the darkness. Art Hislop was there with them, peering overside, as they were all doing, and trying to find out exactly what was going on. Why, I wondered, hadn't he come forward to see for himself?

"Make ready to come about," called the captain. "Hard a-lee!"

There was a great flutter of canvas as the *Condor* came up into the wind and fell off on the other tack.

"Ease the jib and mainsheets," the captain ordered. "Keep her moving slow."

Buck Bosworth moved straight back to Grace Taver. His face was set in hard lines as he said, "It was the man I recommended. Timmons, the wireless operator."

"Oh!" Mrs. Taver said and put her bejeweled hand to her mouth. "But—but maybe we'll find him in the water."

"What good will it do?" Buck asked, harshly. "He'll be dead."

"How do you know that, Buck?" Linda asked, very quietly.

"He was stabbed, or shot—stabbed, I think, because nobody spoke of hearing a shot. He must have rushed on deck and fallen overboard."

The captain drifted over to us.

"What do we do now?" Mrs. Taver asked in a high voice.

Buck Bosworth answered that one. "We put into the nearest port to notify the authorities and to sign on another wireless operator. We can have one flown over from Miami."

"He could swim over from Miami," said the captain, gloomily, "and still come aboard before the port authorities would let us sail. The nearest ports are all in the British Bahamas. Ever get mixed up in their particular brand of red tape?"

Buck Bosworth stared at him. "No. Have you?"

"Yes," said the captain. "Plenty of times."

Grace Taver sensed something building up here. Quickly she stepped into the breach.

"We—we can't afford to be tied up in port too long, Buck," she said. "Captain, what do you suggest?"

THE captain looked at Buck. "Do you know anything about radio, Mr. Bosworth?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes."

"Would it be possible to—for you to repair the set?"

"I might. I'm not sure."

"Could you operate it if it were repaired?"

"I'm not expert, but I guess I could."

"All right, Mrs. Taver, here's what I suggest: As I remember, the only one who really thought we needed an operator was Mr. Bosworth, who wanted to keep in touch with the stock market. Tomorrow we'll probably sight some vessel, a freighter or a liner, that has a wireless.

"We'll ask her to report us and to say that our wireless is out of order and that the operator has—ah, died. Then Mr. Bosworth can see if he can repair the set. If he can't, we'll put in somewhere on the Venezuelan coast and find a man who can do it.

"If we put in at a British or Cuban port, we might be tied up a month while the authorities investigated Timmons's death."

"This is all fine, Captain," I said. "But you've got a case of murder aboard. What do you propose to do about that—about finding the murderer and about seeing that no more murders occur?"

I heard a sharp gasp from Grace Taver.

"Mr. Mason," said the captain, smoothly, "I'll dig into this thing the moment we square away on our course. I'm quite sure it will turn out to be a seaman's row. I remember there was a little argument between the wireless man and some of the sailors at Miami, but I didn't give it much thought at the time."

"Now, isn't that simple," I marveled. "But are you quite sure that none of the others, or even the owner's guests, had any little arguments with the sailors in Miami?"

A feeling of strain was evident in his voice, but I imagine I was the only one who spotted it.

"If you are worried, Mr. Mason," he said, crisply, "we can put in somewhere along the way—at Santiago de Cuba, say—and drop you off there."

"I'm worried, all right, but not that worried," I retorted. "I've always been able to look out for myself."

"You are very fortunate," he said, smoothly.

And turned away. He walked over to the binnacle, glanced at it. He looked up and down the deck, where little clots of sailors and stewards were staring out at the water.

I turned restlessly away and went down into the lounge. But the others drifted in, too, and I was in no mood to conduct post-mortems with them. The memory of those vast quantities of blood on deck and in the passageway below was too vivid to discuss. I picked up my Cointreau, swallowed it at one gulp and went below to my room.

As I expected, Buck Bosworth came and knocked at my door a little while later. I knew it was Buck before I turned the key. I was not taking any chances.

He entered and for a while paced back and forth across the room, not saying a word.

Then he took a long breath.

"It stinks, Bat," he said. "Let's have the dope on our good captain, Hoke Scanlon."

I THOUGHT that over for a moment. I had promised Hoke I wouldn't tell anybody about his record so long as he behaved himself. And how could I be sure he had done that wireless man to death? So for the moment I dodged the question.

"He used to be a bad actor, Buck," I

said. "In his time he's been in a lot of trouble, but he says he's going straight now. And for all I know, he is doing just that."

I hauled a bottle and a glass out of my locker and passed them to him. He didn't bother with the glass. He just raised the bottle to his lips and poured down a jolt.

"Look, Buck," I said. "You had all the time in the world to study this whole proposition before you invested ten thousand dollars in it. You know enough about boats to be interested in who the skipper was. And if you ask me, I think you and the others bought a pretty damned big pig in a poke."

"We did, Bat," he said. "But it didn't seem to matter much at the time. The whole business sounded like fun, and I guess we were all more or less sold on anything Grace put up to us."

"Tell me something about Grace Taver," I suggested.

"You don't know your New York too well, do you? She's about as well known as the Chrysler Building."

"Oh, I've heard of her, all right. But—"

"She had pots and pots of money up to two or three years ago," he said. "Old man Taver left it to her when he got tired of her thinking up things for him to do and blew his brains all over her pretty living-room wall. She was going with the café society set and it did her in the eye.

"Remember that lug—called himself a broker—who pitched all the wild parties and got his clients to invest in a discretionary pool? Well, from Sing Sing he now writes her how sorry he is he lost her jack for her."

"I remember him," I said, grimly. "He played Miami Beach, too."

"Well, he took Grace for everything she had, so she had to dust around and make a living. She has a way with her. Thinks up things. You know, parties, hay rides, blimp rides by moonlight. And collects commissions, of course, for her trouble. Who minds? Fun, some of her parties, and everybody's pictures in all the papers.

"Rumor is she's sort of a capper for one of those 52nd Street joints, steers parties in there. That's all right; we'd go anyway, if the idea came to us. Another thing: if you have a debutante daughter, and the dough, and want her made into a well-publicized glamour gal, slip Grace ten, twenty grand and the trick is practically done. In short, nasty words, she's become a sort of society racketeer."

"So if she and Scanlon had cooked up something smelly, you wouldn't die of astonishment, would you?" I asked.

He pushed himself out of his chair, a tall, rangy bunch of muscle and bone without any too many brains to steer it around with.

"Nothing would astonish me any more, Bat," he said, moodily. "But get this: Grace has built herself a reputation in New York for pulling the most amusing stunts of anyone in town. It sounded good. That's all I can say, although I always took the treasure end of it with a lot of salt."

HE STOPPED pacing back and forth and stared at me. "Have you seen Captain Scanlon giving the eye to Linda?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So have I, and I don't like it. If he does it any more, I'll put him over my knee and crack his backbone in a dozen places."

"I'll match you to see who has first chance at him."

"You never can tell what these kids will fall for," Buck went on, restlessly. "Glamour gals! They're jaded at twenty, right when they ought to be looking starry-eyed at the great, big world. So they get a wallop when a hairy-chested roughneck like Hoke Scanlon shows an interest. A new type. For two cents I'd give Linda a good backhand slap on the puss!"

He started toward the door. I called him back.

"How much will you lose if you don't keep in touch with the stock market until we get to a cable station?"

"I don't know. Thousands, maybe. Or

if I'm as bad a guesser as I've been lately, I might make money by staying away from quotations."

"Okay," said I. "Let me suggest something. Take a look at the wireless set tomorrow and tell Scanlon you can't fix it."

He blinked. "Why?"

"Why did somebody just happen to pick a radio operator—who wasn't their own man, because you put him aboard—to murder?"

"You tell me," Buck said.

"I can't tell you. I don't know. But here's a wild pitch: suppose for some reason they didn't want messages going back and forth from us to the shore."

He scratched his dark and bushy head. "Scanlon didn't break out in a sweat of anxiety to ship a new operator, did he?"

"Your understatement for the week," I agreed.

"You think I'd be in danger if he knew I could repair the set and operate it?" Buck asked, thoughtfully.

"I don't know. We're doing a lot of guessing. But why lead with your chin?"

"I'll think it over, Bat," he said. "Right now my hunch is to fix the set if I can. Right now I think it was probably as the captain said, a seaman's fight. Murders and more murders just don't happen on yachts like this. You've been reading thrillers."

"Okay, pal," I said. "It's your throat they'll be whittling on if you're wrong."

"I'll keep my chin down." He grinned and went out of the room.

I poured myself another big hoot of the Scotch. I had a pretty damned uneasy feeling about everything. If I had told Grace Taver in Miami Harbor what I knew about Hoke's record, she might have fired him then and there, and this bird Timmons, whom I had never seen, might be alive this night.

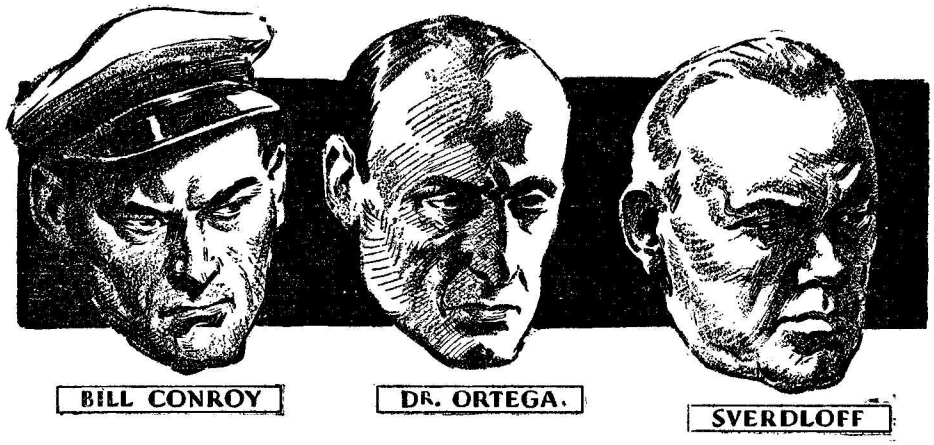
Moreover, Hoke wouldn't be making passes at Linda, who thought because she knew all the head waiters on 52nd Street she knew the right answers to everything.

All right, how did this all add up? Why didn't they want a wireless operator aboard? Because they were trying to get away with something they didn't want immediately reported. What would they (whoever *they* might be) be trying to get away with? I ticked the possibilities off on my fingers.

Item one: four millions in gold, if, as and when they found it. Item two: the *Condor,* as sweet a sailing yacht as these jaded eyes of mine had ever seen. If she were properly victualed, five or six good sailors could take her around the world without ever touching port. Item three: four or five persons who would be worth to a kidnapper almost as much as the gold treasure itself, provided a way were found to collect the ransom money.

One murder already. Not a bad start. And it might be, I told myself gloomily, only the beginning.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



Allah Sends a Reaper

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

Author of "Guns for Ethiopia," "One Step From Hell," etc.

He'd fought without heart, drunk without grace, and earned nothing but dregs. Then on that merciless voyage from Djibouti to Aden, stung by the sands of Arabia, torn by thirst and weariness and fear, Bill Conroy learned how, to every stalk of wheat, the Prophet puts his scythe

CHAPTER I

CUT MOORINGS NOW

THEY call Djibouti "Queen of the Sands," which she is, looking out over the Gulf of Tajura and toward the Indian Ocean; but the sand is full of fleas. Somehow, they endured the sun's glare; and so did the flies that buzzed about Bill Conroy. He squatted against the door jamb of a brush hut, and snored.

His passport read *William Harvey Conroy,* and the governor general of French Somaliland had wondered why the junior partner of Billings, Bemis & Conroy came ashore in the first place. Now he was wondering whether to leave him at large, or throw him in irons until the next boat arrived.

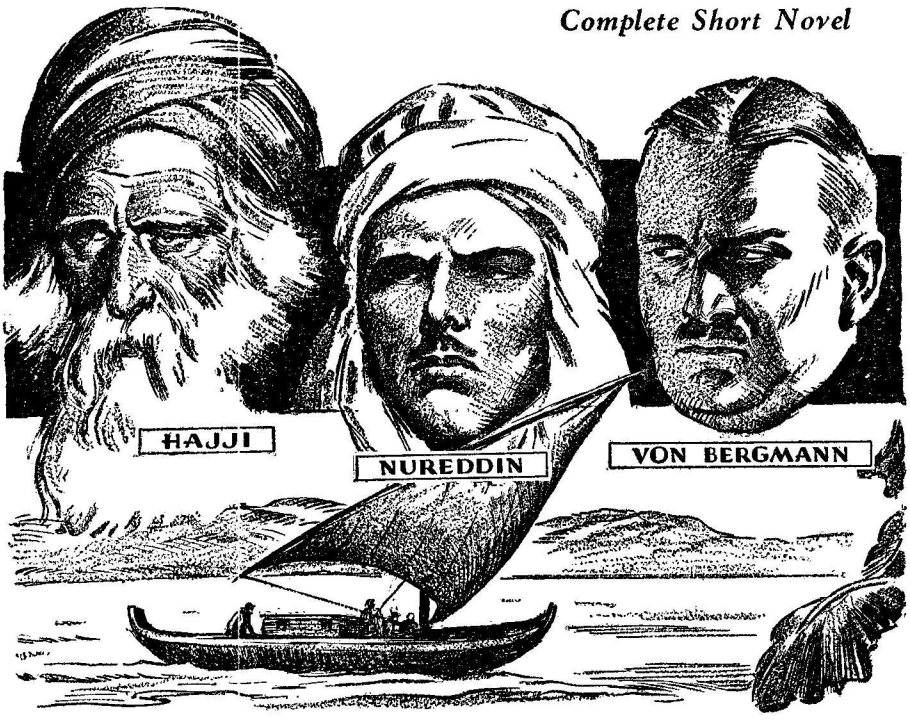
Conroy raised his head and blinked. He needed a shave, and his eyes were now red rather than gray, like his tropical worsteds. A goat, coming out of a neighboring hut, was finishing his fine but beer-stained Panama. Conroy carefully leaned toward the native butcher shop at his left, picked up a bone, and threw it at the goat.

Then he noticed the flies, and grinned wryly. "Nuh-uh. It's not me, after all."

This seemed to cheer him a little. What attracted them was the discarded mash from a batch of *dourra* beer, and the tangle of guts and crudely hacked joints scattered about the bench of the Somali butcher shop. It must have been the two copper colored girls haggling with the proprietor that awakened Conroy.

There was more snoring inside the dirt-floored hut. When Conroy got up and

Complete Short Novel



thrust his head through the narrow doorway, half a dozen chickens squawked and fluttered out. "Giuseppe! You paralyzed?"

The Italian muttered in his native language, then switched to accented English. "Whatta matter, is morning already? Man, I gotta awful head."

Giuseppe Piazzi was a deserter from the army that occupied Ethiopia, several hundred miles inland, and up on the plateau behind those iron-black crags which line the African coast. He was scarcely thirty, about Conroy's age, and he had left California's artichoke fields in his enthusiasm for the New Italy.

His tanned face was bloated; he wore civilian rags; and though he had been at it only a month or so, Piazzi was in much worse shape from drink than Conroy.

The former American broker had an iron quality about him. Whatever he did, he did fiercely, including this business of making a bum of himself. He rather liked Piazzi, the only white man in Djibouti lower than himself.

"Come on up to the hotel with me and get cleaned up," Conroy said, and gave the Facist deserter a hand. "We'll eat."

Piazzi looked sick at the mention of food, and more so when he looked at the hacked remains of the freshly slaughtered goat. But his dark eyes became desperate when he saw the squad of native *askaris* trotting down the dusty street.

A FRENCH non-com was in command of the Somali soldiers, and he was scowling, resentful at duties that brought a white man out into that sun-baked native quarter.

"No use running, Giuseppe," said Conroy, recognizing panic. "Blast the pants off of you, even if they can't shoot for sour apples." He glanced down at the Italian's toes, which poked out of what remained of military brogans. "Man, those barefooted Somalis would run you down in three minutes!"

Baking bare rock, sharp lava, cactus and mimosa made a spacious Hell out of the

hinterland. A miracle had brought Piazzi alive from Ethiopia, and Conroy knew that no man is allowed more than one miracle a month.

"Mister, they send me back and shoota me!"

"Chances are they're looking for me," Conroy observed, and stepped in front of Piazzi. "All right, Sergeant!"

The corporal said something in French; the *askaris* halted, and the rancid butter that greased their hair added further taint to the air. Some of the corporal's speech was for Conroy, who answered, *"Eh bien!* Then I am under arrest."

He thrust his sandy-stubbled jaw a bit further forward. Thirty days in the Djibouti jail was capital punishment. Conroy regarded his battered knuckles. He had beaten the ears off someone, the night before, but he did not remember whose. It could not have been Giuseppe.

"Non. Pas du tout, monsieur. But the governor general desires your presence at once. He ignored Giuseppe. "Let us go."

Conroy fumbled in his pocket, found a badly battered billfold of python skin, and turned to hand the Italian a *Banque de France* note. For a moment, he had intended to give Piazzi the wallet; but things might not be as bad as they sounded. And four years ago, Irma had designed the gold monogram for Conroy's birthday gift. He had spent some time trying to get rid of it, but his courage always failed.

He smothered Piazzi's thanks with a snort and silently laughed at himself. "He's another chump. Checked out and can't live up to it."

The *askaris* were not necessary to round up a derelict; they represented the majesty of France and the governor general. Later, Conroy stood under two ceiling fans which stirred the air into hot pools, and said to the tired fat man behind the desk, "Lafayette, here we are."

The governor smiled a little; he was too fat to resent trifling. His white uniform bulged, and sweat already stained it. "Sit down, *monsieur.*" He waved a soft hand, smoothed out decorations whose color had run into the breast of his tunic. A retired soldier, he despised the comfort of civilian dress.

"I do not object to brawling. Anyone whose bare fists knock out three Somalis has something of merit in him. Me, I have failed sometimes with a gun butt, years ago."

"Thanks, Your Excellency."

Conroy seated himself, and the governor went on, "I am not concerned with white prestige. I am a realist, and I advise you to be one, for a change."

"Indeed?"

His Excellency ruffled some papers on his desk, adjusted his glasses, and went into a combination of reading and speaking:

"YOUR *dossier, monsieur.* Four years ago, you were worth nearly a million dollars. A certain Mademoiselle Irma Wiley, your fiancée, broke an engagement, for reasons not here stated. Then you had a nervous breakdown, presumably because of overwork and overdrink. You dissolved your partnership and specialized in chronic alcoholism.

"Drinking like a gentleman and a broker, *monsieur,* is much more disastrous than honest sottishness."

Conroy was neither amazed nor disturbed. "French thoroughness?"

"Que voulez-vous?" The governor shrugged. "In these times, one must know who is who. With Facist agitators, Nazi agitators, Communist agitators, *sacré bleu!"*

"How do you like my drinking these days?"

"Bad. Not honest sottishness. It is bitter, grim, resentful, suicidal drinking, but there is too much iron in you. I'll lend you a pistol, or I'll suggest that you take the next boat home."

He glanced down at the file. "You have just enough fare for third class passage on deposit at the bank. On the *Empératrice Eugenie.* One of our excellent French boats, arriving from Suez, and bound for

Ceylon, Singapore, Manila, and San Francisco."

"You forget the *francs* in my pocket," Conroy said.

"*Tiens,* my friend! Am I a mind reader?" The governor's smile solidified and there was no longer any twinkle in his eyes. "I forgot to mention that I can jail you as a vagrant, even though you do have money in your pocket. And keep on jailing you."

"This is for my own good, eh?"

"*Non.* I leave that hypocrisy for you Americans. It would be embarrasing for me to explain how you came to be knifed and robbed some night. You avoid white people, and persist in what you call passing out in the native town. Is it that you are asking for it?"

They stared at each other for seconds. Conroy blinked, lowered his head, then raised it. "Yes, that's it. I busted myself trying to go up, and now I am reversing the process."

The governor general rose, smoothed out his tunic. "*Monsieur,* one sees that you have the soul of a poet. But I prefer that you write your verses in your own country." He extended his hand. "I wish you a pleasant trip. Some day you will thank me."

Conroy's defiance had not a chance. He accepted the hand, and returned the bow. Then he said, "Can you extradite Italian deserters?"

"Sometimes. When we, for instance, want a French criminal seized in Ethiopia and delivered here, it is handy to have an Italian. It makes for the evenness of exchange, you apprehend."

"Goodbye, Your Excellency."

"A pleasant trip, *monsieur.*"

A strange thing had happened during that interview. Having finally spoken aloud the purpose which the governor had suspected, Conroy began to wonder. Maybe he should go home. He could never recoup. He did not want to try; the bitterness of success that ruins still left a bad taste in his mouth.

Irma was right. He was not human. He had no creed, no belief, only will and greed; and these had betrayed him. He had lost himself, if ever *that* had been anything to lose.

Now, he had learned his lack of courage. He had been hedging, asking drink or a passing Somali to do what he had lacked the nerve to do.

CONROY went to the bank of Indo-China and cleaned out his account. He went to the offices at the waterfront, where the sun cooked the tar from between the teak plants of Arab *dhows* and *zarougs;* their holds reeked from fish and hides and Ethiopian coffee, and the sweat and rancid butter that clothed the tawny sailors.

But the *Empératrice Eugénie* would anchor out in the blinding blue of the harbor to pick up passengers; maybe discharge some French exile to his office in Djibouti. No one in his right mind ever stopped for pleasure in this flea-ridden and sun-scourged desert by the sea.

Reserving third class passage took him only a moment, once the nodding clerk woke up. "She'll be in this afternoon, and she sails in the morning. *Bon voyage, monsieur.*"

Conroy came out of the tin-roofed building and stood there, the hot waves beating up from the white dust and blinding him, searing his cheeks; the vicious blaze reached through the holes the goat had chewed into his Panama. It boiled the spilled beer out of his suit, and the brandy out of his lean frame.

Conroy felt fine, and he began to realize that he could not drink himself to death.

He was impatient, far too impatient for such dallying. He still walked with the springy tread of an animal, not the sodden slouch of a man who should have been beaten down by Djibouti. The governor general, Conroy now understood, was envious; Djibouti made most white people pudgy, or fever-sallow, thin-blooded and gutless.

So Conroy went to the arcaded hotel on the broad main street, and shaved and

looked for other clothes. These were no better than what he wore. Then he heard the siren of the *Impératrice.* Looking through the window in the thick wall, he saw the long white hull and three funnels; the customs cutter, and some passengers coming ashore.

"With cameras, huh?"

The sun was dipping, and the day's blaze subsided into a sullen swelter. Officials and clerks came to the tables in the arcade, taking aperitifs and *bock.* Tall Somalis and Gallas padded barefooted down the street, carrying loads of brush; graceful brown women went by with earthen jars balanced on their heads, and naked brats drove goats toward Bender Djedeed and the cooking pots.

And already, people with kodaks and avaricious eyes came ashore from the *Impératrice;* tourists, afraid they would miss something in a place where nothing was really alive but natives and goats and fleas.

Conroy leaned against a pilaster and regarded them. They were the kind of people who used to trade with Billings, Bemis, and Conroy. Some of them were, that is; some were less pretentious. There was the girl in white gabardine, cool and unruffled despite the heat. She was laughing, turning a candid camera on an *askari* whose uniform ended at his knees.

HER smile carried over and toward Conroy when she lowered the little camera. It became fixed; her eyes widened, her lashes fluttered. Conroy wanted to look the other way, but he straightened up, and sighed.

"Hello, Bill," she said.

"Hello, Irma. Long time no see."

Irma Wiley groped for further words, and so did Conroy. It was silly to ask him how he liked Djibouti, how long he was staying; anyone could see that he would stay from then on, one of the shabby crowd that was filing from second and third class and lower-rated hotel toward the post office, lining up for the letters that never came, or for the remittance that did arrive.

And he could see that Irma's business, whatever it now might be, had prospered.

His first thought was, "I used to think she was gorgeous." Now he knew that she was moderately nice looking, a quiet girl no one gave a second look. He said, "Ah . . . lousy town for sightseeing."

She answered, "Anyway, I'm staying ashore tonight. It's colorful."

He had a second thought: "It's always been this way. She grows on you. She'll be gorgeous in another minute. The longer you look at her, the more you find." Then Conroy said, "Full of fleas. You'll love the jackals howling and the natives beating drums and howling."

"When are you going home, Bill?" Her tone implied that he should go.

The slanting sun brought copper sparkles out of her chestnut hair, and there was pity in her brown eyes. She was sorry for him, and glad for herself. He said, "I'm staying. Awful nice seeing you, though."

He crossed the street, where Guiseppe Piazzi limped along in shoes too ragged to keep out the burning earth. Conroy was not sailing third class on the *Impératrice;* not with Irma aboard. He did not resent her pity; for a moment it had warmed him, but he did not want it.

She was doing well for herself, traveling. That job, secretary to some vice-president or other. This might be a business trip. But however the case was, he had been right in not even suggesting dinner, or a single quiet drink.

So he said to Guiseppe, "Pal, I'm leaving, and you'd better." He jerked a thumb at the forty-foot *zaroug* whose raking yard and lateen sail slowly settled to the fish-oiled deck. "There's our boat, when she hauls out in the morning. Deck passage with the natives."

"I ain't gotta da money."

"I'll get a refund on that steamer ticket I bought. That'll be plenty."

When that detail was settled, they went to see the skipper to find out if his next port was Muskat or Zanzibar or Port Sudan; Conroy didn't give a hoot where.

Piazzi cared less. Fascism had disappointed him, and details made no difference to a deserter.

CHAPTER II

HARVEST FOR ALLAH

CONROY found Assad in a hut near the waterfront. Outside, the Arab skipper's Galla wife pounded *dourra* meal in a mortar. Assad had a wife in Djibouti, one in Suakin, one in Zanzibar, a fourth in Bahrein; he was at home in each principal port of call, except maybe in Berbera.

That was the story; and at times Conroy wondered whether a man was not a fool to get upset over one woman who was not his wife.

Though in fairness, he admitted that it was not Irma, but his own collection of devils that had made him crack up.

He hailed the house, as he had learned to do. Piazzi followed without saying anything, being sick and afraid. Assad squatted on a mat spread on the clean-swept dirt floor, and waved to his visitors, making place for them.

There was a sleeping rug in a corner, besides some crude utensils and a setting hen.

Assad was leathery, and his sharp face looked as if he had often made good use of the broad-bladed dagger at his belt. At the moment, his cup of coffee-leaf infusion sat steaming beside him, and he had a bowl of incense in his hand.

After welcoming his visitors, in the name of Allah, he solemnly waved the censer to perfume the white beard of the saint who sat next to him. That done, Conroy and Piazzi got the ritual fumigation; not an unkind hint, but a compliment.

The American had a smattering of coast Arabic; Assad had a smattering of eight or ten languages, which was no accomplishment, with his diversified wives. In patchwork, Conroy said, "O *nakhoda,* I am leaving Djibouti, if Allah pleases. Perhaps your ship is not too crowded."

The *nakhoda* answered, "I am sailing for Bahrein, *inshallah.*"

Conroy shrugged. That island on the Persian Gulf was worse than Djibouti, he had heard. Assad's voice had implied his doubt of Conroy's intention.

"Bahrein it is, and who cares?"

Then the white-bearded saint for the first time seemed to be aware of Conroy and the Italian. He must have been seventy, no more than bone and skin in a white robe, but the eyes that looked from under pointed brows were lustrous and wise and kindly.

His serenity made Conroy feel childish, silly; here was a man whom nothing worried, a man free of greed or ambition, a man who had conquered delusion. Quite as if he knew all about Conroy, the ancient Arab ceased fingering his ninety-nine beaded rosary and said, "Flight takes a man into strange paths, but Allah is the Knower. He does what he will do."

This serenity and veiled reproof nettled Conroy for a moment. He said sharply, "What has Allah to do with me, or I with him? There is a steamer leaving, but I prefer a comfortable *zaroug,* if Assad has room."

Assad's wrinkles contracted; he nodded wisely and made marks on the floor, computing the rate.

But the saint picked up some dust from beneath the edge of the mat; dust, and bits of earth, bits of goat dung, and let them slowly sift through his skinny fingers. He said, "O man, Allah has each grain of dust named and numbered, and its destiny is written."

"Praise be his name, and they wisdom, O *hajji!*" the skipper droned.

Whatever his name was, he was a *hajji;* he had made at least once in his life the pilgrimage to Holy Mecca. He seemed to ignore the compliment, and gestured toward the door, and the people who walked through the brief twilight, toward the dock.

Irma was apparently filled up with Djibouti, preferring her stateroom to the sweltering night ashore. A tall, broad man, middle-aged and well fed, well-dressed and prosperous seeming, walked

with her; he had a briefcase in his hand, and he walked as if he owned Djibouti. Carriage and moustache, the few words he spoke about the town, were in German-built English.

Somewhat behind the two was the little doctor Conroy had seen among those coming ashore; a Spaniard, perhaps a political exile. The chatter of Djibouti had made that fairly clear.

He had his black bag. A frail man, nervous as if walking on eggs; quick glances right and left, and sometimes behind him; haggard eyes. Conroy again thought, "Poor devil, he's cracking up, now that he's gotten away."

ALL this as Conroy followed the *hajji's* hand, heard Irma's voice, the German's. A square-shouldered man caught up with the doctor and shortened his stride to accompany him. The big man spat, made a contemptuous gesture at Irma and the prosperous German.

"They too are dust, O man! They are grains trickling through the fingers of Allah. He sent them ashore, and he sends them back, and they go where he will, praised be his name!"

It might have been that sonorous voice; Arabic as the *hajji* spoke it sent little chills rippling over Conroy's skin, and there was a catch in his throat.

He now thought, since Irma had become a shapely blur, "He's got something there. Why else did she stop in Djibouti; why was I coming out just to run into her? If I'd not seen her in time, I'd be on that ship."

But he said to the *hajji,* "Grandfather, what of the grains he forgets, curses, loses because he wants them lost?"

The *hajji* smiled, being sorry for him. "O man, I see the thought behind your face. Satan has made you think yourself forgotten. But I see you, once more a man among men. Verily, is it not written, *To every blade of wheat, Allah sends a reaper?"*

Conroy blinked. He did not understand what the old fellow meant, but he felt a meaning. Maybe it was, "You are paid as you deserve"; but there was nothing that rang of vengeance in the saint's voice. And just then, Assad named the fare to the next port.

They haggled, of course; Conroy got a cut rate for bringing Piazzi. The Italian licked his lips, suspiciously eyed Assad and the *hajji,* and then remembered Ethiopia, and the French habit of swapping wanted men.

Mrs. Assad Number Three came in to make more *keshir* out of ginger and coffee leaves; beards and chins were again fumigated. Then Conroy and Piazzi followed the skipper to the black *zaroug,* which wallowed lazily in the swell.

From the deck, Conroy saw the lights of the *Empératrice;* whiteclad figures flitter along the rail. He tried to find Irma. Then he shrugged, and decided to pick a place to sleep.

The cabin was the skipper's, and hardly large enough for him. Between it and the bulwark was a stove made of sheetiron and rocks placed on the fish-oiled deck. The ruddy glare was reflected from the buttered backs and legs of Somali sailors, stripped down to loin cloth and turban; they needed bare feet to keep a hold on the slippery deck.

Fish and rice were cooking; spices and sweat and leather contributed odors from the hold, and Ethiopian coffee and hides did their bit. Piazzi asked, "Do we have to eat with those fellows?"

Conroy chuckled. "No, they'd cut our throats if we tried to."

Assad did not understand that, but he came up and said, "Here, forward, you can eat and sleep, the men won't mind. These wild fellows are suspicious about infidels."

They followed him.

The cook brought the two a pot of rice drenched with mutton fat. There were other deck passengers; a young Arab, handsome and sleek, spotlessly dressed, almost effeminate with his smooth face and splendid eyes. A certain tigerish alertness, a hardness about his mouth, kept

Conroy from mistaking him for any sweet william.

This elegant fellow ostentatiously spat, and moved his food somewhat away from infidel taint. But the *hajji* came closer, and Conroy smiled when he recognized the saint's face in the glare of the cooking place.

THE old man turned his back on the handsome Arab, set his pot closer to Conroy and Piazzi, and with a flourish, flung back his sleeve.

"Fadl!" he said, the courteous formality of asking a chance companion to join him.

Conroy groped for the proper return. The *hajji* explained, "In Syria they would answer, *sahhn!"*

Conroy bowed.

"Thanks, anyway. *Sahhn*—may it nourish you!"

Then the young Arab, seeing that a saint did not fear contamination, edged around, and saluted the old man. "I am Nureddin Aziz Dawad," he announced. "From Zanzibar."

"I am *Hajji,"* was the answer; one that told plainly that he preferred to be anonymous, from whimsy, or to fulfill a vow.

Neither Arab fancied Piazzi; the Ethiopian business made Italians as unpopular with Moslems as with native Christians. But the old saint did not snub him. Nureddin, Arab-like, began quizzing Conroy; name, age, purpose, destination, number of wives, origin, and the rest. But this was interrupted when Assad wiped his lips and leaped to the poop deck.

At his command, the Somalis set aside their bowls and seized the lines. The anchor creaked up, the yard rose; and presently, the breeze which the *nakhoda* had scented was making the lateen sail belly out. Gear creaking, crew chanting as they went about their work, the *zaroug* tacked slowly across the harbor.

The *Empératrice* offered no whistled salute, but some woman waved a white hand; the breeze ruffled a white skirt, and somewhere an opening companionway flashed light against her trim legs. Conroy returned the gesture, and wondered if that could be Irma.

Hajji said, "Who can say whether pride or wisdom brings you here instead of leaving you there?"

Conroy laughed uneasily. "I'm giving Allah a workout. Keeping track of this cockle shell is a bigger job."

He had to be skeptical, for he was puzzled by that saying about there being a reaper for every stalk of wheat. He thought about it that night, as Piazzi snored and mumbled on the hard deck.

The sun awoke him, and the droning prayers of the Moslems. The *hajji* led them; but Assad was too busy on the poop deck. The Indian Ocean leaves a skipper no time for piety. And that afternoon, all hands learned that work as well as prayer was needed.

FAR off, the wind suddenly whipped a steamer's smoke plume to shreds; a white boat, with three raking funnels. The blistering wind, sand-laden all the way from Africa, began to twist and become chilly. The shrouds whistled, the yard made the sling creak against the mast; lines were first taut, then a shift loosened them; and canvas smacked like pistol shots.

Assad shouted to his Somalis. Two men bent on the tiller. The yard sank, shortening sail; but the *zaroug* pitched and lay on her beam. Cargo was shifting below, torn from its lashings. Conroy cried into *Hajji's* ear, "Here's Allah's chance. Maybe I'd not rather be on that steamer. I bet it's the *Empératrice."*

Hajji smiled, and continued fingering the ninety-nine beads, each one for a Glorious Name of Allah. Later, when the crew began to pray in earnest, *Hajji* still sat there, serene; and seeing him, Conroy said to Piazzi, "Snap out of it, pal. A guy born to be shot can't drown."

The deck was awash. Already, a small boat had broken loose, and with it, the cook's stove. In the midday blackness, Conroy could no longer see the steamer.

There was no fighting that storm. Its

freakish alliance with the currents that swept from Bab el Mandeb into the Indian Ocean gave the *zaroug* no chance; deadly white outlined reefs, and Conroy wondered how long Assad could keep from running aground. Not even a steel boat could last ten minutes, once it struck off that coast.

Tackle crashed to the deck, stunning two of the crew. A heavy sea washed them over the side. A water butt followed. The *nakhoda* strung a line, and booted the crew into action again. But before they trimmed the sail enough, the mast snapped; the yard was down, the canvas in ribbons.

During a lull in the storm, *Hajji* saw Conroy's gray face, and said, "Verily, to every stalk of wheat, Allah sends a reaper. Would we be safer on land?"

Conroy finally kicked off his shoes and joined the crew in rigging a jury mast. He once had had a yacht, along with other things; and crowding on canvas, he had snapped many a spar. Once he got moving, his color returned. He grinned at Assad, who cursed and prayed and gestured from the poop.

CHAPTER III

THE BLADE SHEARS WIDE

IT WAS like a battle, with infantry facing the repeated charge of horsemen. The waves were lancers; and what they missed the first time they got when they reformed to close in again.

Conroy knew that infantry, staying fast in one place, could take all that the speed and shock of mounted men could give. Perhaps Assad knew this from desert experience, perhaps he knew it only from facing the treacherous Red Sea; but certainly he realized that his *zaroug* could survive only by fighting, never yielding or shifting for any advantage.

Just what happened in that howling chaos, Conroy never knew, nor ever learned from the skipper. There was a racing panic which he could feel even before he saw that Assad pitched like a bundle of rags on the deck. He clutched his stomach; blood came from it, and from his mouth.

The ship seemed to feel that she was without a master. Her stout teak timbers groaned and there was no soul left in her, nor in the Somalis. These were gray-faced in the spray and water.

Conroy was sick. This was not like that old fear which had driven him at home, the fear of becoming a thing without pride or importance or recognition. He had once seen a storm of ticker tape, and no partner to advise him. Desperation and fury had burned out his panic, and he had begun selling, selling, selling.

They had cursed him that day, but he rode the market's fall, hurrying the destruction, and thus Billings, Bemis, & Conroy came out of it with profit, where others, lagging a few minutes, had lost. If he had been wrong—

Madman or crook, just words from men like himself. Now that moment of fear seemed strange; here was a sea to tear the heart out of a man, the guts out of him, finish him once for all. The Somalis recognized the hand of Allah. Piazzi recognized nothing. Nureddin clutched a stanchion and stared. *Hajji* stood there, serene, unruffled. If a man drowned, he drowned, and peace be with him.

Conroy went into action. He did not know the Arabic commands, but none could have heard them, any more than they heard Assad's. What mattered was that now a man was on the bridge again, one who was not afraid. He gestured, shouted in English.

They knew what to do. A man with hope and courage was what they needed.

The ship regained her soul. Conroy felt that, and laughed at the sky. He raised his hand in salute and challenge. The savage pounding, the splitting of his head, shaken by the impact of deck against his feet, did not matter. There was not the thrill of winning, for he had not yet won. It was something different.

He did not quite know how it happened, but a hulk that had lost her soul had

omehow regained it. He had caused this hing; men and ship acknowledged him.

The darkness of day lifted only to ush into the gloom of night, but the brief edness of sunset touched a sea that was ullen, not raging. There was time now or Assad, who was conscious; living, but ot for long. He coughed blood and aid, "Where's Nuh?"

No one knew what had happened to he grinning mate. Conroy pointed to the hattered bulwark whose ragged tongue ad torn Assad's stomach and chest when e was pitched against it. *Hajji* said, Allah took him through that, but left you ith us. O *nakhoda!*"

SAVE for the men at the tiller, all that remained of the crew gathered about he skipper. Assad said to Conroy,"At imes I saw you on the bridge and I knew hat my ship had gained heart. How is he cargo?"

"Well, praise Allah," said Conroy, who new it was not well, with coffee and ides and tobacco and rice. The pumps hould be manned, but he wanted the crew o hear what little Assad still could say. This holy man's presence is what saved s."

He played that card for Piazzi. They night take him for a Jonah and throw im overboard, so Conroy wanted to get heir attention on *Hajji.* The old saint aid, "There is no power save in Allah."

"Then sail for—" Assad was all con- used now, and groping. "For Jiddah, and ee that these pilgrims reach dry land nd the road to Mecca. Sell the cargo, rother, and thou, O *Hajji,* see that it is ivided among my wives."

Apportioning Assad's estate was a prob- em in Moslem theology, to say nothing of nvolved arithmetic. Sailing a crippled oat was simple in comparison.

"O, men," Assad said, choking, "this an is your captain, infidel or no. Honor im and serve him—"

He shuddered; his eyes opened again, ut he had life enough to pronounce most f the *ishtitad:* "I bear witness—that there is no God but the God—that Mohammed is the Apostle of God—that—"

"He covered the main points," Conroy said, when he raised his bowed head. "*Hajji,* do now what is fitting, according to your faith." He rose, regarded the men, the ship, what remained of rigging. "Walid! To the pump. And bend on it. Musa! See what food there is, how much water."

The others set about clearing away tangled gear, salvaging and repairing. Piazzi was no longer seasick. His color had returned, and though he understood the creak-thud-gurgle of the pump, that did not worry him.

"You hotta stuff captain. Where you learn him?"

"The same way you're going to learn, Guiseppe," Conroy answered. "We're short-handed, mate and one man overboard, skipper dead, two men knocked cockeyed by the yard when it fell. Take off your shoes."

"You mean, I work with them? Listen, we licka them in Ethiopia. Anyway, I pay for da ride."

"I'd forget that. Never mind taking off the shoes. Your feet are bare anyway. Go below and man the pump, and give a sailor a chance on top."

Piazzi went, muttering something about authority going to a man's head, but he bent on the pump. Then Musa came to report that there was not too much food, and that the remaining butt of water was only half full.

Conroy could have hauled back toward Africa. That was the logical thing to do; get rid of the enforced responsibility before the *zaroug* fell apart. But he had left Africa, and four widely scattered widows depended on his humoring a dying man's wish.

This was the first time he had ever exercised stubbornness in any cause except his own. The novelty of it amused him; or he thought he was amused.

Red Sea skippers do not use chronometers nor sextants. Conroy's position was far from clear. All he knew was that the sun set in Africa, somewhere astern. Going

north far enough would bring him to Arabia, or the mouth of the Red Sea.

But until daylight and rest gave the men a chance, the *zaroug* could not make way in any direction. She needed repairing, though perhaps her leaks would not widen.

LATE that blazing afternoon, a British cruiser went past under full steam. Usually these patrols out of Aden signaled *zarougs* to heave to for inspection for contraband, slaves, guns.

This one apparently did not sight the low black hull and half-crushed poop and scrap of grimy sail. She did not see Conroy's signals, for the light was against her lookout.

"They think," said *Hajji*, "that you are going to ask for your position, as is the way of Arab *nakhodas* who do not have instruments. Usually they stop, but this one races."

Conroy cursed, and so did Piazzi. "An hour later, we'd have met. And now—Guiseppe, relieve that lad at the pump; she's filling faster."

Guiseppe Piazzi sighed and regarded his blistered hands. *Hajji* said, *"Nakhoda sahib,* our lives are in Allah's hands and yours. Had we been picked up by that cruiser, who knows where we would go?"

"Who cares!" Conroy spat on the deck. Look and gesture damned the *zaroug*, himself, everything. "Do you?"

"La, wallahi!" Hajji shook his head. "I mean, it is not wise to complain. Verily, that great ship may go to a doom and we outlive it. O man, my eyes are not God's eyes, but I still see what is on your forehead. You will live, though all of these others die."

The old man's voice was uncanny, his eyes were uncanny, and Conroy shivered. It was as if he had been annointed, or blessed. *Hajji* might be a self-styled sage, but it is hard to laugh at a man who believes in his own wisdom. There was no fear in him, no fear of anything.

"Why won't you live, if I do?" Conroy demanded.

Hajji lowered his voice. "Because young Nureddin will slay me. There is a feud between his house and mine. There has been for two hundred years."

"Come off! He's friendly, he obviously respects you."

"Because he does not know who I am. He may learn."

Conroy frowned. "Why haven't you killed him? It's the custom, you said, law of your people. Blood feud, I understand that."

Hajji shook his head. "I am too old to care for honor and the praise of men. He is too young not to care. Fifty years ago, I slew several of his kinsmen. It is the custom of our people, but it is not good. What I once did for honor, he will do."

"I won't allow a fight."

"In a feud, one slays secretly."

The *zaroug* had become a floating madhouse. But Conroy was thinking of the evil he had done himself and Irma for the sake of honor; he tried to tell himself that Nureddin was somewhat different from a man whose nerves finally crack from serving greed and ambition and ruthlessness.

He might have justified himself, had he not been wondering also, "Why is that cruiser burning all that coal? Can't be revolt in Berbera. Not so soon. Or has war broken out in Europe?"

Close to sunset, the lookout said, *"Ya nakhoda!* Drifting wreckage ahead!"

A lifeboat, not all of its watertight bulkheads pierced by rocks, wallowed awash, with no passengers. The name was plain: *Empératrice Eugenie.*

Hajji saw him shrink and sag, then straighten up, face white and hard. "O *Nakhoda,* that woman's life also is in the hand of Allah. Though the steel ship dies, and the wooden lives, that which is written is written and there is no help for it."

The cruiser, Conroy now knew, was steaming to save what was beyond rescue. "Shut up," he said to the saint, "and tell your beads."

CHAPTER IV

FREE TRIP TO HELL

THREE days passed. There was cargo to spread on deck to dry, though some was beyond salvaging; there were patches to place, sailcloth sausages of rice to wedge against some of the leaks, so that the expansion of the grains would plug leaks beyond the reach of carpentry.

The wind, the current, the scanty rigging, they all kept the *zaroug* from making much way. Wherever the desolate Hadhramaut coast of Arabia was, it was far from sight.

And there the *zaroug* had as good a chance of being looted as refitted. The coast Arabs were smugglers, fishers, pirates and slavers.

But Conroy was most concerned with the fate of the *Empératrice*. Either the cruiser had not yet found her; or else, returning, it had passed the *zaroug* by night. Berlin knew of the big German's fate; Madrid, of the little doctor's; Moscow, the Russian's; and New York, Irma's salvation or finish.

But the *zaroug* was a world of its own, without radio, with threatening famine, and rationed water. There was even a promise of war, though no man knew what young Nureddin suspected about *Hajji*.

Conroy entered these things in the log. Some consul might straighten out the mess; an unwitnessed will, the selling in Jiddah of cargo destined to Bahrein. Conroy's smile was grim when he thought back of what he had once called responsibility and prestige. Now he was one of the last surviving absolute monarchs: a captain at sea.

And not a good captain: for a *zaroug* was not like a yacht.

A saint, a potential assassin, a deserter, a drunkard who had ceased practicing; and fuzzy-headed sailors who no longer chanted, for their thin lips were baked by the blistering wind. Fermenting rice, reeking hides drying in the sun, fish drying the second time. All this came to him as he stood on the battered poop.

"Faster on that pump!" he croaked, then squinted into the glare to see what blurred the glassy glitter of the faroff water. "Musa! What's that to starboard?"

The Somali lookout shifted his gaze. Soot smeared about his eyes blanked out some of the glare. "By Allah, a boat, a small boat!"

Someone was waving. Conroy said, "Haul for it!"

Then the seeds of mutiny sprouted. "*Wallah,* we are crippled. What help can that give us?"

They meant, those who now saw the shape of the boat, "What help are we to give infidels from a steel ship?"

Conroy looked to Piazzi, who was off shift. He lowered his eyes and said, "We are too hongry, too thirsty now."

Sea traditions make good reading, but these men were realists who plundered more shipwreck survivors than they rescued. This corner of Hell was a blend of Asia and Africa, where a man's own life is worth more than any other's life. The storm was over, and the Somalis did not need a captain.

The men eyed each other, not Conroy. He had never been so terribly alone in his life. He said to *Hajji,* "O pilgrim, what is your wisdom?"

The old man's smile was serene, and Conroy knew the answer before there was any speech. A man who is placid while a knife hangs over him would be equally calm in considering the doom of a faroff stranger.

"Thou art the *nakhoda.* Do what seems good."

THERE was no flash of oars. The boat was drifting toward the *zaroug,* though uncertainly. Finally, the gap was small enough for Conroy to see a large man standing up, and other figures huddled as if they did not care what happened. Conroy went to a narrow dugout which had not been washed away and began to unship it.

The men advanced a little, then halted, and Musa said, "What is this, *ya nakhoda?*"

"In this dugout," Conroy answered, "I am captain. I go to my own people, and save you food and water. So that you can do as Assad commanded before he died. You have a holy man aboard, and it will be well with you."

Over their shoulders, he saw *Hajji's* sudden smile. Then they said, "Stay with us, and we will obey."

The *zaroug* tacked sluggishly toward the lifeboat. Presently Conroy could read the name, see the crumple of tarpaulin in the stern, the sun-scorched shoulders and faces of the men. One had a black bag, one a briefcase; and he wore a hat. The others had shirts bound about their heads to keep out the deadly sun.

The castaways could scarcely speak, much less hail the *zaroug*. The deck swam under Conroy's feet, black danced before his eyes; then he said to himself, "Maybe Irma's on the cruiser. Or in another boat with oars."

They hauled the big German, the bigger Russian over the side. The wiry little Spanish doctor needed no help. He gave Conroy his case, and licked his lips a little before he said, "Under the tarpaulin."

Then Conroy saw the soggy white shoes, the ruined hosiery, the crumpled white skirt. The girl had lovely legs. He said, mechanically, "I'll lift her up," and went over the side.

The lifeboat had been battered. It was half full of water, and only its air-tight compartments kept it afloat. Some savage reef had almost whipped it to pieces. Above, the German said to Piazzi, "Some of us were washed overboard. She struck so quickly. Few boats launched in that sea. *Ach,* iss there no more water?"

A gust of wind sent a hat whisking into the sea.

The thin-faced doctor said, "Herr Bergmann, made a headcloth for yourself, this sun is dangerous."

"Pfui! Am I stranger to the sun? A weakling?"

It must have been a nice trip, judging from Sverdloff's deep rasping laugh, over his pannikin of water. All this danced in Conroy's ears as he crept forward, afraid to look at the girl's face. She was painfully wedged on a seat, keeping just above the slopping seawater.

Tawny chestnut hair, sodden and salt-caked, matted about a shapely small head. No sunburn on her arms, or the shoulder exposed by her tattered blouse; her fellows had sheltered her in time, and faced the sun themselves.

He knew now it was Irma, but he was afraid to look at her face and find that it was someone else. She sat up, startled; her feet dipped into the bilge water. Dry lips, dry throat, dry staring eyes. She could not speak for a moment, or understand. Then, "Oh—Bill! You did sail with us."

He gave her a hand, half carried her from under the canvas, when he could better have flung it aside; but Conroy was not thinking. He answered, "On my own ship. Musa, thou blockhead, a hand! How do you like my crew? Eat at the captain's table tonight."

"Bill," she said, and would hardly let go when brown hands reached down to pull her over the low bulwark. Then, as he followed her, "How did you survive? Not in *this.*"

"In this. Here's a drink. Musa, break our grub. Walid, grab that tarpaulin."

THE lifeboat was sunk now to the gunwales. Herr von Bergmann grimaced. "*Ach,* yes. We were bailing. She can't quite sink. That reef! Radio helped us not."

"If that profit-minded captain," said Sverdloff, with more accent than von Bergmann, "has attended to business instead of a speed record, we should be safe."

Bergmann spat, cursed in German. The two glared at each other, then settled back against the bulwark. They were too worn out to hate each other, so they demanded more water, more food.

Conroy was thinking, "The big Russion hates profit, huh? And von Bergmann likes it. That's a laugh, here."

He said, "No more eats, no drinking until sunrise, and very little then. Share and share alike, except for the crew, and they get more because they need it.

"Sverdloff—" Conroy grinned, a little maliciously. "You'll like this. We're executing a five-year plan in five *days*, if the boat don't fall apart before then."

Von Bergmann's laugh shook the storm-sail. "Captain! That iss a great joker you are. As I told him before the wreck—"

Dr. Ortega cut in, "Gentlemen, we are too crowded for politics. Captain, where are you bound, and how much is the fare?" But his eyes twinkled when he asked the rates.

"For Hell, I fear," Conroy gravely said, "and everything is free. If we land, you can pay the former skipper's four widows whatever you please."

When they moved to pick spots on deck, Irma came to Conroy and said, "You must be someone else. Solomon."

"Von Bergmann wouldn't approve of that," he answered. "But it's crazy. The old man with the white beard predicted all this. The saint, over there."

A moment's silence, and she said, "He looks like one. What did he say?"

"I didn't understand, at first. Now I think I do. *Kull zra' kaijib lu llâh hassâdu.* To every stalk of wheat, God sends a reaper. Every one gets his payoff, no matter where he ducks."

Her eyes clouded; she frowned a little, then smiled and laid a hand on his arm. "No, Bill. There's more than that. That's what I thought, when I saw you in Djibouti, though not in those words. I thought your reaper had found you. But it's more than what you think."

It was nearly dark, and dusk was very short. Conroy said, "Your slip is showing." That startled her for a moment. He added, "Tear enough of it off to hide your face."

"Heavens, am I that terrible!"

"No. We've got some garden variety Moslems aboard, and a saint for good measure. You're one of them now, I am, and we've got to play ball."

Later, he left her at the coil of hawser, and went to the poop deck. *Hajji* came to him, and said. *"Ya nakhoda,* do you understand now?"

"Almost, *Hajji.* Some of these people will die. You're right."

The old man nodded, sighed. "When you know *why* each one dies, among those who will die, wisdom will be on you, and the peace also."

Wisdom and the peace: these two he had never found.

CHAPTER V

SHARKS DECIDE ARGUMENTS

THE condition of the *zaroug* compelled Conroy to stay near the Arabian coast, when he sighted land three days later. In case she hit another blow, she would fall apart; what canvas there was was patched.

Assad, economical as most Arab skippers, had not furnished oil lamps for running lights. Thus, if Conroy had risked getting into steamer lanes he might have been smashed to bits by night, instead of being picked up by day.

The crew was haggard and sullen; the passengers were more so, except for Irma and *Hajji* and Dr. Ortega. The tarpaulin from the lifeboat was added to the sail, but that was not enough to help a great deal.

Assad, trusting to Allah, had carried little spare rigging, and practically no tools. And Conroy, a good yacht skipper, was at loss. A native *nakhoda* could have done much better.

"If pirates don't board us," Conroy told Irma, "we'll be lucky."

This when she pointed to a village on the desolate Hadhramaut coast. She believed him when she saw that the crew had no inclination to haul ashore for food and water.

"I think a boat's putting out now."

The lookout's cry confirmed her opinion. The Somalis said, "There is no might and no majesty save in Allah," and fingered their long knives. Conroy got the old Mauser from Assad's cabin. The car-

tridges were corroded, the rifle was gummed with tallow, and rusty in spots; the bore was full of dirt.

"Like an officer's pistol," he grimly said, and pulled a cleaning string through the barrel. Then, squinting toward the reef through which an Arab boat was taking, he added, "Chances are they're hungrier than we are. And haven't much more water."

Irma's face tightened behind her veil, but she forced a smile. "Being in Paris and Cairo and London isn't seeing the world, after all."

"If you mean, those lads heading for us aren't contented peasants, you're too right." He held his breath for a moment, seeing the dizzying maneuver that brought the Arabs through the passage. The tiny *zaroug* was crowded to the last inch of ragged sail. "It was an even chance that they'd capsize."

"Would they—" She laughed nervously. "Make us walk the plank, or butcher us, or just rob us?"

"They need, and they'd use, every scrap we've got, including that empty five-gallon gasoline tin from the cook's galley. Some of us would be knifed, but most of us would be sold inland as slaves."

"Oh." She couldn't believe that.

"This is the Red Sea," he said, which explained everything.

"Ya nahoda!" Musa cried to Conroy. "Shall we give them a present and maybe *Hajji* can persuade them not to hurt us."

Having a saint aboard might help. He sat in the scanty shadow the poop cast on deck, and fingered his beads. Von Bergmann was pawing in heaps of spliced cable, looking for a place to hide his briefcase.

DR. ORTEGA said to Sverdloff, "A medical man can sometimes win the good will of savages. With pills, eye washes—half of them have ophthalmia, poor devils."

"Poor devils! Yes. Imperialistic powers," Sverdloff lectured. "Stinking Italians in Ethiopia, greedy Britons in Iraq, French in Syria. Little wonder the natives are pirates—when there's enough wealth even in Arabia for everyone!"

"Why you—" Piazzi was on his feet scowling.

Sverdloff spat. "You poor fool, you stink only because you're a tool of that imperialist bandit. Cangratulations on deserting my friend."

But Piazzi did not see it that way. He snatched a belaying pin, cursed, and closed in to brain the big Russian. His face was red, his black eyes blazed. Conroy shouted from the bridge, "Stop it, you!"

The pin smacked down, glancing off the Russian's bullet head; any other shape would have been fractured. The blow made his shoulder sink, but he was a bear for brute strength. He snarled, deep in his chest, and hurled himself without rising. Another blow, then Piazzi cried out, with the fear of a man who strikes vainly in a nightmare.

The Somalis laughed. Conroy slipped as he leaped from the bridge. Irma screamed and the saint looked up from his beads, still serene. Piazzi toppled over, tackled about the calves. His head popped like a melon against a stanchion, and the sluggish roll of the *zaroug* let him slide overboard, just before Conroy could grab his legs.

"Man overboard," the Somali lookout dutifully cried; he meant, one less mouth to feed.

Conroy did not dive after Piazzi. He just said, "Poor devil, he asked for it."

Triangular fins cut the water. Sharks had been trailing the hapless boat. A hissing, splashing, foaming of the oily water; then the foam was red. Conroy felt sick, and he wondered if Irma's veil would handicap her next move. But she surprised him by not being as delicately keyed as she had been in New York.

Sverdloff rose, still rumbling. He licked his lips. "Putting me in irons? I tell you—"

"Self defense. Let Dr. Ortega fix up your head."

Conroy could not have said anything

else, yet he felt that his justice had given the Russian large ideas. A man who complains about the rationing of food needed watching. Sverdloff squared his shoulders, waved away the little doctor, and announced, "An idealist went over the side. The pathetic fool. He deserted Mussolini, and then died defending him. People are funny."

Much of this was leveled at von Bergmann, who had concealed his briefcase. Instead of returning to his scanty corner of shade, the big German stood in the full glare of the sun, arms akimbo. He was ready to answer the left-handed challenge.

Then Conroy said, "You fools, there'll be plenty of fighting if that's what you want!"

That fatal tussle had for the moment whipped irritability into a mild insanity. Conroy's warning restored peace, for the time. It was incredible that men who would soon face a pirate raid could quarrel instead of teaming up. But exposure and short rations had stripped their nerves bare.

Dr. Ortega said, "Herr von Bergmann, get in the shade or you'll be sunstruck. It is treacherous!"

The frail Spaniard, though a fugitive Loyalist, was first of all a medical man; but von Bergmann had no use for Loyalists.

"*Pfui!* If I had your bald head, maybe yes."

This over his shoulder, as he picked up a marlinspike and joined the Somalis, who were now at the rail with their long knives. Some yelled at the approaching *zaroug*, "*Ruh, ya kilab!* Go dogs, or we'll slice your guts out!"

THE Arab pirates returned the compliment. Each side was working up courage for the clash, though neither could yet understand the words of the other.

Then Conroy stretched himself on the poop, slipped a cleaned cartridge into the breech of the Mauser, and prayed that the sights had not been knocked out of line.

He had smudged soot around his eyes to kill the bitter glare. He shook his head, wiped off sweat. He said to Irma, "Fan your skirt out and throw a shadow."

That helped. He exhaled slowly, timing the sluggish swell. The pirates were dancing toward the prow, waving swords and assorted firearms. They were not yet shooting, for ammunition was too precious to waste. So was Conroy's, but he had more confidence than they had.

The blast jerked him back a full inch across the slippery deck. The shock against his shoulder told him that the powder was not stale. Then he saw the helmsman throw up his arms, and pitch into the water.

"Got him," he grunted, and Irma said, "Oh!"

The Somalis yelled. Von Bergmann declared, "I could not do better, not even when I belonged to the *Schützenverein.*"

"Thanks." Conroy slipped in another cartridge. "Watch this."

The bolt was limbering up. Slow, deliberate, remorseless, he picked off three more, with but one miss; the magazine was empty. He yelled, "More shells, Musa!".

But there were no more shells, and the *zaroug* was boring home. The sun gleamed on curved swords, on daggers, on flintlocks inlaid with mother of pearl; though the pirates now crouched behind bulwarks, they could not win complete concealment.

Conroy licked his lips. "I've settled everyone's hash. Now it is a blood feud between us and them." He rose. "Heat up saltwater. Get some fish oil and rags blazing. Dump it into their faces."

He clubbed the Mauser, sized up his feeble crew.

"The sharks do it quickly," Irma said.

Conroy jerked her from the rail. "You idiot!"

Hajji chanted, *"By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkeneth! Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, neither is he displeased. Did he not find thee an orphan, and hath he not taken care of thee?"*

Irma relaxed. "What—what's he saying?"

Conroy told her, and added, "From the Koran, I think. He's not a bit scared. I am."

Musa came bounding from the cabin. "*Ya nakhoda!* A shotgun! And three shells," he panted. "There is no God but God!"

Conroy snatched the weapon and handed Musa the empty rifle. He frowned, pushed Irma aside, eyed the pirate *zaroug*. Puffs of white smoke, blue smoke, blossomed from the bulwarks.

Slugs falling short plopped into the water; some thudded into the teak sides, some whined across the deck. A Somali yelled, clutched his arm. Irma dropped flat, and so did the passengers and crew.

Conroy walked slowly along the bridge, and leaped to the deck. He was cursing abstractedly, fingering heaps of rigging. Nazi and Communist and Spanish Loyalist lay side by side. *Hajji* sat placidly looking at the approaching pirates. Nureddin, the man who might kill him, crouched with a curved dagger in his hand, the silver-hilted weapon of a gentleman.

His lips were tight, his eyes sparkled, his nostrils flared. He no longer looked effeminate. He reminded Conroy of a leopard, sleek fighting fury waiting to explode.

THEN Conroy found what he sought: a length of fine-linked chain. He snatched a Somali's knife, chopped down, one-two-three, and returned the weapon before the man could speak. Then he picked up the sections of chain, cut the shot from the cartridges in the breach. Next, he dumped the powder charges from the spares down the muzzle.

Once, he glanced up, when a slug whisked past him. Pirates were tacking in for the final swoop. It would not be long now. He rammed wads to the double powder charges, then dropped the pieces of chain down the barrel.

"Get away," he said, gesturing. "Down!"

The pirate's lateen sail bellied. They were a little more than a cable-length away now, peppering hand-cast bullets and scrap iron out of their ancient guns. Conroy steadied himself.

And pulled both triggers. A cloud of smoke swirled about him. He lurched back against the jury mast. His shoulder seemed dead. His head no longer belonged to him. He heard a peculiar whistling, then the yelling of his crew.

And the yelling of the pirates.

Their sail was gone. The fragments of chain had sliced it. Being under tension, the canvas had fairly exploded. The *zaroug* lost way, wallowed. Conroy's sluggish boat hauled off.

He blinked at the shotgun's warped barrels. Only luck had kept them from ripping, or the breech from blowing through his head. Musa gestured at the pirates and said, "*Sahib*, they are afraid! They think you made magic!"

Conroy slumped and seated himself on some cable. "I wish I had a drink," he muttered. "A damn big triple Scotch."

He needed a drink as he had never needed those he had taken to nerve him for the market, or to drug his regrets in Djibouti. Reaction was tearing him to pieces.

Irma seated herself beside him. "I could do with one myself," she said, shakily. "But you don't need any. You whipped the storm without a bottle."

"I didn't. It was *Hajji*. He told me you'd be safe—no, he didn't put it that way, either. He said it wouldn't matter—that sounds awful, I guess—I don't know exactly how he did put it—ever since I met him, I've gone around in a haze. It's all been crazy, starting with seeing you in Djibouti. So I'd believe almost anything, provided it's wild enough."

"Meeting me in Djibouti," Irma said, "wasn't so outrageous. I'm head buyer for Westley, Limited."

He echoed the name, but for a moment it meant nothing. Then Conroy sat up straight. "You? Why, that's one of the biggest jobs a woman can hold, back home! Well, Top meets bottom."

She shrugged. "Your pride was foolish, in Djibouti, but it showed you'd not hit the bottom. Anyway, for a couple of years I had nothing to do but work. I didn't want to think of us. And when I became head buyer, I liked all the traveling."

He grimaced. "I've not liked traveling. I've been a chump. You'd have listened if I'd decided not to be pigheaded."

"I liked traveling," she repeated.

"Huh!" He was thinking of places she had seen only from the outside. "So picturesque. The Taj by moonlight, and so on."

"No, Bill. I was hoping I'd meet you, somewhere. And rather afraid that I would."

Bill Conroy did not try to unravel that last bit. He still needed a drink, and he wondered what he would do when he could hook his foot on a brass rail. Maybe nothing at all. He might make another million, instead. Irma's rise in the world was already goading him a little . . .

CHAPTER VI

WAY FOR TRAITORS

ADEN and the deadly Gate of Tears were not far away as miles go, but in terms of food and water and endurance it was otherwise.

Red-eyed, black-lipped, the passengers eyed the barren shore, the reefs strewn with the ribs of wrecked *dhows* and *zarougs*. Von Bergmann, in spite of his belated concession to the heat, keeled over.

His face was white and clammy, not suffused.

"Huh," said Conroy, "that's funny. Something he ate, I guess."

Dr. Ortega patted his shoulder. "No. Heat exhaustion. No breeze except a hot blast, with hot sand blown from shore. Something has been worrying him. You understand, captain? Why these natives can stand it? They are placid, they know when to bend, no?"

"Well, *Hajji*, for instance."

Ortega knelt beside von Bergmann. "Heat exhaustion, not the sunstroke from direct exposure. He needs brandy, hot drinks. A blanket."

"Brandy!" Conroy's laugh cracked. "Put lots of ice in mine!"

He rose, leaving the doctor to do what he could. The Somalis wished the arrogant German an early death. They had never seen anyone turn pale from the heat, and they had hopes.

On the other hand, they were curious and eager, admiring the *hakim's* black bag and the contents. If he saved von Bergmann, that would not help the water shortage, but it would prove that the little Spaniard was a magician, and this was a place where such a person would be useful.

"Too proud," Conroy said when he crowded himself into Irma's shaded corner. "Tough guy. And he must love that briefcase to carry it through hell and high water."

"Hard, but jittery," she observed. "On the whole trip. We picked him up in Marseilles. I think he's expecting someone to tap him on the shoulder."

"That and the sun would make him keel over."

Sand from Arabia, hot as the wind, stung their cheeks: there was no water along that barren coast. But once, high on the slope of a deep gash that dropped from mountain to shore, they saw gray-green vegetation, and moving figures. Seeing this same sign of life once more, Irma said, "They do raise something up there."

"Incense. Grows wild. The Queen of Sheba's people used to pick the gum from the shrubs. She sent some to Solomon, and the Egyptians came down here to get it. Sweetness out of death."

She looked at him for a moment, curiously. "Something's happened to you, since —New York."

He laughed harshly. "Yes. Thirsty, broke, burned out, finished. All self-made, of course. I was sorry for myself until I saw barefooted Gallas hopping through mimosa thorns and cactus and glass-sharp lava, chasing their goats."

He squinted somberly at the brazen

horizon. The Red Sea might be preparing more torture, more than he could face. Von Bergmann was responding to emergency treatment, but he was not yet equal to speech.

Irma went on, "But in some ways, you've not changed. When you shot those pirates."

"It was good shooting."

"It was horrible."

"You're funny. I had to."

"I know you did. It was the *way* you did it."

He snorted. "I did it the best I could."

She sighed. "You don't understand. It was mathematics with you. I watched you. You didn't even bother to wonder if the man dropped. When he did—you looked as if you'd won a box of candy. Remember that shooting gallery, at the carnival?"

He nodded. "Lots I can't forget. *That* night particularly not."

"I wish I could. It was later when I suspected."

"Suspected what?"

"That you were all will and no heart. That I cared for you because you willed me to, not because I wanted to. That you were some terrible machine without anything to keep it under control."

"It came in handy, back there."

"Let's talk about something else. You just don't understand yet."

He made a helpless gesture; but he did understand, a little. For years, he had lived under a strain like that of sniping the four pirates. No wonder he had finally gone haywire.

A few minutes of it, now, left him washed out. This time, he'd keyed himself to save his people; then, he had raced under full throttle to quench his greed. But there was no use arguing with a woman.

VON BERGMANN was sitting up, a bit shaky but very much himself. He resented the doctor, almost as much as he resented the necessity of his assistance. "How much do I owe you?" he demanded.

Dr. Ortega smiled and smoothly said, "Ashore, at least two thousand marks. I saved your life, it is worth that. Here, it is free. Even if you did help Franco drive freedom from Spain."

Von Bergmann spat. "A price for everything." He fumbled in his coat, thumbed his wallet, and counted out bills. They were Bank of England notes. "I am not a charity patient."

Ortega smiled, and pocketed the money. "Thank you, Herr von Bergmann. After all, you can afford it."

Irma laughed hysterically. Von Bergmann made a derisive gesture toward the doctor, and shook his head. "You see, a price for everything."

Irma said, "I could choke him, the pig! This is no place for ribbing. The doctor has a good heart. Nine Spaniards out of ten would have knifed him before now."

Conroy smiled curiously. "Right, my dear. This is no place for ribbing."

She did not know what to say to that. And as the day dragged on, Conroy watched Nureddin and *Hajji*. He wondered whether the young Arab had learned the saint's identity, wondered whether common peril would call for a truce. He could not be everywhere, could not spend all his time awake.

A man cannot get out of his rut, Conroy was thinking; madhouse here, just like the madhouse back home. And for no further good.

The water was dwindling faster than it should have, and so was the scanty food. Conroy again reduced the ration, and strained his eyes, looking for the first glimpse of Aden. The brittle tempers of the crew and passengers kept him on edge.

The Somalis might run amuck, he told himself, that night, when he should have been asleep. It came back to him, now, that Assad had had a revolver. It must be in the cabin, somewhere.

Restless, he went to look for it. The man on watch stared stolidly ahead. He was a brown skeleton draped over the tiller bar. A little breeze bellied the canvas, and made the rigging creak wearily. Conroy

picked his way among those sprawled on the oily deck; they stirred restlessly.

He struck matches, poked around in the stifling cabin, which was hardly more than six feet square. It reeked of years of sweat, of tobacco, of fish. Assad's sleeping mat lay in a corner Bits of cord, an adze, a turban cloth lay in a clutter. Finally he found the revolver, and pocketed it.

Barefooted, Conroy made no sound when he emerged. He had no thought of stealth, though uneasiness may have silenced his tread as he got to the bridge.

Then he saw the large man at the water butt. The sailor on guard snored, exhausted. From below came the *thud-squish-clunk* of the pump. No wonder the man watching the rations could not keep awake, with a trick at the pump just behind him.

Conroy said to the looter, "Close that spigot and pour that water back."

It was Sverdloff, bulky in the gloom, dirty white shirt flaring back from his broad chest. His teeth showed in a smile. He stood there, holding the pannikin almost to his mouth.

"Put it back," Conroy said, raising his voice. "And get those fish out of your pockets."

He advanced a pace. Sverdloff dropped the pannikin. It tinkled against the deck. He knew that he was in for a beating, and he was confident. "Put your dukes down," said Conroy. "You're going in irons, until you learn to practice your theory of share and share."

"Irons." He growled, reached for his pocket, found a knife.

"Don't!" Conroy's pistol came out; the knife dropped.

THEN the sleeping Somali rose, without a word. He struck from the rear. The point of his blade jutted an inch from Sverdloff's hairy chest. There was no cure for that, Dr. Ortega said, when he came trotting toward the disturbance.

The Somali sailor was saying, "Master, I was sleepy, I could not help it."

Conroy looked at the faces that gathered around him, and he knew that he could not have saved Sverdloff's life. He said to the sailor, "You did well, and this is on my head, not yours."

Hajji said, "It was better that way, *nakhoda*. It would not have been in your heart to try and sentence him as he deserved."

They all saw the pistol that Conroy slid back into his pocket, and that was good. He would not later have to draw it to prove he had it. In case of trouble, that first display would save at least one man's life, since a weapon drawn must be used once to prove the man behind it.

At dawn, they weighted Sverdloff's ankles. The crew were drawn up. Conroy said, *"Hajji*, we know not what this man believed. He was our brother and did what any might be tempted to do. Your hands are clean, and you are most fit to commend him to the mercy of Allah."

"This man," said the saint, "died betraying the belief he professed. I wish no man evil, but I do not wish that one well."

Conroy did not remove his head cloth. That would have lowered his dignity in Moslem eyes, for they did not uncover even in prayer. He recited the *Fathah*, the chapter which some say Mohammed borrowed from the Christians. The men muttered, *"Wallah*, our infidel captain can pray."

Then Sverdloff was pushed to the sharks, and the Somalis ceremonially washed away the taint of touching a corpse. Conroy turned away from the flurry of fins, and frowned for a moment as he looked at the placid saint.

"Prolonged-of-life," he said, "what is the meaning of all this? The Italian deserter died for defending what he had betrayed, and that Russian died for betraying what he had defended."

Hajji's lids dropped wearily, then rose. "O Captain, you are finding wisdom. Is it not written that to every stalk a reaper is sent? Before your beard is as white as mine, you could teach me."

He walked away, fingering his ninety-nine beads. Conroy went into the cabin

to write another entry into the log. He would have some accounting at Aden. The *zaroug* was under British registry, he had learned from examining the sea-bleached papers; and *Hajji* was a British subject.

Then he saw Irma, and knew that she had slept through it all. But his face told her something. Eyes wide over her veil, she looked around and asked, "What happened last night?"

"Sverdloff is baiting capitalists in Hell, I think. Von Bergmann thinks it is good riddance, and Dr. Ortega is sorry. Me, I'm just puzzled."

Irma listened to him, looked at and away from the blood pool that Musa was flushing from the deck. Finally she said, "I don't think you'll be puzzled long."

"It'll get us too, soon?" He shook his fist at sky and sea.

"It won't get us, Bill. I know that now. Somehow, I think you're winning. Yourself, I mean. Don't you see, it does make sense?"

CHAPTER VII

AMULET

THERE seemed to be no end to that savage Hadhramaut coast. Maps, Conroy remembered, showed towns; a long pink fringe on the Arabian shore indicated British influence.

"But it's all rock and thorn," he said, gesturing. "It's easy to put pink on the map. If they'd duco those blasted hills, a greenhorn might know when he's pulling into a place where he wouldn't be murdered before he had a chance to say, 'You've got a lovely view here.'"

"We can't hold out much longer," Walid said.

"By Allah, we'll land at the next settlement," Nureddin swore. "We'll seize food and water. We'll kill them if they don't offer us hospitality."

Von Bergmann crouched in a patch of shade. He clutched the grip of his heavy leather briefcase, and stared with red eyes at Arabia's forbidding barrier. Sometimes he glanced wrathfully upward, licked his dry lips, and tried to estimate how long it would be before the skipper rationed out a few ounces of stale, warm water and unsavory fish, some mouldy rice. But he never forgot that briefcase.

Hajji saw and smiled a little. "*Wallah*, the infidel loves that leather bag better than his life."

"He can't drink it," Conroy muttered in the saint's ear.

"Is there medicine in it, like in the Spaniard's black saddle bag?" Walid asked. He was skinny, but he always had been; wiry, and his deep-set eyes had an apish twinkle. Of all the crew, he suffered least.

"He brings the dead back to life; can't he make magic and get food? What has the *Alleman* that is so valuable?"

Conroy snorted. "Papers and such like trash! No food and no magic."

Walid crouched there, intently studying his splay feet. The calloused soles were thornproof, rockproof. Each toe was agile as a man's fingers. He used them as deftly as his hands when there was some bit of carpentry to do. Walid seemed fascinated by his versatile feet, and quite unworried.

"That little ape," said Irma, "will outlive us all."

Conroy sighed. "I wasted my youth. I can't splice rope with my toes, and my feet need shoes. They did, even when I was worth a million."

He laughed, and something about his tone made her smile. She caught his hand and said, "Bill, you'll be a human being yet."

He disengaged his hand, and shook his head. "Don't. You'll offend the saint. Gestures like that aren't proper in the Moslem public."

"Am I being put in my place!"

"Don't worry. The he-man Moslem gets plenty of hen-pecking in private, but trying to reform him in public is *tabu*. Better that way, huh?"

The saint was sniffing the hot wind. Slowly he rose, and went to the rail. Irma said, "Maybe he's psychic."

"Maybe he smells some familiar spot.

The way you can scent the clove trees of Zanzibar, miles out at sea."

Hajji climbed to the rail. He was quick and nimble; and this first fast move he had made on the whole trip surprised Irma. "And I thought he had one foot in the grave!"

"Arab dignity, that's all." Conroy rose. "He must have a hunch."

Hajji started to climb the shrouds, apparently, to get a better view than the lookout could get. "Watch it!" Conroy warned. "Rigging's rotten."

THE saint seemed not to hear. Something far up the coast was holding his gaze. Nureddin was now on his feet, nervously fingering his silver-shafter dagger. Von Bergmann stood there, squinting upward, but without relaxing his grip on the leather case.

Strangely, it was *Hajji* who held their attention, rather than the barren hills and crags that danced under the sun. Conroy whispered to Irma. "Must have been raised in the desert. Better eyes than any of us. He's picking a landmark, maybe."

The creak of the jury rigging had long since become monotonous; but there was a sudden sound that reached out from the blended protests of every ancient rope. The saint dropped, clutched for support, and missed. Conroy yelled and leaped forward.

But *Hajji* did not hit the deck. He pitched out, just far enough to clear the rail.

"Man overboard!" the lookout cried. "There is no might and no majesty save in Allah. Our luck has left us."

"Put about, you blockheads!" Conroy shouted.

Hajji proved himself a desert Arab. He could not swim a stroke. Before a boat could be lowered, he would drown. And then there was this matter of sharks. The thought of Piazzi's fate made Irma cry out and catch Conroy's arms as he started to clear the rail.

"Don't—Bill—"

He tore loose, and cut the water, clean. *Hajji* was too well entangled in his robes to make a good job of threshing. He was not even making the usual frantic effort. Having been born to race camels across the desert, he considered this plunge into the Gulf of Aden as plainly a summons from Allah, who had blessed him for seventy odd years.

He went down a second time before Conroy reached him. Warm water closed over Conroy, who was thinking, "If I were a pearl diver!" He did not hear the cries from the *zaroug,* for his ears roared. He caught a skinny arm.

Hajji was not even struggling now. Shock and resignation to the will of Allah; this was his day.

When Conroy came up, he saw the fin of an approaching shark. The scent of uncured hides in the *zaroug* was what drew the slayers. The crew were having a hard time; weak, short-handed, little wind and not enough sail, they could not put about quickly.

"Lower the boat!" Conroy yelled, and did his best to win a hopeless race.

Speed was useless. It took agility, the timing of a swordsman or boxer, and then a sharp knife. Conroy had none of these, and he had a saint who would surely drown if abandoned for the moment needed to out-maneuver the shark.

Then Nureddin went over the side. The broad-bladed *jambia* gleamed between his teeth. The curved steel would split a man's chest open, or rip a leopard from end to end. And the young Arab had shed every garment but his turban. Sleek, smooth, he cut the water. He yelled, wasted a breath in cursing the shark, then slipped under.

The water went red. Foam masked Conroy and the saint. Then the little dugout reached the three. That last desperate attempt to dodge had filled *Hajji* with water.

"He has gone to the mercy of Allah," Nureddin observed.

"We'll work on him. So will the doctor. Hurry!"

Walid said, "*Wallah,* we'll eat the shark."

When they got *Hajji* on deck, it was

plain that Nureddin's attack had saved him. His leg had been rasped by the sandpaper hide as the fish swerved from the Arab's deadly stroke.

Then Dr. Ortega got to work. "Back please. Tell them, captain! They mustn't crowd."

But they would not go back. The little man with the black saddle bag was going to bring a dead man to life. They even ignored Nureddin, who had put on his *jellab* and was readjusting his saturated turban as he watched.

HAJJI had an amulet about his neck; a piece of carved carnelian suspended from a string. One face was flat, and engraved in bold, interlaced Arabic script. Though neither Conroy nor Dr. Ortega knew it, this was a seal which had been cut in Holy Mecca, in the bazaar where pilgrims buy mementoes of their long trip.

Ortega snapped the string, impatiently, and dropped the amulet-seal, for it might restrict circulation.

"Turn him over," he commanded. "You understand the method?"

"Watch and see—"

That *Hajji* was skin and bones was all the more apparent when they stripped off his white robe. "Careful," Ortega cautioned. "Not too much weight, you'll crush his lungs. Fracture a rib. Slowly, like breathing—no, no! One . . . let up . . . two . . . let up—so!"

"Allah! They make him breathe," Walid muttered, when he heard the strangled exhalation of air when Conroy pressed down. "The captain is a magician, too. Why doesn't he bring us water then?"

"Let me work; you're tired," Ortega said.

"Doctor, if you save this old chap, my hat's off to you," Conroy said, and picked up the carnelian seal. The sacred hand of Fathma, its five digits to remind true believers of the five holy persons of Islam, was cunningly carved.

All the men recognized it, and wondered if the token of piety would actually save *Hajji*. If it did, *wallah*, they'd all buy one, even if they had to walk to Mecca.

"He breathes! Verily, he breathes!"

The sodden white beard twitched; the eyelids fluttered; *Hajji* coughed, shuddered a little. Ortega screeched, "Kick them away, get them back, captain. Shove that case to me."

Once *Hajji* was breathing, and comfortably stretched out on a mat, the sailors forgot him. They closed in on Ortega, and wanted him to work some magic for them. They all had ailing relatives, and assumed that his cures would operate by remote control.

"Get them away. Tell them it is no miracle."

Conroy chuckled. "If they rush you this way in America, you'll like your new home, doctor."

"If they only would!" Ortega's face lengthened, and Conroy suspected that the little doctor had little more than his black bag and his skill; and perhaps some relatives in Spain, hiding from Franco.

Nureddin hovered near when Conroy went to *Hajji* and handed him the carnelian seal. "May it bring you luck again."

"The doctor didn't take it off because it is holy?"

"No. Because the string stopped circulation."

"Mashallah!" Hajji stroked his beard, considered the seal which his fingers nearly hid. "Captain, it is yours. I have nothing else."

Conroy was embarrassed. The actual value of the memento was not great, but it meant much to a Moslem. Refusing would offend the old man. Then he saw a way out. "Prolonged-of-Life, give it to Nureddin. He killed the shark that would have eaten you and me with you. I do not deserve it."

NUREDDIN'S eyes were strange, puzzling for a moment; unnaturally bright. But his face was expressionless. *Hajji* considered, gravely, for a moment,

and then said, "What Nureddin did was the charity of one true believer to another. Though what merit is there in saving a life? Allah willed it."

"Praised be his name, thou art right, O *Hajji!*" Nureddin cut in.

This was too smooth, though Conroy did not know why he felt so. *Hajji* went on, "Captain, I see that Allah loves you. Therefore I give you this holy token. In the end, you will be wise. You may make the profession of faith, and I will meet you in Paradise."

The old man's voice was solemn. It made Conroy choke for a moment. Irma, not understanding a word, stood within arm's reach; wide-eyed, slightly leaning forward. "Take it, Bill," she whispered.

Conroy accepted. He felt somewhat as if he had collected a legacy and received a blessing of a kinsman. Then *Hajji* said, "Give me your hand, let me look again at the shore."

Later, the old man said, "I was wrong. My eyes are not what they once were. That is not the landmark. But there is a village."

"A village, by Allah!" someone seconded.

Nureddin, shading his eyes, echoed the affirmation. Then he said, "O Captain, let me go ashore and speak to the chief. I will tell him of the holy man we have aboard, and how you have the blessing of Allah."

"You know this district?"

"Allah will open the way," he evaded. "Lo, there is greenness! There is water, *inshallah*. They will sell or give, or they will rob us."

"They'll give!"

Conroy's jaw clamped down. "I'll depend on you, Nureddin."

And later, anchored well off shore, he watched the young Arab paddling the dugout toward the wretched cluster of brush huts and unwhitewashed mud houses that blended with the baked brown of the coast. If there was any verdure, only Nureddin could see it.

"The usual ration, Walid," Conroy commanded. "No one drinks fully until we know how much we can get. Find out how far it is to Aden."

"Aden," Irma sighed. "And a boat home! Bill, you idiot, I am glad you were too proud to take third class on the *Empératrice*, but you'll not be that way again!"

"Not if you'll go third class," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

CORPSES AFLOAT

WHEN Nureddin came back from the sorry village, Conroy knew the answer, long before the young Arab hailed the *zaroug*. The setting sun reddened his face, accented the hard angles into which his smooth face had set. His shoulders slumped; there was no more snap to his paddling.

Conroy helped him aboard. "What luck?"

"God does what he will do. May he curse those sons of pigs, may he curse their grandfathers." Nureddin paused for breath. "And Allah curse any man who does not curse the ancestors of those cut-off ones ashore."

"That," said Conroy, "is better cursing than I've ever managed. Walid, give Nureddin his ration."

"They did not deny me a drink, captain," the Arab protested. "And it may be that they would respect the holy pilgrim."

Hajji bowed. "It may be so."

"Go in the morning then."

"No. Tonight. You can row, and a moon will guide us back. It is not well for these to thirst when I might find water."

"You're still shaky, *Hajji*."

"Allah preserved, and he will strengthen me."

It was nearly dark when Conroy shoved off. *Hajji's* turban was a white blob in the gloom. Ahead, foam outlined the reefs; but there was a passage where a dugout could go.

Conroy however was put to the limit, handling the tricky little craft. A Somali

sailor could have done better, but it seemed his task to accompany the goodwill envoy. Just for luck, he had the revolver thrust in his waistband.

"To the left, *ya nakhoda,*" *Hajji* cried.

Conroy ploughed deep. For a moment, water broke over the gunwales. The old Arab began bailing. Nureddin could have paddled more effectively, but the stout fellow deserved a rest. Finally, when the dugout was beached, *Hajji* said, "Now we walk by the right. I smell smoke. They are cooking meat."

"Meat." Conroy licked his salt dried lips, and cursed fish.

Half way to the village, *Hajji* halted. "With all respect to your presence, these people do not love infidels. Let me go on now, it will be better."

"Take this gun."

"I am an old man. They honor my beard, or laugh at my weapon."

He went on, empty handed. Conroy paced restlessly as he watched the treacherous shadows, the white surf, the glint of sand as they alternately swallowed up the old man's robe and turban, then revealed him; slow, plodding as if once more marching to Holy Mecca.

Conroy was apprehensive. The Hadhramaut coast loves no man. He kicked a piece of driftwood, and slowly followed *Hajji.* Prudence be damned. Yet he hesitated about ignoring the Arab's advice.

Something soft, like a poorly inflated football, made him start. It seemed as if something dead had touched his foot. Then he stooped. It was a goatskin water bag, but inflated with air. Though clear of the tide, it still was wet.

"Damn funny. They use blownup hides for water wings," he muttered. "But who'd leave good leather lying around? Not here on starvation coast."

He picked it up, hefted it. This was a sign that he could not interpret; it worried him.

Then he stretched his legs, and ran after *Hajji.* He was about to shout, when he heard a cry. There was *Hajji,* and there also was another turbaned man, lunging from behind a rock. He had a knife, and the two figures blurred together for an instant.

Conroy yelled, but dared not fire. One of the men was down. He recovered; the other whirled. Others came bounding from the village. Conroy fired as the knife descended, and the blow fell wild. Then he closed in, and heard Nureddin snarl, "O thou dog, thou son of my grandfather's enemy—"

THE pistol smacked down, and Nureddin collapsed. Conroy now understood the goatskin. The young Arab had come back without water in order to trick *Hajji* ashore; he had brought a goatskin, inflated it, and swum ashore, after the dugout, to ambush his enemy.

"Did he get you?" Conroy pulled *Hajji* upright.

"Somewhat; it is nothing," the old Arab groaned, and clutched his side. The three who came on the run were now close. Conroy shouted, "Back!" He fired. They howled. One dropped, the others fled.

Hajji said, "Nureddin read the device on the seal. I had hoped that he had not seen. Now you know why I would not offer it to him. I can walk; I am well."

Conroy was sick with wrath. He turned on the half-conscious Nureddin, then let the pistol drop to his side. "He is your man, *Hajji!*" he said, and offered him the weapon.

"He risked his life for me," said the saint, "before he knew that his grandfather hated mine. I am too old for vengeance. Let him stay here with these people who helped him trap me. He is among friends."

"Why—you knew this was no place for you?"

Hajji did not answer. He walked deliberately toward the boat.

Conroy jerked Nureddin to his feet and booted him along, a kick helping each wobbly pace. "You lousy rat, I'll not kill you. I'll take you to Aden for

the British to try. You penny ante hero, they'll hang you, and you won't die like a man from any bullet!"

"Allah does what he will do," Nureddin muttered, groggy. "My face would be black if I had not tried."

Conroy made him paddle back. The pistol from the rear did that nicely. *Hajji* insisted, "It is well with me, *ya nakhoda.*"

The villagers were not pursuing, as far as Conroy could see. But he had killed one of them, and now there was a blood feud. The food and water had to last to Aden.

Once alongside the *zaroug, Hajji* was pulled over the side, then Nureddin, covered by the revolver. "Tie him!" Conroy commanded.

The Somalis obeyed. When they saw the *Hajji's* wounds, they understood. A feud, after all, was a feud; but when the captain wanted a man bound, there was nothing to be said. It was not until Dr. Ortega set to work on *Hajji* that the sailors began to get the point.

"How much water did you bring, captain?"

"None. You heard the shooting, didn't you?"

"You killed a villager?"

"One of Nureddin's friends." He saw them scowl, mutter, finger their long Somali knives. "But he is on my head. The British governor in Aden will demand him of me, and he is not yours to kill."

"He slew a holy man," Walid muttered. "We will all die."

"Shut up, you fool! He did that ashore. The ship's luck is not hurt."

That eased them a little, but Conroy knew that getting Nureddin alive to Aden would be a problem. He was not even sure why he wanted the young Arab delivered alive. He said to Irma, "For a second I nearly finished him. Then I remembered that he acted according to his code."

DR. ORTEGA looked up from his patient. A bit of rag floated in a saucer of fish oil; smoky yellow flame lighted *Hajji.* "The old man wants to see you, captain."

If the saint felt any pain, his face did not show it; but he was parchment pale now, and his eyes burned. *"Ya nakhoda,"* he said, when Conroy squatted beside him, "before I go, tell me what you will do with Nureddin."

Conroy did not know what to say, for a moment. Finally he answered, "You are a British subject. I will give him to the British. Until then, he is on my head, and I do not judge him. You gave him his life; who am I to take it from him?"

Hajji smiled a little, and coughed some blood. It clotted his beard. He said, "You have found the way of wisdom. *Zra kull kaijib lu llâ hassa—"*

He choked. Conroy said, "I almost know now how Allah sends each stalk its reaper, *Hajji.*"

The old man crumpled against Dr. Ortega's arm. "Go away, captain. If I can convince him he'll live, there is a chance. He thinks this is the hand of fate, that this was his due. Get these men away, too."

Conroy cleared that corner of the deck. For a long time, he sat watching Ortega squatting beside the wounded saint. Irma finally asked, "I wonder whether I couldn't help the doctor?"

Conroy shook his head. "It isn't what's in the black bag that'll help *Hajji.* It's Ortega's will against Moslem fatalism. *Hajji's* old, but tough as a cordovan boot."

A long silence. At last Conroy rose and sighed. "Whether he lives or doesn't, I've got an extra job, now. Getting Nureddin to Aden, alive. If these fellows get the idea that Nureddin knifed their luck, there's no telling what'll happen."

"You can't protect Nureddin against the whole crew!" The implication horrified Irma. "Bill, don't be silly. You didn't protect Sverdloff."

"That was different. Legally, I could have shot Sverdloff for stealing water. To maintain discipline. To save all, not just one."

She looked at him. He nodded. His smile

was bleak and weary when he said, "This is a lot bigger than my old job, back home. The pay isn't impressive, but it's bigger than your job, darling."

He went down into the stifling hold where Nureddin was bound, and said to him, "Pray, O man! If *Hajji* dies, the luck of this ship is dead."

Nureddin smiled. "If the Somalis do not kill me, the British will hang me, and there is no help for it. I did what I had to do."

IN THE days that followed, Conroy piloted a nightmare. Brown corpses navigated. Irma sat in one place, hours at a time, staring. Von Bergmann squatted there, gripping his briefcase, muttering, glaring at the almost empty cask that Conroy guarded with his last two cartridges.

Hajji still lived, but Dr. Ortega was in little better shape than his patient.

"Don't nod, captain," Von Bergmann thickly muttered. "These fellows are going crazy."

Von Bergmann would stand by with the clubbed Mauser when Conroy rationed the water. Ortega said, "I overcharged you, Herr von Bergmann."

The big German managed a grim smile.

It was close to sunset when the lookout croaked, "Aden! See! Aden!"

Far off, a volcanic crag rose black above the dun hills. The great rock of Perim swooped up from the harbor; the fortified island that guarded the Red Sea for Great Britain.

Bit by bit, they could distinguish the houses that clung to the sun-blasted slope. Aden, barren corner of Hell, was the sweetest sight these people could remember. Aden, where they had to distill drinking water from the sea, cage it in cisterns when there was an annual rain; Aden, the station that drove officials mad.

"She's beautiful!" Conroy said to Irma.

The going was slow. Tack after tack, getting nowhere; the oily sea stretched on and on. Or so it seemed. And when the sun sank behind Africa's edge, the crippled *zaroug* was guided by the lighthouse whose white finger reached from Perim. Nice, for a navigator; but the *zaroug* dragged keel on one of the countless reefs.

No one cared. She settled, sluggish, came to rest. The crew did not curse. They were too exhausted. Conroy said, "I'll take you ashore, a few at a time. I can row. It's not far."

"Do thou go first, captain," monkey-faced Walid said; he was still bright-eyed, and the least stricken.

Hajji seemed to have borrowed vitality from Ortega; enough to keep him muttering and trying to recite *suras* from the Koran. But as Conroy watched the sailors lower the old man into the dugout, he was not certain whether the hospital in Aden could make any difference. Whatever it was that kept *Hajji* alive might at any moment become too weary to carry on.

"Ration out all the water to those who have to wait," Conroy ordered. He gestured to Irma. "Room for you. And one more passenger."

Von Bergmann and Ortega had equal rights to that precious chance. The German said, "Doctor, your place is with your patient."

"It makes little difference." Ortega sadly shook his head.

"Go anyway. I am staying. To guard the prisoner. With that extra drink, it iss nothing."

His eyes were red. He was weaving on his feet, but he took the revolver and his briefcase, and squatted near the hatchway. The Somalis gathered in a cluster.

"I don't think they'll try to hurt Nureddin," Conroy said. "If they get too tough, don't poke your chin out."

Von Bergmann grunted. "They could not rush me. At the *Schützenverein*, I was expert also with the revolver. But hurry back, captain."

As they shoved off, Conroy called, "Keep a torch going, so I can find my way back." Then, to Irma: "If *Hajji's* not a saint, I'm a prosperous citizen. He's done something to von Bergmann."

CHAPTER IX

SHOES ARE BETTER

WHEN the dugout reached the beach, a sentry challenged Conroy's party. Distress or no, one simply couldn't let people land at will in Aden.

It was *Hajji's* fight against death that cleared the way.

It took several hours to cut red tape. Conroy wheedled and browbeat himself into the presence of the governor general. He was leathery, with drooping mustaches, bushy brows, and armor-piercing eyes. He was annoyed, but he tried not to show it. Likewise, he was skeptical, until Conroy thrust the log of the *zaroug* across the desk.

That began to make an impression. Irma's passports helped. Finally, the governor conceded that they might not be spies. "Extraordinary! Survivors of the *Impératrice*. My word, Mr. Conroy!"

He rang for whiskey and soda. There was ice. Bubbles raced up, golden. Conroy shook his head. "I have shipmates and passengers aboard. And three, waiting outside. A wounded man who's got to get medical attention at once. A Moslem saint. A prince or something. If he dies for lack of hospital care—"

"Oh, I say! Here, here, bring them in at once!"

An orderly brought Irma to meet his excellency. Ortega stayed with his patient. He had no time for courtesies. The governor telephoned to the hospital, and then sent another orderly to make arrangements at a hotel. Conroy, however, declined both refreshments and quarters.

"I have a prisoner aboard. And one passenger. No telling what may happen while I'm gone." He eyed the governor. "Anyway, I can't take an advantage over my crew, coming ashore first."

"Not even a drink, Mr. Conroy?"

He watched the bubbles twining up in small, gleaming pearls, saw them swerve past the chunks of ice. He could smell the smoky old Scotch.

"Thank you, sir. Not even a drink."

The governor could not understand that. Then Conroy realized that Irma had been holding her breath; she still leaned forward, watching him. He knew that he did not have to explain to her.

"A prisoner and a passenger," Conroy reported. "And my crew."

"Very well, I'll send a launch for Mr. von Bergmann," his excellency conceded. "If you'll guide us. The prisoner—you see, I can't have him taken in charge at this hour. I'm sure he's quite safe in the hold. Haw—the sharks, you know."

"Hurry back, Bill," Irma urged, before she followed the orderly.

Then Conroy went down to the water front to board a revenue cutter.

Approaching the reef was ticklish work, but it was finally done. The revenue men followed Conroy; he was captain of that sodden hulk.

A sailor said, *"Ya nakhoda,* look! By Allah, we did not do this!"

Von Bergmann was huddled near the hatch. He still clutched the revolver. Some of his head was missing. Near him was the handle of a briefcase; it had been sliced with a sharp knife. The case was gone.

"Mutiny, by Jove!"

"No. Suicide," Conroy said. "Walid's missing. The poor devil nodded, and the Somali cut the handle and went over the side with the loot."

"Ah . . . smuggled securities, currency, you mean?"

Conroy nodded. "That's my best guess. His only hope. Broke, he'd be deported. And you know what he'd get back home from his fellow Nazis."

"Oh, quite."

They replaced their caps, then eyed Conroy. "Er . . . we might be going, captain. Take this poor chap ashore. And you're well done in, too."

Conroy shook his head. "Not unless you can take these Somalis."

"Oh, I say. We can't. It's irregular. We're not immigration officials."

"I'm sticking with this tub. She won't break up. Please call in the morning. With

proper authority. And leave us some water."

LATER, it occurred to him to give Nureddin a drink. He should not have forgotten him. But everything was a whirl. He was too relieved to want to stir. He wanted to think. About von Bergmann. About everything. Particularly about *Hajji*, who could not possibly survive. He almost had the answer, finally, and luxuries ashore would distract him.

The Arab drank, and curiously regarded Conroy. "Doubtless they will hang me." He laughed. "But they won't hang Walid. They won't even put him in jail."

"They will when he starts spending foreign cash."

"Look over there," Nureddin said, twisting his head.

In the far corner of the hold were scraps of leather; fine, heavy leather as from von Bergmann's briefcase. A big wad of U.S. currency, negotiable bonds. British banknotes and securities lay on the heap of rawhides.

Conroy squatted there, blinking. Then he noted the shape of the leather parings. Walid had stolen the briefcase, discarded the foolish paper, and made sandals of the leather. Thus shod to dazzle friends ashore, he had gone over the side.

"Yes, captain. Walid made shoes, and I swore not to tell till he was gone. And the big infidel killed himself. There was no more guard, but the sailors hated me. The fear of your wrath saved me from them."

Conroy picked up the paper; forty or fifty thousand dollars' worth, a negotiable wad that passed on delivery. Abstractedly, he stuffed it into his shirt. He was thinking, "This was von Bergmann's life. Walid preferred sandals."

He laughed. He knew now what *Hajji* meant. He knew everything in his dizziness; he understood his own past and his future. Nureddin said, "Are they valuable, captain?"

"Huh! They're trash. The man was crazy." He stared at the unblinking Arab who had done his duty as he saw it.

"Nureddin, you are a stout swimmer. I am very tired, and I will not hear if you go overboard. To find a boat for Africa, before dawn. Whether *Hajji* lives or dies, you have your chance."

He loosened the knots. "I will say that you broke from your bonds. And your knife will be stuck in the cabin door. Walk softly, don't wake me."

He went up to the poop. He may not have slept, but he did not hear what followed. When he awoke, it was dawn, and the sailors were praying. Near him, thrust into the deck, was a silver hafted dagger, the weapon of an Arab gentleman.

The Somalis looked stupid, and swore that they had heard nothing. Doubtless Satan had taken Nureddin away. They grinned and chattered in their own language, nodding wisely; the captain had strange ways, pretending he had not released the slayer.

Then the launch came, with officials of all sorts. Disposing of the *zaroug*, her cargo, and her crew was a problem to make them frown

"By Allah, O captain," the sailors said, "if ever you sail this sea, let us go with you. Our heads are under your feet."

Later, he met Irma in the lobby of the hotel. Dr. Ortega was with her. The little Spaniard's eyes gleamed, and he forgot all his courtesy. Before Irma could speak, he lunged at Conroy, caught him with both arms, kissed him on both cheeks.

"He'll live! Those good doctors ashore, they did it!"

He ended in a sputter of Spanish. Conroy stood there, blinking and repeating, "He'll live. Uhuh. He'll live."

Irma got her chance. "Bill, I was worried silly. They didn't tell me about your crazy idea of staying on the boat."

"This funny Doctor Ortega," Conroy said, "thinks the hospital saved *Hajji*. Take us to your room, doctor. Right away. My hunch was right."

Presently, he was telling them what had happened to von Bergmann. He concluded, "Naturally that forty-fifty thous-

and in loot wasn't mentioned in my report, when I saw the governor, this morning. I don't like Nazi consuls, and there's no sense letting their government nail that money. Whether von Bergmann stole it or merely smuggled his own property out of the country, it'll be confiscated."

"So you're doing the confiscating?" She squeezed his arm. "Oh, Bill! You deserve a fresh start. *Hajji* was right. It doesn't make sense."

CONROY shook his head. He produced the securities and laid the sheaf on the table. "This is Doctor Ortega's fee. All I'm keeping is Nureddin's dagger."

The Spaniard's eyes twinkled. He thought that this was a good joke. "Ah! You are afraid I'll tell on you. So you bribe me, no? Very good, I am content with only a third of it. Do not worry, I shall not betray you."

"You don't understand," Conroy said. "I want none of it. I'm getting rid of it. You left Spain in a hurry, you are entitled to it, possibly because it is from Nazi-land. Or for saving *Hajji*. Everyone aboard that floating madhouse got his papers fixed to date. She has—I have—

"A Somali sailor threw this stuff away, and kept the case to make shoes. He was right. I worshiped that stuff as von Bergmann did, and this once, I've got to mock it. For the good of my soul—not a word, doctor, get it out of my sight. I have to tell Irma a few things."

Ortega sighed, shrugged, pocketed the securities. "And now I must leave my own room. Very well, but I shall return soon."

When he stepped into the hall, Irma said, "Bill, I know you're crazy. Broke, in Aden, then doing that." She came closer, looked up, eyes all agleam. "But I love it. And you've quit loving money. You'll never kill yourself trying to cage it."

"No. I won't. Not after seeing Allah send a reaper.

"But I'm not broke. I have a third class fare, which I had in Djibouti. I'm entitled to a few dollars salvage, if any of the *zaroug's* cargo can be salvaged. But I'll be in New York before the officials are through locating four widows of a British subject and settling Assad's estate. Getting a job will be easy. A floor trader always can get a job."

"And keep it, if he remembers that a pair of shoes are better."

"Bill," she said, "you insist on going third class?"

"A *zaroug* was good enough for *Hajji*."

"Then I'm going third class."

"You mean, *we* are." She nodded, and couldn't answer, for he was kissing her. But finally she managed to say, "Dr. Ortega, don't wear out that hall carpet. Come in and wish us luck."

Conroy released her. "Take us to your patient, doctor. We want *Hajji's* blessing. In a dangerous enterprise."

THE END

Passage Home

Clark was in close, jabbing, throwing stomach punches. But it was an uppercut to the chin that finally knocked the captain out

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "Lost Harbors," "Death Due North," etc.

Welcome to beautiful Faa-Maa on Perth Island. A genuine beach-comber, a lovely halfcaste girl, and a good fight for your money. In short, a delightful place—for a stopover

THIS wasn't the boat Clark Dodson would choose to go home on. But who knew when another one would come along? The long view necessarily prevailed.

"Tie up," he said to his Tongan skiffman, "while I dicker for a passage."

The untidy deck to which Clark ascended had hatches open. Winches were singing, and slingsful of copra bags were swinging across the starboard rail. A mate in dungarees was directing, and Clark asked him, "Skipper aboard?"

The mate thumbed toward an office-cabin aft.

Clark found the skipper to be Yankee, like himself. Scanlon was his name. A rawboned giant in soiled white pants, with an open undershirt exposing his red, hairy chest. Skipper Scanlon was perspiring over manifests when Clark confronted him.

"Could I book a passage to San Francisco?"

"Might." Scanlon looked the tall, brown customer up and down, coldly. "Might. Depends on what ye've got a mind to pay."

"Whatever's right and fair, skipper."

"Ah!" The skipper brightened slightly.

"We got just one supernumerary cabin, young man. Come along and have a look at it."

He led Clark up a dingy aisle amidship, and to an unoccupied cabin there. The cabin was small, but adequate. Northbound, Clark reflected, its starboard ports would let in the trades.

He looked at Scanlon.

"How much, skipper?"

"Forty pounds," said Scanlon. His eyes contracted shrewdly. They were, Clark thought, the eyes of a man constantly on the make.

"A bit steep," Clark protested. Twenty should be enough, on a tub like this.

"If you feel that way," Scanlon retorted, "you better stop ashore for the next boat." He knew there wouldn't be another boat here for six weeks.

"I'll take it." Clark produced a fat wallet and counted out eight five-pound notes.

The wallet's fatness wasn't missed by Scanlon. He took the forty pounds and gave a receipt. "Fetch aboard your luggage, young man. We're weighing anchor with the tide."

When his luggage had been transferred from skiff to cabin, Clark stood on deck to watch the last lighterload of copra swung into the holds.

The sun was setting beyond palms ashore. Clark looked off at a beach of shell, and at the bank of bush beyond, without sentiment or regret.

The romantic illusions he'd brought here, three years ago, were rather musty now. In the islands he'd found nothing but heat and hard work. For three drab, sweaty years he'd tried everything from counting bananas to tending counters—for what? For three hundred pounds of savings and a hot hunger to get home with it.

But he wouldn't get home with quite all of it, Clark admitted ruefully. Because forty of the three hundred had already gone for his passage. A sharp trader, Scanlon, to shake him down like that!

SCANLON, in his office-cabin, tucked the forty pounds in his billfold, making no note of it on the ship's books.

Here was income which never need be reported to the owners. Since Scanlon acted as his own purser, such rake-offs were easily covered up.

A hitch came when, just before anchor was weighed, the bos'n brought mail from ashore. Scanlon saw that one of the letters had been posted at Suva by a fellow skipper of this same trading fleet. It was addressed to Scanlon here at Rongatabu.

"Crabtree is at Apia," the missive informed purely by way of gossip. "You can lay to it he'll board you there, Scanlon, and start sleuthing through your accounts."

Crabtree! Scanlon's resentment flared. Crabtree was the fleet's watchdog. Officially called the Pacific area traffic agent, he was also a traveling auditor of sorts. You never could tell when he'd pop aboard and take a peep at your revenue.

Crabtree, at Apia, would find a passenger on this ship. It'd be just like him to ask the passenger how much he'd paid for passage. Old snooper! Scanlon foresaw that he must, after all, book the forty pounds.

This, for Skipper Scanlon of the *Capricorn,* was like having an eye tooth pulled. With the money already pouched, he felt as if he were being robbed of it. No way out, though. He reached with sullen reluctance for the book to make a proper entry.

Then he heard the mate calling him. The tide was running out and it was time to up anchor. So Scanlon ascended to the bridge. He kept his post there until the ship was past the reef and pointing toward Perth Island.

It was a forty-hour run to Faa-Maa Cove, on Perth Island. On the evening before arrival there, Scanlon had still failed to place a paid passage on record. The forty pounds was still in his pocket. No reason it shouldn't stay there—except for the hazard of Crabtree at Apia.

Apia would be the next way-point after Perth Island.

Six rum punches imbibed in his cabin that night inspired Scanlon with a solution. Near midnight, he slipped along a dim passage to Clark Dodson's cabin. That extremely healthy young man should be asleep, now.

The skipper let himself in with a pass key. The cabin was dark. Deep breathing of a sleeper reassured him. Scanlon, snapping on a flash, saw the inmate's whites draped over a stool there. He went shiftily through them for Dodson's wallet.

He found a receipt for paid passage, crunched it into a ball and thumped it through an open porthole. Also his delving fingers discovered the reason for the wallet's fatness. Money was there. Scanlon brought forth a roll of British notes.

He restored an empty wallet to a looted pocket and withdrew. Slipping aft to his own quarters, the skipper found himself richer by two hundred and sixty pounds.

With the passage money, it made three hundred.

THE reefs of Perth Island were sighted by daybreak. The land drew near, a long high land robed in dark green bush. The settlemen of Faa-Maa made a lazy line of sheetiron and thatched roofs along the beach.

At breakfast, and just after anchorage in the lagoon, a shock hit Clark Dodson. Scanlon said to him blandly, "Well, we'll miss you, young man." Four of them were seated there: the skipper, the mate, the engineer and the passenger.

"Miss me? What do you mean, skipper?"

"This is Faa-Maa," said Scanlon. "Your port."

Something in his eyes kept Clark from laughing. "My port? Why would I want to get off here, skipper?"

"I can't say, young man. All I know is you bought a passage here from Rongatabu. Your luggage is packed, I take it?" Scanlon turned to the mate. "Mr. Orme, have a boat ready to take Mr. Dodson ashore."

It wasn't a joke, Clark knew. His hand went to his wallet, and its flatness made him lose color. He looked. The receipt and the money were gone.

Clark leashed his fury. He kept his hands off Scanlon's throat. This was Scanlon's deck. And there was no proof. There sat a mate and an engineer, confused but bound by duty to support Scanlon.

"You've robbed me, skipper!" Clark blurted. He did not raise his voice, although his face was flaming.

"Careful, young man," Scanlon warned. He stood up sternly. "I'll not be insulted on my own ship." To his officers he said: "He paid me two pounds at Rongatabu for passage to Perth Island. It's on the books. See that he's put ashore, Mr. Orme."

Scanlon stalked from the saloon.

He was locked in his cabin when Clark went to bang desperately on the door there. There was no response. No recourse. Clark heard davits whine as a boat was lowered. The mate's voice shouted, "You can take the mail pouch ashore, too, bos'n."

Clark went to the rail. He stood furiously by and saw his baggage dropped into the boat.

"You're beaching me, whether I like it or not?"

The mate shrugged. "Sorry. Skipper's orders." The man had no choice, Clark admitted.

He got into the boat with the bos'n and four seamen. The boat was oared to the shore. Clark Dodson's bags were set out on the beach there. The bos'n took a mail pouch up to the sheetiron store which evidently was also the island post office.

Clark picked up his bags and followed. Inside he found a dozen Polynesian customers at a counter heaped with calico and hardware. A mild and sallow Scotchman was serving them. At the far end a white woman, presumably the Scotch-

man's wife, was on duty at a wicket window.

Clark pushed forward to the Scotchman, voicing bitterly his complaints against Scanlon. "Any police around here?" he demanded.

"No police here, lad," the trader said. "There's a deputy commissioner and staff over on Luau, about eighty miles to leeward. They make an inspection here twice a year."

"Twice a year! You mean I'm stranded here, broke, for six months before I can even appeal?"

The Scot was sympathetic, but could do nothing. "You might get some natives," he suggested, "to take you over to Luau in a *poupou*."

"How often do freighters come here?"

"Once a month, lad."

Clark withdrew morosely to a window. From it he could see the lagoon, and Scanlon's ship out there. Native craft loaded with copra had surrounded the ship now, and small lot cargo was being taken aboard.

A CLEAR, engaging voice at the post office wicket made Clark turn that way. A young girl was asking there, "Are you sure, please?"

Beyond the wicket, the storekeeper's wife was sorting mail just arrived on the *Capricorn*. "It didn't come this month, Carrie," she said.

When the girl turned, Clark at first thought she was British. She was slim and pretty and about nineteen, he judged. Then by her olive skin with a faint rose tint at the cheekbones, he decided she was a halfcaste. Braided black hair was coiled on her head with a ginger flower fixed there, and a waistless dress of figured calico covered her from throat to sandals.

She passed Clark with a shyly curious smile, and went out.

In a little while Clark went out himself, with his bags, and sat down on the sand. Three years of hard work in the Tongas—and here he was penniless on the beach at Faa-Maa. No use coaxing some native to take him over to Luau. Scanlon's ship would be gone by sundown. Nor could Clark establish treachery by anything more than his word.

Nothing to do but comb the beach here till the next ship, and on it work his passage to America.

Gazing inland, Clark could see only a steep, forbidding mountain, rank with tropic bush. Then he looked each way along the beach, and to his left he saw one white man. A beach tramp, evidently, for the man was shaggy and shabby. He lay sprawled in the shade of a banyan and seemed to be dozing there.

"That makes two of us." Clark tried gamely to manage a grin as he picked up his bags and strolled that way.

He came to the vagabond under the banyan. "Move over, pal," Clark greeted wryly. "I feel that way too."

The man sat up, stretched his arms, yawned. He was lean, ragged, and appeared not to have shaved in years. His voice, however, came with the accent of a Britisher with background.

"Palmerston's the name. Archie Palmerston. Don't happen to have a cigaret, do you?"

Clark gave him one, then sat down on a root of the banyan.

"How long have you been around here, Palmerston?"

"Twenty years, or thereabouts," the man said.

"How," Clark asked, "does one get away?"

The man stared from deep, dissolute eyes. "Can't really say. I never tried it, you know."

Archie Palmerston finished his cigaret, then dropped to his back, closed his eyes and again went peacefully asleep.

Clark continued to sit by, watching the ship out there. Hours dragged, until finally the ship drew anchor. Her petty trading here concluded, the *Capricorn* nosed out through the reef to sea.

"Look here, Archie," Clark said when his companion again sat up. "I've just been gypped out of three hundred pounds

by the skipper of that ship. He's—"

"He's been dipping into my pie, too," said Archie. "Some day I'll get even with that blighter; just wait and see."

"You mean Scanlon of the *Capricorn?*"

"Aye. Makes three times, now, he's dipped into my pie. Five quid each whack."

"What pie?"

"I'm a remittance man," explained Archie Palmerston.

Clark had often heard of remittance men, and thought of them as a breed of wanderers perhaps one notch above beachcombers. Younger sons, generally, who receive some small remittance monthly in return for keeping out of the way.

"Five quid a month I've been drawing," Archie confided, "from solicitors in London. Keeps me in rum and cigarets, and it keeps Carrie in calico."

"Who's Carrie?"

"My daughter." And Clark instantly recalled the halfcaste girl he'd seen at the post office wicket.

HIS inquiry drew out that Archie, on landing here twenty years ago, had married a native girl and was now a widower. "Carrie," Archie said, "called for the mail today and then stopped by to tell me the remittance didn't show up."

"It comes by check?"

"It used to. But it's a job to cash checks here, so I told the solicitors just to put a five-quid note in an envelope each month. Only missed getting it three times in twenty years."

"Which three times?"

"The three times that mail happened to come in on the *Capricorn.*"

Clark's interest quickened. Here might be a count against Scanlon far more serious than his own. If Scanlon had been purloining cash from a British mail pouch, he'd have the whole empire about his ears.

"You can't prove it, though," Archie mourned. "But it looks deuced like he found out there's a remittance man here. Sea captains always hear about those things. So it looks like he dipped into the bag every time he fetched mail here, and grabbed off my five quid."

"You know Scanlon?"

"Never saw him, 'cept from a distance."

"I'd like," Clark announced with feeling, "to take a punch at that crook."

"Nothing to stop you," Archie said, "if you feel up to a hike over the mountain."

"What do you mean? Scanlon just put to sea."

"He makes one more cove on Perth Island." Archie thumbed toward the island's high, bushy backbone. Then, with his finger, he drew a sketch in the sand.

This island, Clark learned, was about forty miles long and eight wide. Its two principal trading coves were Faa-Maa and Faa-Laa, on opposite coasts, forty miles apart by water but only eight miles by land. Scanlon would round the island tonight, and tomorrow be anchored at Faa-Laa.

Clark concentrated. An eight-mile tramp over the mountain would intercept Scanlon. But what could he gain by it? He would still be on Scanlon's deck, with his own unsupported word weighed against a skipper's.

"It's a steep trail, up and down," Archie warned. "You'd need to fight thorn and rock all the way."

A tropic squall had been rolling across the reef. As suddenly as its thunder clapped, an idea came to Dodson.

The brief shower sent them scurrying to a shelter long ago preempted by Palmerston. This was the shambles of an old and bush-invaded plantation. There was a house of bamboo walls and a sagging thatched roof, with an interior divided into compartments by tapa cloth hangings.

When they arrived Caroline Palmerston had a supper of breadfruit and baked bonito ready. "Meet Mr. Dodson, Carrie," said Archie. "He's been slickered by Scanlon, same as we have."

The girl smiled. "Ours is yours, please," she said.

Engrossed with a plan churning in his head, Clark only half appreciated the miracle she had accomplished in making a home here for Palmerston.

It didn't occur to him that these grass mats had been woven by her own hands. Or that she had beaten out this tapa cloth from the bark of trees, and had polished these shells for dinner plates.

He did observe, though, that the place was bright and clean, with flowers festooned everywhere. And that Caroline's lips matched the gingerbloom in her hair.

But most of the early evening Clark concentrated on Scanlon.

"Listen, Archie," he suggested after supper, "you're about my build. Maybe these'll fit you." He took from one of his bags a suit of fresh whites, with shoes and helmet to match.

"You don't have to pay for your board," Archie protested.

"I don't mean that." Clark now produced a passport. He removed a photograph from it and gave it to his host. Then from the bag he brought forth a razor. "Go shave, Archie, and dress up. I want you to hike over the mountain, and board the *Capricorn* at Faa-Laa."

THE natives at Faa-Laa had so many boat-loads of copra ready that Scanlon, when he dropped his hook there, knew that he'd be a full two days loading. That suited him quite well. The more cargo, the more profit. He remembered that Crabtree would board him at Apia. Well, the old snooper wouldn't be able to beef about a skimpy cargo this cruise.

The ship had no more than anchored when Scanlon saw a white man being oared out from the main jetty. The oncomer had no baggage, and so probably wasn't looking for passage. He wore neat whites and a helmet, was cleanly shaven and carried a cane.

The man came aboard, inquiring briskly, "Anybody in your crew named Henry K. Clark, skipper?"

"No one by that name here," said Scanlon.

"This chap has a pack of aliases. He's wanted at Suva for murder."

The skipper's eyes flickered. "You're a police officer?"

"Righto," said Archie Palmerston. "But dash it all, I've chased this fellow halfway across the South Seas."

It was always well to stand in with the police, so Scanlon suggested drinks in his cabin.

"Chap's a Yank," Archie chattered there, careful to follow coaching by Clark Dodson, "and likely to be heading home any time. So I always take a peep at ships bound for America."

"Murder, did you say?"

"Aye, skipper. He was a clerk, once, at a sugar refinery at Suva. Had his fingers in the till when the super caught him cold. So he croaked the super and stowed away for the Tongas. Lost him there." Archie's smile was grim. "But we police never quit a trail, you know."

"Hope you lay a hand on him," Scanlon murmured. His interest was only mild until Archie announced: "There's a reward posted by the sugar people. A thousand guineas, dead or alive."

"A thousand guineas!" Scanlon echoed. "This man has a pack of aliases, did you say?"

"Aye, skipper." Archie drew out a memo as if to refresh his memory. "The ones he's been using lately are Harry K. Clark, Alf Clarkson, Alf Dodds, and Clark Dodson. And by the way, here's a mug of the blighter. Just in case you run across him some time." Archie exposed Clark Dodson's passport photograph.

An intense excitement possessed Scanlon. He was on his feet, asking avid questions. "A thousand guineas reward? You're sure of that?"

"Righto. A thousand guineas. Any man who leads me to this killer, can have it right in his lap, skipper."

Scanlon was breathing hard. Here was a real windfall. He knew, of course, exactly where to find Clark Dodson.

Yet avarice made him wary. Any man of the crew could give the same information. They could all say that Dodson was stranded on a beach only eight miles away, directly across this island.

It meant, if this policeman should question the entire crew, that the reward would be split among them. Such foresight was inevitable to the canny Scanlon, and had been accurately predicted by Clark Dodson.

"Let's go ashore," Scanlon urged in a whisper. "I'll tip you to what I know in the pub there."

Pretending to be mystified, Archie went ashore with Scanlon. Scanlon paid for rum punches at the pub. "If you guarantee me the reward," he said, "I can lead you right to this chap."

"Lead me to him, and you get it, skipper."

"Could you stand a rough hike of eight miles?" Scanlon had never been over the ridge trail, but knew that such a trail existed.

"Eight miles or eight thousand," said Archie.

"I'll point him out to you, then," Scanlon promised. "Come along."

INQUIRY from a native put them on a trail leading upbush. Archie, who had just traversed it, pretended dismay at its ruggedness. Thorny brush slapped them as they pushed on and up.

"It needs a goat to get by here," Archie complained. The led was really leading, but Scanlon didn't know it.

"Come along," Scanlon kept urging. He was all but winded. But for a thousand guineas he would have scaled the palisades of hell. Plenty of time, too, since his ship would be two days loading at Faa-Laa.

On and up they kept fighting, through thickets of taro and banana. At painful last a summit was reached, from which they could look both ways to the sea.

"Easy going now," Scanlon exulted, and went plunging down the Faa-Maa slope.

"How do you know he's there?" Archie panted.

"Never mind how I know. He's there, all right."

They hurried on down, tripping over lianas, spiked here and there by the coarse sharp fronds of pandanus. Dense bush kept them from seeing ahead, now.

"How much further?" Archie groaned. "If I don't get a cold beer pretty soon, I'll faint."

His cue to say this was a tumble-down plantation near the trail. Archie brightened at sight of a house there. It was his own house. "Let's stop in and get our wind back, skipper. Maybe they got some cold stout."

"Naw, come on," Scanlon argued. "It's only a little further on to the beach."

"But I tell you I'm all burned out!" Archie veered stubbornly off toward the old house.

Not to let this potential gold mine out of sight, Scanlon followed. They found the door of the place open, and stepped in.

Sprawled on a pile of grass mats there lay Clark Dodson.

Scanlon, though surprised, was elated. He pointed. "There he is! Your man Dodson. Grab him quick."

Clark stood up, smiling. And Scanlon, with a shock, heard Archie say: "You made a mistake, skipper. This is not the man."

"Not him?" Scanlon yelled. "It is, I say. You showed me his picture."

Clark circled to a position between Scanlon and the door. His eyes glinted. "I'm not the man you're looking for, Archie. But you brought me the man *I'm* looking for. Say your prayers, Scanlon."

Scanlon saw through it now. It was a trap.

"Do you want to give me my three hundred pounds, skipper?" Clark asked. "Or do I take it out of your hide?"

"Bash his blinkin' head in," yelled Archie.

Fear knifed through Scanlon. They'd lured him here, he knew, far from the haven of his deck. Two to one, they

could cut his throat and toss him into some quagmire of the bush.

"Stand steady, skipper," Clark invited, "till you get your wind back. I'm not armed and Archie's keeping out of it. It's just you and I, now, in a place where you can't bawl for the bos'n."

Confidence surged back into Scanlon. If it went no farther than a rough and tumble, there was nothing to be afraid of. . . . Then Scanlon glimpsed a dark, pretty face peering from behind tapa cloth.

A girl! Her presence more than ever reassured him. They'd hardly knife him or gun him in front of a girl.

"If it's knuckles you want," Scanlon challenged, "you can ship a cargo of mine right now."

CLARK stepped up and slapped him in the face. Scanlon was at him, then, swinging. But Clark wasn't there. The deftness of his footwork confused Scanlon. Then a stab came to Scanlon's stomach. He half doubled. Slap! Once more an open palm smacked his cheek.

"Save a piece of him for me!" Archie chortled.

Scanlon closed in, swinging. Clark let himself be chased twice around the room. Scanlon's breath, by then, came in gasps. An open hand kept stinging his cheek. Fists kept denting his stomach. Blind rage choked him.

He swung again and Clark ducked, slashing back slaps and stabs. "I'll save three pieces, Archie," Clark promised. "Once for each time he swiped your remittance from the mails."

"I didn't!" Scanlon screamed. He kept chasing, swinging, missing. Blood and sweat rolled from his face. "You can't prove a thing!" he bellowed.

"You're right, skipper," Clark smiled. "We can't prove a thing. But the funny thing about it is, neither can you."

That, more than ever, maddened Scanlon. He couldn't prove he'd been lured here, to be mauled and humiliated by Dodson. He'd been so cannily careful not to let his crew know about this cruise with Archie over a mountain.

His breath came shorter with each swing. Clark whacked his nose and blood gushed there. When next Scanlon dove in for a clinch, Clark tripped him and he sprawled headlong.

Archie cheered. "Let's get our money off him and then kick him out."

"Just our luck if he left it on the ship," Clark echoed. And to the skipper: "On your feet. You're not half licked yet."

The taunt brought Scanlon up, snatching for a stool. He threw it with a force to brain Clark, who dodged. The stool crashed against a wall. Then Clark was in close, slashing, slapping, jabbing. The stomach punches hurt Scanlon most. But in the end, it was an uppercut to the chin that knocked him out.

He lay still on his back with glazing eyes.

Clark searched him, finding no money except a few silver coins. "Means he left mine in the ship's safe, Archie."

An old letter came to hand, however. It was addressed to Scanlon at Rongatabu and was from another skipper of the same trading fleet. Its text informed Clark that a fleet official named Crabtree would board the *Capricorn* at Apia.

Scanlon opened his eyes to hear Clark say, "If this man Crabtree knew half the truth, skipper, he'd fire you."

"You can't prove it!" Scanlon groaned.

"Let's keep beating him up," Archie urged, "until he signs a confession."

Clark shook his head. "No use, Archie. A confession you'd get that way wouldn't hold in court. Let him go."

Scanlon staggered to his feet. As he backed toward the exit, he was too badly whipped to make threats. Only a truculent reiteration of defense came from him: "They won't believe you. It's your word against mine."

Clark nodded. "Exactly. So boot him out, Archie."

And Palmerston with zest did just that.

WHEN the man was gone, Palmerston dug up a demijohn of rum he had hoarded. Clark was in no mood to join him. So the remittance man settled down alone over the rum, to celebrate the occasion by getting drunk.

Clark strolled out into the twilight with Caroline. Scanlon was not in sight and the palms whispered peacefully. The quick contrast from sordid brawling becalmed Clark.

A shell path led them through a grove of breadfruit to the sea. They sat down on the sand there. A tall coconut tree bowed over them, fronds dipping toward the sea. Clark could feel a breath of trade wind on his cheek, caressing him softly, and blowing to him the siren song of the reef.

"Will you stay here long, please?" asked Caroline.

"Only till I can get a passage home," he said. But when he looked at the girl now, the appeal in her dark trusting eyes startled him. It frightened him a little, too. Her mother, twenty years ago, must have been just this lovely. No wonder Archie Palmerston had missed one, and ten, and a hundred boats from Faa-Maa.

In a little while sounds of music and clapping hands reached them.

"What's going on there, Caroline?"

"A *kava* ceremony," she told him. "Also they dance the *siva-siva*. My mother's people always celebrate this way, just after a harvest of copra is sold to a ship."

Of course! Those brown men he'd seen in the lagoon yesterday, heaving copra bags to Scanlon's deck, were her mother's people. Her uncles and cousins.

"If you like," Caroline smiled, "we will go there. And I shall dance for you."

"Swell." Clark took her hands and raised her up. As they went toward the village he said: "And I want to ask your kinfolks a question, Caroline. It's about this last deal in copra with Scanlon."

ACHING at every joint, Scanlon was climbing a bush-banked mountain. The ascent was torture. His face was raw from the battering by Dodson, and now thorns flogged him at every step of the trail.

Dark caught him halfway to the summit. After that he groped blindly, tripping over creepers. Insects stung his flesh. Scanlon slapped them away and stumbled on.

It was nearly dawn when he descended into Faa-Laa. A skiff took him out to his ship, where a single dim deck light burned. The deck watch saw him come aboard, and smiled, presuming that the skipper had been carousing at the Faa-Laa pub.

Scanlon tumbled into his bunk. Bruised and humiliated, he lay there heaping torrid maledictions upon Clark Dodson.

After a bath at noon, though, he felt better. His consolation was the indisputable possession of three hundred pounds. The scars of a thrashing would heal, but the loot he could keep forever.

Late afternoon saw the last of the copra taken on from native boats. The *Capricorn* pulled anchor for Apia.

Two days to Apia, third ranking port of the South Seas.

On a bright blue morning the ship eased in through the reef there. Blazing flamboyants rimmed the beach, walled by a solid mile of trading stores from the bush. Other ships were there, loading cacao beans and rubber.

Scanlon stood at his rail and saw a skiff coming out from the shore. In it he saw a thin, stooped man with severe lips and a beetle brow.

Crabtree! He scowled at Crabtree. Always snooping, that fellow. Scanlon both feared and hated him. For Amos Crabtree was more than a mere traveling auditor of the fleet. He stood high in the owners' councils and had the power to make or break skippers.

Crabtree came somberly up the steps. His face, as usual, was like a dill pickle. Scanlon greeted him with stiff formality.

and then led the way to his office cabin.

"I'll have to run along back to shore, skipper," announced Crabtree, "just as soon as I have a look at your accounts."

Scanlon brought out the cargo and account books. Scanlon's practiced eye scanned through them.

"I see here, skipper, that you had a passenger from Rongatabu to Faa-Maa. You charged him two pounds."

"He was a vag," asserted Scanlon, "and only had two pounds. So I took him to the next port."

His guest gave a sour nod and continued to peruse items of revenue. "I notice you did pretty well at Perth Island this cruise. Fourteen tons at Faa-Maa and thirty at Faa-Laa."

"Aye, they had a good crop there," said Scanlon.

He was confounded then, by a voice from the door. "Good morning, Mr. Crabtree." Scanlon looked up and saw Clark Dodson framed there.

"Hey!" Scanlon exploded. "What you doin' on my deck?"

CRABTREE whirled, staring. And Clark said smoothly: "I hiked over the hill, Scanlon, just in time to stow away in your hold." To Crabtree he added, "I've a perfect right, because I paid forty pounds for passage to Frisco."

"Forty?" barked Crabtree. "The book says two."

"You blasted tramp," Scanlon bawled, "get off my deck."

His face was dark red now; his fists were clenched; but there was fear in his eyes.

"Just a minute," interposed Crabtree. "Let's hear your story, young man."

Clark gave it in detail. He also relayed Palmerston's.

"A pack of lies!" Scanlon bellowed. "He's just trying to mooch passage."

"It's only your word against a skipper's, young man," Crabtree agreed. "You say things, but you can't prove them."

"What price," Clark challenged, "does the account book say Scanlon paid for copra at Faa-Maa?"

Crabtree glanced at entries in the book. "Nine pounds per ton."

"And here," Clark said, offering a paper with many signatures, "is a sworn statement from thirty chiefs and *matais* on Perth Island. It proves Scanlon paid only *eight* pounds per ton."

"It's a trick!" yelled Scanlon.

"The trick," Clark charged, "is Scanlon's. He embezzles one pound out of every nine the owners spend for copra. If he did it at Faa-Maa, he's been doing it all through the islands."

Proof of perfidy was staring at Crabtree.

He lashed out: "Scanlon, your word's worthless now. I'm forced to accept Dodson's. You're relieved of command. The mate will take over, while we prosecute you for fraud against owners, passengers, shippers, and for looting the Royal mails."

With Scanlon shouting impotent defiance, Crabtree led Clark to the deck. "And now, young man, what can we do to make amends?"

"I'd like my three hundred pounds back, Mr. Crabtree. And you can take fifteen out of Scanlon's pay to reimburse Palmerston."

Crabtree nodded, his sharp eyes studying the lean, cool young men.

"That's fair. What else?"

What else? Clark, for a moment, did not respond. His memory went vividly back two nights, to Perth Island, and to a girl warm in his arms there. He remembered his all but overwhelming impulse to linger, to live forever off the bounties of sunshine with Caroline.

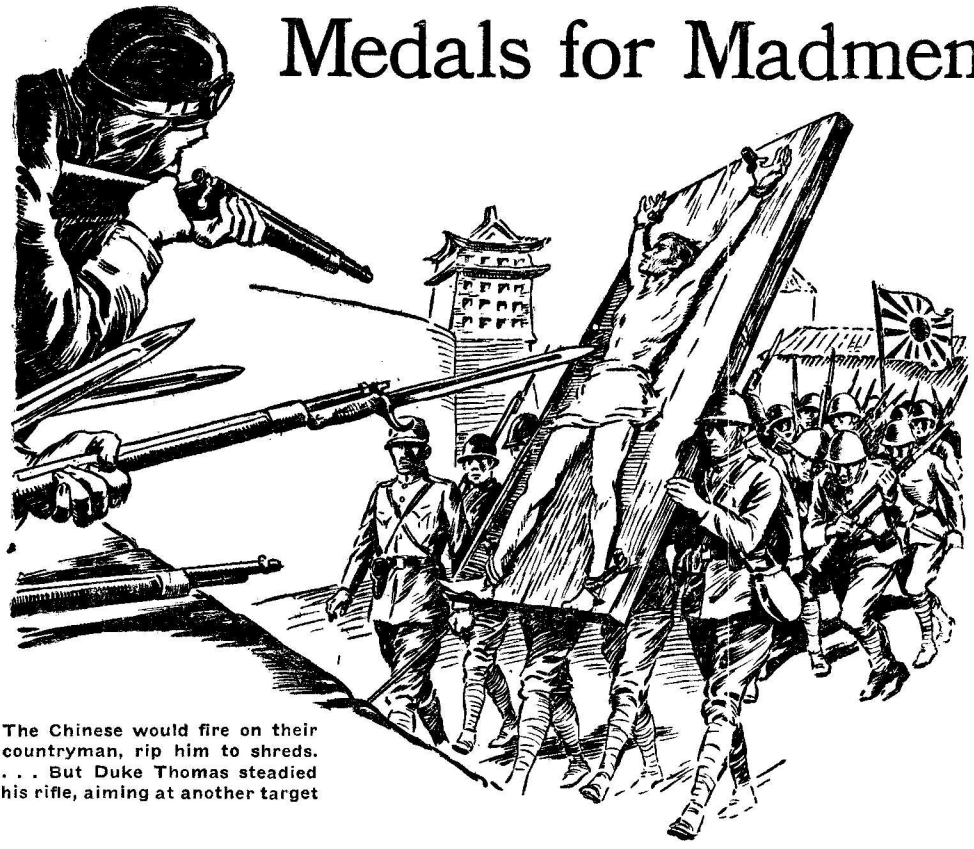
He recalled, too, why he hadn't. Sight of a derelict of the bush, sodden with rum there, had warned him in time. Ten years of it and he too, Clark Dodson, would be another Palmerston.

"What else do you want, young man?"

Clark Dodson dropped a curtain on those memories.

"Passage home," he said.

Medals for Madmen



The Chinese would fire on their countryman, rip him to shreds. . . . But Duke Thomas steadied his rifle, aiming at another target

Incident of the Chinese camp, in which a disgusted American shows the Patriots how to win a battle with firecrackers. Manager of props: a coolie-boy who was crazy for a hunk of brass

A Short Novelet

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "Hook, Line, and Tinker," "Fly High, Fly Tough," etc.

i

BEFORE the astonished, frightened gaze of the coolie crowd Duke Thomas held the general's orderly at arm's length and shook him until his whole body danced like a suspended marionette.

He released him and the man fell to his knees on the masonry of the old city wall.

"Lin," Thomas commanded his coolie boy, "you speak this man for show proper respect."

Lin's thin, elfin face barely masked the pleasure that was his. His small body shook with a storm of hissing, singsong Chinese.

The big, dark-featured American flyer knew that the general's orderly was being told off in proper style. Several times he heard the Chinese word *tsan dziang*, colonel. That was the rank Duke Thomas had insisted on in his flying contract with the Chinese Central Government. It was purely a matter of protection against situations like this.

Duke's only fear was that Lin would

go too far, so that General Sheun Su would lose face along with this officious orderly.

"That's enough," Duke said finally.

"He say," Lin interpreted, "General Sheun Su wish for speak with you."

"Sure." Thomas nodded. "I got that all right, Lin. But the way he came up here and grabbed my arm you'd think I was a coolie boy."

The orderly cringed away and left like a whipped dog. He carried with him the knowledge that no man, orderly or general, might safely touch the person of this big American madman flyer.

"Now you catchee other boys," Thomas directed Lin. "Bring box of hand grenades topside here."

While he was waiting for the old hand grenades Duke Thomas looked down from the city wall to where the enemy troops were demolishing the pagoda of The Seven Faithful Wives, distributing the heavy, ancient timbers around the distant semicircle of watch fires.

He estimated that there were at least three thousand of the little brown soldiers out there. It seemed almost certain that Loochau, this strategic city commanding the Szo river, must capitulate within the week.

THERE was a stir among the Chinese guerrilla soldiers, stationed in the main watch tower above the south gate. Thomas followed the direction of pointing fingers.

A timbered screen had been built and two squads of the enemy were moving slowly toward the walls, carrying the screen before them. The naked, bronzed body of a Chinese farmer hung spreadeagled on the screen's face.

He was merely a sardonic, sadistic touch. The Chinese defenders would fire on him, rip his body to bloody shreds, before they would allow the Japanese within dynamiting range of the gate.

Thomas walked over to the machine gun emplacement. Despite his too-many years in China this butchering of human shields still sickened him.

The officer in charge, a lanky country boy still in his teens, saluted, grinning, pointing to the moving shield. Duke smiled in return, signifying that he understood the situation. It was something that existed, willy-nilly. You might as well smile at it, just as you did the other unpleasant things of life.

Duke liked these young Chinese who had been forced into the unbelievable hardships of guerrilla warfare. Some of them were scholars, carrying degrees from Chinese and mission colleges. All of them had that steady, mature look that comes from prolonged and close association with death.

Two men serving the machine gun reluctantly placed a web belt of cartridges into the feed pawl. These foreign devil guns ate so voraciously of their precious ammunition!

It was exactly what the Japanese wanted. By every cunning means that veteran soldiers can devise they had tested out the strength of the defenders. They knew they were short on food and decent drinking water, that there were no more bombs for the trench mortars, that the one-pounders were silent for the same reason. Now they were making inroads on the dwindling store of small arms ammunition.

Duke estimated the distance separating them from the moving screen of timber. Fifteen hundred yards.

While waiting for the inevitable slaughter of their countryman, one of the Chinese lit an "all nations" cigarette—made from a careful gleaning of street butts—and after a hungry breath of it passed it to the next soldier.

It passed the rounds of half a dozen men, was handed to a tall Mongol. He in turn would have given it to the American for a comradely puff. Duke brought out one of his own scant store, and after two good puffs handed it to the next nearest soldier.

There was a tight moment. These were proud fighting men and if they thought for one instant the American would refuse to smoke with them . . .

Duke reached over and tapped the

heavy, two-handed big sword scabbarded across the Mongol's back. He motioned toward the Japanese camp.

A murmur of approval came from the group. That was what they wanted; to get among the enemy with those murderous blades. This American flyer understood them. He hadn't refused to smoke; he had merely shared one of his delightful foreign cigarettes with them.

Duke's eyes had dropped to the Mongol's rifle and for an instant he could scarcely believe what he saw. How could an Enfield find its way out here?

All the gunmetal finish had long since left the rifle. The bare, raw steel had the satiny quality that comes from hours of patient rubbing with peanut oil; the stock was beautifully smooth from being polished with the bare palms of its owner.

The Chinese have an intuitive sense with anyone whom they like. The Mongol lifted his rifle in proud hands and extended it toward Thomas for inspection. His formerly stern face was smiling shyly.

Duke bobbed his head in appreciation, neutralized the stop catch and withdrew the bolt, taking a look into the bore of it. He nodded, well pleased. That bore would have stood the scrutiny of a West Point inspection.

Duke felt the balance of it. Again the Chinese read his mind. Carefully, a little reluctantly, he took three cartridges from his belt, rubbed them with an oily rag and passed them over to Thomas.

Duke looked down from the wall, searching for a target. He came to a sudden, rash decision.

The Japanese had been moving steadily forward with their screen, urged on by a strutting little officer who led the way while they were still safe from rifle fire. Occasionally he pointed with his short sword at the live human sacrifice they were bringing within range of the Chinese machine gun.

THE American lengthened the rifle sling, put his arm through it with a sharpshooter's turn and lay down full length on the parapet. The Chinese watched him curiously, not yet aware of his intention. Duke looked about for an indication of wind. He peered over the open sight leaf, comparing its width with the height of the Japanese officer.

The range was a good thousand yards, in this country an unheard of distance for a rifle. Duke knew the chances he was taking. No one there would expect to hit anything more than half that distance away. But to try—and fail—that would be bad.

Duke adjusted the range and windage, slid a cartridge into the breech. He squirmed into a more comfortable position, cuddling the stock against his cheek.

The Chinese officer spoke; a sharp hissing command. They knew now what Thomas was going to attempt. Movement among the soldiers ceased. There was a dead, waiting silence.

Thomas sucked in a deep breath, expelled part of it. His right fist tightened slowly, squeezing slack from the trigger. The diagonal strap of the officer's belt showed above the front sight. The gun exploded.

"A little high," Duke muttered. "I'd say a twelve o'clock two."

There was a sharp, hissing intake of breath; astonishment. The cocky little officer had dropped, as if struck over the head with a ten-pound sledge hammer.

"That was truly a fine shot," a pleasant voice remarked, in good English. "But Mr. Duke Thomas, was it not what you call good luck?"

Duke jerked the bolt, blew into the breech. He twisted over on his side and grinned up at Colonel Zee Vee Wong, who was lowering a pair of good binoculars. "Maybe so," he admitted, "but I get two more shots at the nigger babies."

"Not those what-you-call nigger babies." The colonel pointed. "I think tonight they will discuss the possibility of Chinese devils. You blew the back of that officer's head off."

Duke got to his feet, handed the rifle to its owner. The Mongol took it, gave

Duke Thomas a look of reverence. He spoke in dialect to his comrades. "I have told you this man is a very devil of a warrior. For that reason his pig of a coolie boy will not be whipped for the rice he stole last night."

Colonel Wong motioned Thomas surreptitiously, that odd flapping of a hand that is the same as an Occidental beckoning finger. Duke joined him away from the soldiers.

"Mr. Thomas—" Wong spoke with Oriental obliqueness—"when the wolf pack is surrounded by dogs it is well for them to forget private quarrels."

Duke Thomas gave Colonel Wong a straight, frank stare.

"You've been in my country, Wong. Let's drop the frills. I haven't any private quarrel with General Sheun Su. I'm merely ordered by the Central Government to fly him up here to take command of Loochau's defenses. It's his own home town and to save his face over the purchase of those worthless hand grenades he refuses the three junk loads of ammunition offered him.

"Now it's too late to get them and the city is starving and sooner or later he's going to order these poor Chinese kids out to face the Japanese; big swords against machine guns. Well, I don't think much of him, and I don't mind his knowing it. He's one of those weak, war-lord links in the Chinese military system."

WONG listened to this, his face passive, noncommittal. "Your coolie boy, Lin, called the general's orderly the son of a thousand pig ancestors."

The colonel smiled. "That, perhaps, is too many pigs to have in one's family. It would be well, Mr. Thomas, if you put this Lin back with the coolie laborers and took another boy for a personal servant."

Thomas grunted approval of that suggestion. "The little devil keeps me in hot water all the time, Colonel. Lord knows how I got him in the first place. My other coolie boy got sick at Chungking and this kid just took charge of me. Even tries to make me wear some kind of a silly medal he found in my luggage."

"Then it is agreed," Wong said. "You will have your pick of a number of good servant boys, according to the terms of your contract."

"No." Duke shook his head stubbornly. "This little devil causes me all sorts of trouble but some way or other he . . ."

Lin came toward them at a trot, carrying a hand grenade. "Is no good," he said. He pulled the safety pin and released the grip lever to demonstrate.

Duke cuffed it from his hand. "You little fool! The fact that one of them doesn't explode is no sign they're all duds."

"What is wrong with them?" Wong asked curiously. The wrinkled iron sphere had fallen twenty feet over the outside wall. Nothing happened.

"Personally," Thomas said, "I think they're full of Syrian cheese. Sheun Su got them from one of those hook-nosed, greasy lads and I'm a Dutchman if there wasn't some squeeze money in the deal."

They were back where the coolies had removed the top from one of the grenade boxes. "How many boxes down in that store room, Lin?"

"Seex million," Lin said promptly.

"That means there're quite a few," Duke interpreted. "Line some of 'em up there on the wall, Lin."

"What do you plan?" Colonel Wong inquired, watching Duke pull the heavy forty-five automatic from his holster.

Thomas shrugged. "Just an idea, Colonel. If they'll explode from impact I could fly over the Jap lines and drop them, a box at a time. They think we haven't any aerial bombs, so that'd throw them into confusion and give our boys a chance to get at close range with their swords."

Wong nodded his approval as Duke leveled on the distant row of grenades. They hopped about under the smash of pistol bullets, but nothing happened.

One of them rolled down the inside of the wall, landing in a charcoal brazier.

The coolies shouted with laughter as the old woman who had been tending the family tea water ran, with a shrill chattering of fear.

Duke replaced the shells in the clip and holstered his gun. "That's that." He shrugged.

Wong nodded. He pointed toward the enemy position. "Friends have cut the man loose from wooden shield. A brave thing to do. The Japanese will punish them for it."

"Look at 'em," Thomas said in disgust. "What kind of people are these of yours, Wong? There's a thousand coolie farmers out there, with baskets of supplies for the Japs."

Wong's lips tightened. "My people have learned patience and wisdom from ages of suffering, Mr. Thomas. They serve the invader because they must. But they do not forget."

"In the meantime their soldiers eat dog meat inside here, if they're lucky enough to get even that."

"The general's orderly returns," Wong said hurriedly. "It is better that he does not find me here."

ii

THIS time the orderly brought his hand up in smart salute. Lin, with an impish grin on his face, interpreted. "He says General Sheun Su respectfully requests presence of marster."

"That's better," Luke nodded. "Dump these worthless grenades over the wall and . . ."

Sound crashed over his words. One of the coolies grabbed at his leg, astonishment coming to his face as blood trickled. The general's orderly came very near doing a double somersault off the wall.

"Holy Pete!"

"Holies Spet!" Lin dutifully echoed his master. "Is good bombs, I think so."

Instinctively Duke Thomas had glanced upward to locate the airplane that had dropped the bomb. Now he was looking at the ruined charcoal brazier. "Sure," he agreed, "if you tie a kitchen stove to 'em. The lousy hand grenades haven't any caps."

Closely followed by Lin, Duke slouched toward the general's quarters, down a street so narrow that his wide shoulders seemed at times to scrape the mud-plastered walls on either side.

Behind his coolie boy came the general's orderly, plodding along without protest in the odoriferous dust cloud that frothed up around the flyer's boots and remained suspended in the air as if, like the inhabitants of the starving city, it had no strength for further movement.

A tiny naked man-child, saffron-brown in color, lay face upward at the edge of the street with the look of death about its shrunken face and body. Its black eyes slowly and with awful resignation followed the movement of the white foreign barbarian.

Because of civilian food riots General Sheun Su's headquarters had been moved from the old palace, near the temple grounds that had been cleared for Duke's big transport plane. Now it was down in a more guarded spot, among the bivouacked soldiers.

Sheun Su was a small man. He had a thin, crafty face, closely clipped hair and wispy little mustache. Colonel Zee Vee Wong, the only other occupant of the room, was just seating himself, as far as possible from the commander. The way he pulled the skirts of his long robe about him seemed to increase this contemptuous detachment.

The general stared with veiled, expressionless eyes at the American, who stood on the other side of the mat-covered wicker table. Duke returned the stare, unsmiling. With a rudeness foreign to Chinese character Sheun Su withheld an invitation for Thomas to be seated during the interview.

"Mr. Thomas," the general began, in his halting, slurred English, "you are aware of the situation in which we find ourselves."

Thomas nodded, without words.

"Colonel Wong informs me that you

have been testing my—the small-bombs-for-throwing." Su looked at the American with hope in his small black eyes.

"That's right," Duke said. "And they're worthless. They explode in an open fire, but that's no help to us."

Su's face twisted plaintively. "I cannot understand," he murmured.

"That's easy. They're probably World War stuff. The salesman demonstrated for you with new grenades and then slipped you the old ones. They've got fuses and detonators, but no caps."

For an uncontrolled moment chagrin and something very near to terror showed in the general's face. He was paying dearly for the squeeze money, the graft, he had taken in purchasing those grenades. If the city of Loochau fell to the Japanese he would certainly lose face.

AT THIS point there was an interruption in the conference. Duke's imp of a coolie boy had observed that his master was being forced to stand, his six-foot-one slightly stooped in the low-ceilinged hut. The general was seated.

In Lin's eyes this was not proper at all. He came trotting across the dusty street, carrying a stool almost as large as himself.

"Chin dzou!" he commanded in Shanghai dialect, slamming the stool down behind Thomas. "Seet down, marster."

Duke caught the quick gleam of murder in the general's eyes.

"Pei!" he said sternly. "Lin, you imp of Satan, the general's going to cut your ears off one of these days. It'll serve you bloody well right, too."

Lin departed, grinning. In his eyes the marster was all-powerful, all-wise. No harm could come to him as long as he was coolie boy for this great foreign devil who could fly the thunder plane so that even the birds must stay ground-side while he was in the air or otherwise lose face completely.

"Have I your permission to be seated?" Thomas inquired respectfully of Sheun Su. "My coolie boy is one complete fool. I am very sorry."

Sheun Su ignored the apology. He had motioned to one of the sentries at the door and was firing a barrage of sibilant, grunting Chinese. The soldier saluted and would have departed, but Colonel Zee Vee Wong entered the conversation with animation.

A heated argument ensued between him and the general. Wong finally turned away in angry disgust. The soldier saluted the general and backed out of the room.

"Please to seet down," the general addresed Thomas, with a subtle change in manner. He tenderly stroked the few straggling hairs of his mustache, studying Thomas.

"You people of America are wise, and cunning in many ways," he said ingratiatingly.

Thomas bowed.

"Colonel Wong has told me of the magnificent shot you made this morning. Other tales came to me before I had the honor of your friendship."

Duke kept a smile from his face. The general was leading up to something.

"No doubt," Sheun Su continued smoothly, "you have planned the way in which the enemy may be defeated."

"General," Duke Thomas protested, "I have a civilian contract with your government which calls only for the flying of officials. Any fighting I do is something that must be arranged outside of that contract."

Sheun Su bowed acknowledgment of this. "I have here"—he tapped a metal box on the table—"a large sum of money which will be paid you for the enemy's defeat. Three thousand dollars gold. It is my own money."

"Three thousand dollars gold is not a large sum of money," Thomas said. He added, under his breath: "Probably about half as much as the squeeze money you collected on those grenades."

Sheun Su's lips tightened. "Five thousand is a large sum," he suggested.

"Larger than three thousand," Thomas admitted.

"Can do?" the general asked, wetting his lips.

"I talk tonight," Thomas promised, standing. Bowing formally he stepped out into the narrow street, walked thoughtfully toward his own hut.

As he neared this a thin shriek of terror reached his ears. "Marster, marster, you sorry for Lin. Marster . . .!"

THOMAS shoved his way through a moving throng of Chinese. Two soldiers had his coolie boy, pushing and dragging him toward an open square where, by order of Sheun Su, certain sudden, violent deaths had occurred during the last few days of civilian riots.

Grabbing the first soldier by the collar of his tunic, Duke whirled him around, simultaneously brought a crushing right hook to his jaw. The man went limp in his hands. The next instant the other soldier pitched forward onto his face, propelled by a well-placed kick from Duke's heavy field boot.

"Now, what the devil you been up to, Lin?"

"Me no go up to nofling, I tell you, marster. Thees soldiers say is by order of General Su I get me shot."

"By order of—" Duke paused, remembering the incident of the stool. If the conference with Su had lasted another ten minutes Duke would have been minus one very foolish coolie boy.

He grasped Lin's thin shoulder with a stern hand. "Is three times you make insult for General Sheun Su," he stated. "One time Chungking side, 'nother time Sianfu; now this."

"Marster no likie?" Lin inquired, his courage and grin returning immediately that he stood in the shadow of the great foreign devil's protection.

"Marster decidedly no likie. Maybeso marster catchee one bullet for this time." Duke patted his forty-five. "I tell you true, Lin, is more of this I shoot your ears off."

Lin's smile collapsed. His tiny body appeared to wilt within the faded blue coolie coat. He slunk off disconsolately toward his own hovel.

Ten minutes later Duke was visited, with considerable pomp and dignity, by Major Wu and two lieutenants of the general's staff. Two squads of slant-eyed soldiers brought up the rear.

Duke watched them approach, an unpleasantly dry, metallic taste in his mouth. Turning to conceal the movement, he unfastened the flap of his pistol holster, made sure the gun was loose for a quick draw.

Major Wu stated a demand with short formality. Pilot Duke Thomas must surrender his coolie boy for immediate execution, by order of General Sheun Su.

Followed a highly abstract argument by Thomas who pointed out, with expressions of intense regret, that such a thing was impossible. By the terms of his contract with the Central Government he, Pilot Thomas, was to be furnished with a coolie boy of his own selection.

This particular coolie boy whom they wished to execute was, unfortunately, the very coolie boy he had selected as his personal servant. If the execution were to take place he would no longer be in possession of a boy of his own selection.

The major could appreciate that. And, much as he regretted the necessity he, Pilot Thomas, must insist that all terms of his contract be lived up to.

The major and two lieutenants held consultation. Undoubtedly this foreign barbarian had them on the hip. An honorable Chinese general can not go around breaking the terms of contracts and still remain a general.

There was another angle which one of the lieutenants suggested to the major, changing from Mandarin to one of the obscure dialects for fear the big man might understand him.

If the pilot should lose his contract—if it should be stolen from him by people who do such low things—he would no longer be able to protect this son of a pig. The execution could very well wait until such a time.

The interview ended, with bows and expressions of great respect from all concerned.

iii

DUKE THOMAS entered his hut with a troubled mind. The acceptance of his verdict on Lin's case by Major Wu did not fool the American for one small moment.

Sometime, and in some fashion, General Sheun Su would have his revenge for Lin's insolence.

Duke stared distastefully at the mud-and-wattle wall of his room. It would be very easy for one lone American flyer to get mislaid in the vast chaos of China. He should take the little beggar out and kick him around the compound a few times, to keep him from committing more indiscretions.

"Marster."

Duke turned a scowling face. "Well, what d'you want?"

"Marster, I think maybeso you likie tea."

Duke grinned despite himself. "Sure. I likie million dollars, too, you little devil. But I catchee no million dollars and I drinkee boiled ditch water that stinks. And if I'm holed up here another day I'll be eating fried bugs, so help me, allie same you coolie boys."

"Maybeso Sheun Su eatchem bugs," Lin said, composedly arranging bowl and crockery pot. "Marster no eatchem bugs, I say."

"Well, I'll be a—this *is* tea, Lin!"

The boy smiled with quiet pride, ducking his head and sucking air modestly through his teeth. He departed, returning shortly with a large crockery bowl and chopsticks, submerged in another bowl of steaming water.

"I boil chopsticks allie same you say, marster."

Thomas uncovered the large bowl and looked at the mess of curried rice and chicken with eyes that refused to believe.

Finally, in a meek voice: "Lin, the days of miracles are past, so you must be in cahoots with the devil. But the devil take me if I care. I'm too hungry."

Lin watched each mouthful as Thomas started wolfing the food. "I no hoots the devil," he said. A long pause while he studied his master from expressionless eyes. Then: "I eatchem head, feet, tail," he observed placidly. "Velly good for me. I wanch talk, marster. Is proper?"

"Is proper," Duke vouchsafed between mouthfuls.

"I catchee this Jap-side," Lin calmly stated, indicating the curried chicken and the tea.

Duke masked his astonishment, scooping the hotly spiced rice and chicken into his cheeks.

Lin was disappointed, as he had expected to be. This foreign barbarian of his was a long-time-pidgeon.

"I catchee army, Jap-side," Lin continued.

This time he was rewarded with a calculating stare from his master. "How many for army you catchee?"

"I say seexty million," Lin stated, always willing to gamble heavily on his scanty English.

"Sixty million men," Duke repeated reflectively. "Lin, no is so many as sixty million soldiers in all China. You no speak me proper."

"I say seexty billion," Lin hastily corrected himself, knowing that these foreign devils have a nasty way of being exact in figures.

"Have got sixty coolies, I don't think so," Duke stated, which statement was bound to be right, one way or the other.

LIN was properly awed at such an astonishing display of wisdom. "Have got feefty coolies," he said humbly. "Can get maybeso ten-twenty more."

"These boys catchee guns and bullets? Have got big swords?"

"No have," Lin sulkily admitted. "But could steal from Japs. You say so, you use devil-ship, can be one big war lord. We chop Sheun Su's head off then, I think so." Lin smacked his lips.

"No can do," Thomas shook his head. "Where these coolies, you speak me?"

"Jap-side. What I say, they do."

"You tell them I use airplane—devil-ship, for them?" Duke shrewdly guessed.

Lin hung his head, wriggling his toes in the dust. "I speak them maybeso," he admitted.

Thomas maintained a threatening face. "What I say, you do, Lin," he ordered. "You no tell me how you get outside walls. Is proper. But is very dangerous here for you. General catchee you go outside city walls is very bad for you; for me. Maybe-so shoot for spies. You very careful. You know?"

"Me savvy," Lin nodded sadly.

He had dreamed of his master as a war lord, a great marshal, generalissimo, perhaps an emperor—and himself, Lin, striding along behind the master, wearing a grand uniform.

And perhaps the master, at some future time, would see fit to decorate him with a medal. Lin had developed a tremendous yearning for a medal, having seen one that the master owned.

Though this medal was never worn, and was treated with an amused air by the master, Lin secretly kept it polished, saw that it was always included in the master's belongings. Lin would have given at least two legs and an arm to have a medal half that grand pinned on his flat little chest.

But the master said, "No can do."

Lin studied a huge cockroach that hung motionless on the side wall. Meticulously he counted the legs of the insect. There was one missing. Lotus blossoms do not always have the same number of petals; there are not always the same number of leaves on a tree. . . .

Lin squatted in a corner of the hut, staring without expression at a great, uncouth Occidental brute who stuffed his mouth with succulent food, and yet seemed to be thinking of other things. And what Lin was thinking of no man east of the China Sea could ever know. . . .

DUKE THOMAS stood beside the south watch tower of the ancient city; stood on a wall twenty feet thick, built of bricks, stones and mortar a thousand years before his nation had come into being.

Outside the walls the camp fires of the enemy made the darkness a sable moat that seemed to reflect the stars.

Accustomed to the Orient, Thomas paid no heed to the curious stares of the Chinese, perhaps a dozen of whom had followed him to the watch tower—men whose cheekbones stood out sharply to accentuate the Oriental slant of their eyes; women with the same thinness of hunger, with doll-children sashed to their backs, heads rolling in an unnatural, death-hinting fashion.

"Their country's a madhouse," Duke bleakly muttered. "And these crooked upstarts who get themselves to be generals—"

Duke shrugged the thoughts away, turned to the immediate need of a plan for delivering the besieged city. One of the nearest enemy fires threw up a small shower of sparks as more fuel was added. Thomas watched this with vacant eyes for a moment. Slowly a plan began forming in his mind . . .

He walked thoughtfully back toward his hut, for there were details to be considered and the more he considered them the more fantastic became the plan.

As Duke lighted a candle stub on his table his eyes were caught by the dull gleam of a brass Chinese padlock. It was one of those block affairs which require two keys, but in this case it had been forced open by the point of a bayonet or some such implement.

There had been looting in the city but Thomas' hut was supposed to be under special military guard. He brought the opened pilot bag over to the table and intuitively pulled the zipper fastener on an inside pocket. His flying contract had been stolen.

Duke examined the remaining contents of his bag. Nothing else was missing and the contract would be renewed without question when he got back to Chungking. He smiled grimly, quite certain of the reason for the theft.

As he pawed through the stuff his hand encountered a small object, wrapped about with worn, blue coolie cloth. Smiling absently he removed the wrappings to disclose a pewter medal, slightly larger than an American dollar.

How it had originally gotten into his luggage he could never understand. Three times he had chucked it carelessly into a corner and each time Lin had found it, much concerned as to how his master's precious medal could have been so mislaid.

Finally Thomas had bowed to the inevitable, knowing the Chinese character —knowing that the medal was a source of great satisfaction and pride to Lin, who boasted of it to the other coolie boys, just as he boasted of the great size and strength of his master.

Duke heard the scuffle of approaching footsteps. Absent-mindedly he dropped the medal into the side pocket of his khaki jacket before closing the bag. It was an orderly from Sheun Su, requesting his immediate presence.

PEANUT oil lamps lit the headquarters with red, smoky flames. Colonel Wong, Major Wu and two lieutenants were there with the general. As before Colonel Wong had withdrawn as far as possible from the commander.

Again Duke Thomas was confronted with the demand that his coolie boy be turned over to the general for immediate execution.

Thomas didn't bother to ask the official reason for this, knowing that Sheun Su was determined to have his petty revenge. A dozen false reasons could be named offhand and the boy murdered with impunity.

Nor did he make any reference to his contract which he knew the general had had stolen. Sheun Su would simply deny any knowledge of this, and of the terms which would have protected Lin.

"This coolie boy shall be turned over to you tomorrow," Duke promised. "He is an unimportant person and I have important matters to discuss. This morning you promised me five thousand dollars gold for a plan which would defeat the Japanese and deliver the city. Is it so?"

"Is so," the general said shortly, not missing the fact that Thomas was obviously calling the other officers' attention to this promise.

"One other promise I must have from you," Duke persisted. "To make possible this defeat of the Japanese I must make use of a low person. One who may possibly have acted as a spy for the Japanese; who is detestable in many other ways.

"But to get his assistance I must ask that you will grant him full pardon for all things he has done in the past. Will you give me such a promise?"

"Will do," Sheun promised without hesitation. This wouldn't be the first time he had connived with the enemy. "And the plan?"

Thomas countered that question with one of his own, to distract the general, "You have the great cymbal players, descendants of the famous old Empress band?"

The general nodded. "I have."

"Very well. One hour before daylight tomorrow morning that band, followed by your entire command, will quietly leave the south gate which faces the enemy. The curve of the great Szo river protects you from the north, east and west. The enemy is before you.

"Draw your men up in battle array, without guns, with their big swords drawn and keenly whetted. At the first sound of an explosion they charge an enemy which they will find in complete confusion. They will be led by the great band of cymbals and horns, playing the ancient war music of China. The music of victory."

Duke Thomas spoke the words with the rounding, sonorous tones of a mystic who sees far into the future. It had its effect. Even the general sat straighter in his chair, his eyes brighter. But caution drew him back.

"That is no plan," he objected. "I must know the details. Why will the enemy be in confusion?"

"General Sheun Su," Thomas blazed. "You command the garrison of a starving city. Even your soldiers are weakened by hunger. In one day, two days, you must make that charge. Tomorrow I promise to demoralize the enemy. Later I make no promises. Now I will answer no questions."

The general sat like an ugly little bronze god, considering this. The lamplight flickered over a face already etched with lines of defeat.

"It shall be done," he said, in a low voice.

As Thomas was about to leave Sheun Su's presence his glance came to rest on the face of Colonel Wong.

He liked the colonel. There was strength of character in his crudely formed, bony face. He had the reputation of being a philosopher, a scholar, and something of a poet. He was quiet of demeanor, wore by preference the long-robe and wide thin trousers of his country. But in battle he was a very demon of reckless courage.

Duke had always thought that the colonel liked him. But now the older man was staring at him with such utter contempt that the American recoiled, walked fumblingly out into the darkness. He remembered then his promise to turn Lin over to the general for execution the following day.

Thomas shrugged. Did Wong expect him to fight off the general's army with one forty-five automatic? And if he did, that little devil of a Lin would be in another mess before the sun had set.

Now there were other things to be thought of. And there was five thousand dollars in gold which he was going to enjoy collecting from the money-loving general.

Duke called out for Lin when he got to the hut. Sitting there, with a gutted candle barely pushing back the encroaching shadows, with Lin squatting in the dust before him, Thomas spoke.

He repeated what he said three times and made the shivering coolie repeat back to him, word for word.

There must be no single mistake made in these directions. The lives of four thousand courageous fighters depended on them —two full regiments who would die under the withering blasts of Japanese machine guns and rifle fire.

What Duke Thomas told the coolie boy that night about hand grenades would have made a civilized ordinance officer popeyed.

A thousand thousand devils were to be released from the sky. The hand grenades, properly placed, would direct their wrath on the enemy. Otherwise these demons would feast upon Lin and upon his so-called army of sixty coolie boys. . . .

iv

A FAINT, droning rumble, coming from the temple grounds within the city, reached the ears of the Japanese sentries that morning. They exchanged comments, in low voices, so as not to awaken the main command.

It was the airplane. Their spies had told them the Chinese had no aerial bombs. So there was nothing to fear. Probably the Chinese general was preparing to desert.

The first of the Chinese hucksters began filtering into the camp, each with two big baskets of vegetables and fruit, slung from a bamboo pole over the shoulder. They brought wood for the big watch fires, gave the sentries gifts of fruit that they might be allowed to sit by the warmth the short time until dawn.

That distant rumble of the airplane took on a heavy, surging note. It lifted into the sky and swung in a wide circle about the city.

An uneasiness came over the sentries. The Chinese farmers had stampeded like crazy cattle, throwing their baskets into the flames, shouting of devils as they ran.

Suddenly the great metal bird roared over the campfires, so close that it seemed the blue flames from exhaust stacks might scorch the ground. Then complete, unutterable confusion. Their spies had told the Japanese that there were no bombs. They had lied.

The whole camp was being blown to fragments.

Wild, unearthly music crashed out in the gray dawn. Then that awful, blood-chilling battle cry of the big swords. And they were on them, in a surge of red, flailing metal.

DUKE THOMAS circled lazily in the sky. He had opened the cockpit side window to get that cool, clean upper air into his lungs.

He nudged the control forward, eased back on it and swung the wheel, coming up in the soul-satisfying swoop of a wing-over. A red, blazing disk shoved up from the flat, canal-threaded plains to the east.

Duke lifted his voice.

". . . and the dawn comes up like thunder, out of China, 'cross the bay . . ." He was in no hurry to get down there in the stinking dust of Loochau.

When he landed finally, Lin was there to meet him, filled with excitement, news. He told Duke of a tremendous, bloody victory that the flyer had already witnessed from the air. His two skinny little fists clutched an imaginary big sword and he fought and strutted and posed.

Duke listened to this, smiling, leaning a little wearily against the gray metal fuselage of his plane. The braying of horns, the air-shattering clash of cymbals; the ancient, splendid, barbaric music of old Cathay reached his ears.

"And the general came marching home," Duke muttered sardonically.

"Sheun Su no come march home," Lin denied, his quick ears catching the words.

"Sheun Su talkie army, 'brave fella guys you. Fight plentee hard, catchee plentee glory, yes.'

"But—" Lin continued acting it out—"general no likee catchee glory. Speak Major Wu. Chop chop, catchee suitcase, catchee box. Come topside temple ground for catchee airplane."

Lin made a comical face, caricaturing panic and fear. "Airplane all gone. General plentee scared, plentee mad."

Thomas grinned, watching a string of sentries being posted along the old palace road. Evidently, now the victory had been won without his help, Sheun Su thought it safe to establish himself in more sumptuous quarters in the old palace.

Followed by Lin, Thomas strode down the road toward his hut. There were times when he thought he had had enough of China.

A squad of soldiers stood outside the door of his hut, commanded by Major Wu.

"What goes on here?" Thomas demanded.

"By order of General Sheun Su," the major said with dignity, "this vile coolie boy is to be taken for execution."

Duke's face whitened with anger. What length these fools would go to maintain their face! "By my promise," he corrected in a steel hard voice, "I am to turn this miserable coolie boy over to Sheun Su this day for execution."

A low moan of anguish came from Lin.

Major Wu ducked his head with a smirk. "What you say is true, Pilot Thomas. I have come with soldiers to assist you."

Suddenly Thomas lost his temper.

"You!" He strode up to the astonished major. "You think I need your help and the help of soldiers to deliver one coolie boy for execution? Beat it, you scurvy dog! Get outta my sight before I tell the whole division where you and Su were when the advance was made."

Thomas watched them leave. There was no time to be lost. He dragged Lin from where he cowered within the hut. Shoving him along at a dog trot he followed closely after Wu and the soldiers. So closely indeed that they were almost on their heels as they entered the state reception chamber of the palace.

MAJOR WU was starting a vigorous protest to the general when Thomas shoved the guards aside and pushed Lin before him into the room.

"General Sheun Su—" Gilbert spoke in a loud voice—"I have delivered my coolie boy to you for execution, as I promised."

A complete silence fell on the large assembly of officers and city officials.

The general bowed, masking his surprise, Never, in his fondest dreams, had he imagined the American would lose face to the extent of delivering the boy himself, without protest.

"It is proper," he said finally. "You have kept your promise."

"I always keep my promises, General Sheun Su," Duke stated, pointedly. "And *you* have made promises to be kept also."

Sheun Su nodded, lips tight. He extended a bulky parcel. "Here is the value of five thousand dollars gold, part in currency of your country, part in Hongkong currency. Colonel Wong will vouch for this."

He threw his head back proudly. "You see, Pilot Thomas, General Sheun Su also keeps his promises."

Duke took the money, placed it on a chair near him. This whole thing was getting to be as fantastic as a dream, he thought.

But it was not a dream. In ten minutes his coolie boy would be having his neck stretched to receive the deadly kiss of a big sword. Unless . . .

Duke found that his hands were trembling from suppressed tension. He thrust them into his jacket pockets. One of them came in contact with the medal he had thoughtlessly dropped in there the night before.

"General Sheun Su," Thomas said, trying to keep his voice level, "you also promised me you would give full pardon to the miserable wretch who aided in demoralizing the enemy."

"That is true." The general nodded.

Duke jerked the pewter medal from his pocket, holding it so that all might see. He stepped forward and pulled Lin up from his crouching position. He could feel the boy trembling, like a frightened animal, as he pinned the medal on his faded blue coat.

"For this man, General Sheun Su, I demand full pardon of all past crimes, according to your promise."

It was pure, raw melodrama, even to the final stage effect of the medal. As such it was right down the Chinese alley. Lin's knees were too wobbly to support him, but with the help of Duke he stood before Sheun Su. A ghost of the old, impish grin came to his lips.

The general's face darkened with a rage and hatred the more unbearable because there was no possibility of revenge. He might have found a loophole by which he could have voided his promise of a pardon. But to execute a man just decorated for service to his country—that was unthinkable.

Subdued exclamations of approval could be heard from all sides. Colonel Wong, greatly respected by all of them, had risen sharply to his feet as Thomas demanded the pardon. Now he sat primly on the edge of the carved, blackwood stool.

He reached back and plucked his fan from under the collar of his long-robe. Its slow undulations revealed the mechanical nodding of his head, the approving smile on his wide mouth.

"The full pardon is granted," Sheun Su muttered and brought the flat of his palm sharply down on the table.

Duke bowed formally and managed to push Lin's upper regions into the semblance of a bow.

With a sudden impulse Duke took the parcel of money that Sheun Su had given him and stepped forward to drop it into the lap of Colonel Wong.

"Your country has brave soldiers," he said. "Men who will fight with swords against machine guns should not go with empty stomachs. Use this for food."

The colonel stood and bowed his thanks. "Perhaps," he murmured, behind the shield of his fan, "you will trust your secret with me." The wise old eyes wrinkled with silent mirth. "There is talk among the soldiers that you dropped devil powder from your airplane this morning."

"I dropped nothing from my plane," Duke said. "But perhaps," he added, "there were some hand grenades thrown into the enemies' watch fires. Plenty of

hand grenades. If one firecracker makes a noise, Colonel, will many firecrackers not make a greater noise?"

Colonel Wong tapped Duke approvingly on the shoulder with his fan. "Such profound wisdom should be brought to the attention of the generalissimo," he said. "Though it may break the rice bowl of a certain general it will be much better for my country, I think."

LIN marched along two paces in the rear as Duke left the palace gates. His flat chest was thrust up like the breast of a pouter pigeon, so that he could see that handsome medal. He walked with a grotesque flapping of his shoulders, so that the medal would swing about and attract the attention of all people.

"Don't be fooled by that worthless trinket, boy," Duke advised.

"Velly fine," Lin replied, with untouched complacency.

"There's at least twenty million people have one in my country," Thomas insisted.

"So?" happily. "Twenty million people likee, must be *velly* fine medal."

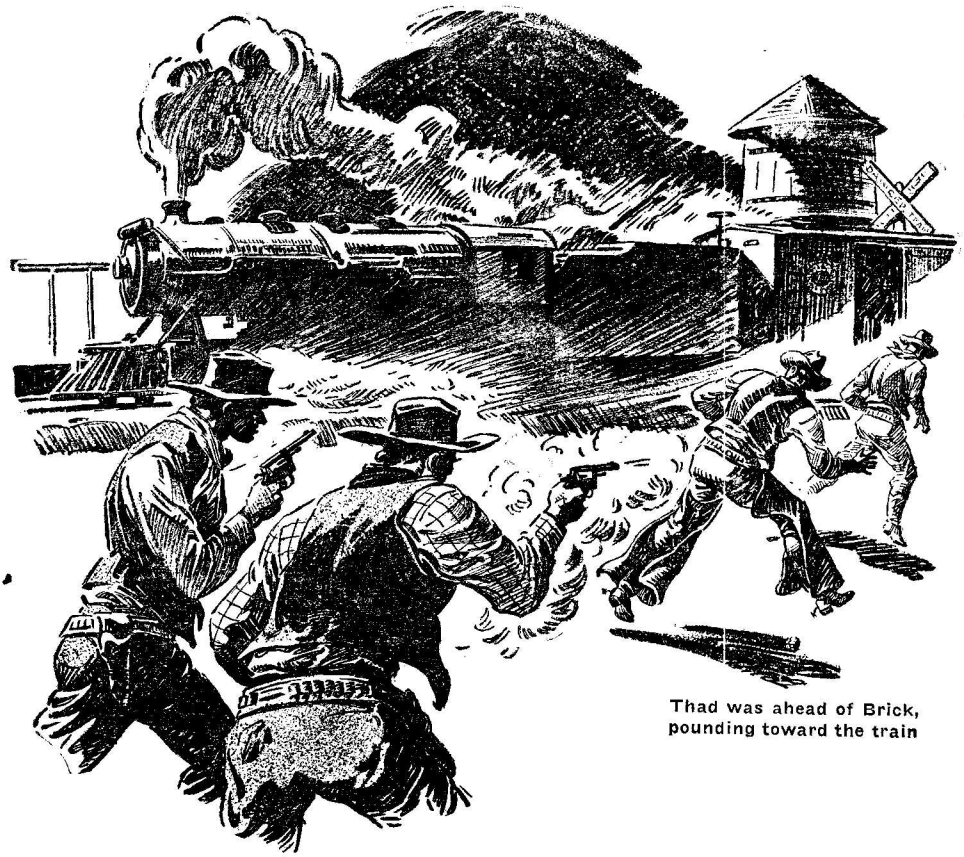
"You little dope! D'you know what is written on medal? Here," savagely. "I read for you: *Chicago World's Fair, 1933.* Now what d'you think of it?"

"Is velly fine medal, I thank you, marster."

Duke Thomas slouched along, his boots sinking into the thick, stinking dust of the street. A tall soldier, naked to the waist, still splashed with blood, rasped the big sword from his shoulder scabbard, flattened its blood-rimmed steel to his forehead and bowed—the guerrilla soldier's salute to a general. It was the Mongol who had loaned Duke his rifle.

Thomas acknowledged the courtesy salute. His lips twisted in a sour grin.

"Madmen," he growled. "Crazy, every one of them—including myself."



Thad was ahead of Brick, pounding toward the train

Rawhide Road

By BENNETT FOSTER

YOUNG Thad Breathea comes down from Wyoming to find his grandfather and walks straight into a mess of trouble. First of all, his letters of identification fall into the hands of a crooked gambler, Ten High Croates; and then Thad discovers that his grandfather is dead and that the Lazy S ranch now belongs to his step-uncle, taciturn, furtive Dale Krespin. Determined to hang onto the Breathea ranch, Krespin makes the best of a unique opportunity to doublecross Thad. By accident Thad is involved in a bank holdup in Las Flores; he is arrested, and Dale Krespin denies any knowledge of him.

But young Breathea isn't held for long. Brick Mahoney, leader of the bank robbers, breaks Thad out of jail and takes him to a hideout in the hills. Brick's two partners, Curly and Silk, refuse to drag a green kid around with them, however; they ride off on their own. So Thad Breathea and Brick Mahoney set out on a devious flight from the law—a flight that becomes even more hazardous and exhausting after Brick has shot a man in self-defense and has himself been wounded.

MEANWHILE in Las Flores the gambler Ten High Croates begins to blackmail Dale Krespin with Thad Breathea's letters, knowing that Krespin has tried to get rid of the other claimant to the Lazy S ranch. As for Krespin, he is jumpy with fear now because Thad is free; he consults with his foreman, the smooth, dangerous Ben Prince. Prince contracts to take care of Ten High Croates and to send some boys after young Breathea. He gets in touch with Curly and Silk, and they agree to kill Brick and Thad—for a price. Then, while Dale Krespin is sitting in the office of Deputy Charlie Farrel, a

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man dashes in to announce that the gambler Croates has been shot.

Thad Breathea, hiding out with Brick, cannot believe that the law will not give him a chance. So, when a posse finally discovers where the two are living, Thad rides out to give himself up. He gets a burst of gunfire for his pains. That decides Thad Breathea; riding in flight once more with Brick who is still suffering from his wound, Thad announces bitterly that he's staying clear of the law. "From now on," he says, "I'm on my own!" . . .

CHAPTER XIII

RUN, LITTLE BANDIT

MORNING came, cold, gray, cloudless. With the first faint streaks of dawn Thad was up, out of the shelter of the stream bed, wrangling the hobbled horses. The animals were fresher after the night's rest, but they were far from what Thad wanted in the line of horseflesh. Still they must do until others could be acquired, and Thad saddled them.

Brick lay by silently. His face was lined and Thad knew that the arm was paining him. When they inspected the injury Thad drew a quick breath. The arm was swollen huge and was red and inflamed. It was easy to see that the bullet wound was infected; but Thad, replacing the bandage, could not tell whether or not the arm was broken again.

"Got to do something about that," Thad announced when he had finished. "That's got to have a doctor, Brick."

"No." Brick shook his head. His eyes were bright with the mounting fever in his body. "No doctor. Think I want to run my head in a loop?"

"We've got to outfit anyhow," Thad said. "Where's a town, Brick?"

"Concha," Brick answered slowly, "is just against the Texas line. Mebbe—"

"We'll go there," Thad decided.

Brick looked at the boy and was about to expostulate, but closed his lips on the words. There was a new look about Thad, a new competency in his very posture. It was as though Thad Breathea had suddenly graduated into manhood.

"An' here's where we get some horses," Thad announced. "There's a bunch workin' in to water."

He helped Brick mount and, leaving the red-haired man under the creek bank, rode out on the flat. There was a horse band coming toward the creek and Thad drove them in toward the water. He was pleased to note that the horses bore saddle marks, showing that they were broken. In his present condition Brick could not ride a bronc.

The horses went into the creek bed and Thad drove them downstream. Brick fell in with the horses, turning them, and they went into an angle of the cut bank, some hundred feet of sand and gravel separating them from the water. Thad and Brick dismounted and Thad took Brick's rope from the saddle and got his own rope.

"They're gentle," he said, and walked toward the horses.

Brick stood by while Thad made his selections. For Brick he roped out a bay with black stockings, and led him out, tying him to a clump of brush. For himself, he selected another bay, almost the twin of Brick's. Brick let the rest go and they trotted off as Thad began to change saddles.

When he had effected the change, shifting Brick's saddle as well as his own, he mounted Brick's horse and rode him back and forth through the sand. Brick watched, and despite the pain in his arm he could not repress a grin. Thad Breathea was uncorking his companion's horse and doing a business-like job. Thad, seemingly, had undertaken to look after Brick Mahoney.

Satisfied that Brick's horse would not buck, Thad mounted his own. This horse too, full of vigor as he was, did not offer to pitch. Brick, climbing unsteadily on his bay while Thad held the animal's head, grinned again.

"And now what?" Brick asked.

"Now," Thad replied, "we'll haze these horses we rode along and drop 'em where they won't be too easy picked up. We're pretty close to a house, the way I figure, and there's no use of leavin' sign."

"You learn fast," Brick said, and fell in behind the two riderless horses.

THE two men rode on east, driving the free horses until Brick moved to drop them in a clump of piñon trees on a little point. They had come a full ten miles from the creek and there was not much chance that the horses would be picked up soon.

Two companions struck on through the piñons and out onto the plain again, still working east. They were hungry and tired, stiff from their riding and from their almost sleepless night. Neither mentioned the fact. Thad watched Brick with anxious, covert glances. Brick attended grimly to the business of getting along.

Finally, black smoke against the sky attracted the attention of both, and Brick said: "That's the E.P.&S.W. We're gettin' close to it."

"Where's Concha?" Thad asked.

"East, along the tracks," Brick answered vaguely.

At noon, with the sun high overhead, a wagon road curving up from the south came to run beside the tracks. Thad and Brick followed the road. They came presently to a crossroad, a grade crossing traversing the tracks and joining the road they followed. There was a telegraph pole beside the crossing and tacked on it a white cardboard square. Thad, riding close, looked at the sign and then pulled it loose and rode back to Brick.

"Look," he directed.

It bore this legend:

WANTED

For Bank Robbery and Murder: Thomas Mahoney, alias Brick Mahoney, alias Red, alias Colorado Mahoney; and Thaddeus Breathea, alias Thad Breathea, alias Wyoming Kid.

A description followed and then:

A reward of two hundred dollars each will be paid by the sheriff of Dos Piedras County for information leading to the apprehension and arrest of the above.

"They didn't get my name right," Thad said carefully. "It ain't Thaddeus; it's Theodore. I'd better tell 'em about that."

"You can thank Branch Long for that 'Wyoming Kid' business," Brick commented. "He heard me say you were from Wyoming an' he heard me call you 'kid.' "

"The Wyoming Kid," Thad murmured the words. He tossed the poster aside and looked at Brick through narrowed, glinting eyes. "Let's go on," he said tersely, and the words were an order. Brick made no answer other than to start his horse.

By mid-afternoon, still following the railroad, they saw against the hazy eastern sky the black bulk of a water tower perched on stilts above the railroad grade. That water tower was Concha, Brick said. He added that they had better wait for night.

"The stores will be open," Brick continued. "It's a little town an' they won't close up. You'd better buy what we're goin' to need, Thad. My red hair kind of marks me."

Thad nodded his agreement, and Brick, holding his reins in his injured hand, drew money from his pocket and handed it to his companion. Thad took the proffered bills and put them away, and they rode on, looking now for a place to hole up until darkness came.

They found what they wanted in a stone-lined culvert that crossed under the tracks. The arch was set at an angle, bending sharply just beyond the tracks, and a trickle of water ran through the culvert. The two men dismounted, watered the horses and drank. Then Thad and Brick sat down, with their backs against the stone of the culvert. Brick smoked a cigarette that Thad rolled for him, and they spoke of their future plans.

"We'd better," Brick said, "turn these horses loose an' get on the train out of here. This is the E.P.&S.W. an' it runs right into Franklin. We can hit a train an' go south. I'm goin' to have to lay up awhile till this arm gets well."

"You mean buy a ticket?" Thad demanded. "They'd—"

"I mean hop a freight," Brick interrupted, and grinned. "We'll ride a boxcar south."

"Oh," Thad said.

"But first," Brick announced, "we've got to eat. I'm about half starved."

Thad too was feeling the pinch of hunger. He nodded. "Will we turn the horses loose out here?" he asked. "An' what about the saddles, Brick? They—"

"Yo're ridin' a stolen saddle an' I expect that mine belonged to somebody else one time," Brick said. "Don't worry about the saddles. But I don't think we'd better walk in. We'll take the horses an' just leave 'em in town. Somebody will want 'em an' anyhow we'd better have 'em handy in case we need to leave before a train pulls out. I wish this arm didn't hurt so damned bad."

"Let's put some cold water on it," Thad said. "Maybe that would ease it some."

Brick bared his arm, tenderly lifting it from the sling, and Thad bathed the inflamed surface with a handkerchief. Brick said that the water felt good.

WHEN sundown came, they mounted once more and rode on east. The water tank came closer, and Brick, pulling his gun from his holster, pushed the weapon down inside his waistband under his shirt. "You'd better hide your gun, kid," he advised. "They don't like for you to carry one in town an' we'd better not have the law lookin' at us."

Following Brick's example, Thad slipped shells from his belt, placing them in a trousers pocket. They hung the gun belts on their saddles.

"We'll eat," Brick announced. "An' I want a drink. I can use a drink of whisky, kid."

Thad nodded. He had taken but one drink of liquor in his life, a drink that his father had given him when he had come from a long ride, cold and wet through.

He remembered that now.

"An' a big steak," Brick continued. "We'll buy a little canned stuff, too, so we can have somethin' to eat in our boxcar."

It was dusk when they reached the outskirts of the town. Brick turned his horse toward the railroad and nodded his satisfaction. A switch engine was chuffing busily back and forth in the railroad yard and there was a locomotive on the track from the round-house, its nose pointed toward the east.

"Looks like we're in luck," Brick commented.

"Why?" Thad demanded.

"They're makin' up a train. That engine's headed the way we want to go."

Thad grunted. This was all new to him.

"An empty boxcar is goin' to look mighty good to me," Brick said. "This is all right, kid. We'll tie the horses to that hitch-rack an' go get our drink an' our meal. Come on."

They were in the middle of the town now, the street they traversed flanking the tracks of the railroad. Further along they could see the bulk of the depot and its lights. Opposite them was a hitch-rail with three horses tethered to it, and behind the rail a store. A little further down the street was a saloon, and between it and the depot a restaurant. Thad fastened both horses to the hitch-rail.

"Don't tie a tight knot," Brick admonished. "We might want 'em."

They went around the rail and on to the saloon, boots thumping on the board sidewalk, Brick's spurs jingling. Pushing open the door, they went in, and a heavy man, hair plastered against his head and neatly parted in the middle, put down the towel and glass he held and advanced along the bar toward them. Brick tipped back his hat, grinned at the barman and said: "Whisky."

The bartender's round, inquiring eyes sought Thad's, and Thad nodded. The bartender set out a bottle and two small glasses.

Thad watched Brick. When Brick poured his drink, Thad did likewise, and when Brick said: "First today!" and shot the whisky down his throat, Thad at-

tempted to toss his off as casually. It gagged and burned and he swallowed convulsively.

Brick said, "That was good. We'll take another."

They had the second drink, and the bartender gave Brick his change, asking: "Been travelin'?"

"Some," Brick told him. "We come in from Texas. Is there anythin' goin' on around Concho? Anybody hirin' hands?"

"They're workin' cattle," the bartender announced. "You might catch on with a wagon. Looks like you'd got hurt."

"Horse fell with me," Brick said casually. "It ain't bad."

Thad could feel the whisky warming him, the warmth suffusing from his belly up through his body. His tongue felt thick and furry. Brick, too, was feeling the two quick drinks on his empty stomach.

"Have another little shot?" the bartender asked, moving the bottle suggestively.

"Sure," Brick agreed, taking the bottle.

"I've had enough," Thad declared. "I'm hungry, Brick."

Brick's eyes shot a warning and Thad realized at once what he had done. Brick put down the bottle.

"I guess I won't," he said elaborately. "I'm hungry, too. Come on, Bud."

They went out of the saloon. On the sidewalk Thad said: "I'm a damned fool. I didn't think."

"I don't guess he noticed it," Brick said. "Let's eat."

They went on to the restaurant.

WHILE they waited for their steaks to cook, Brick read a paper that was on the table. It was an old paper, its edges frayed and the corners curled. Brick read slowly and then pushed the paper across to Thad. "I'm glad that fellow Curly downed in the bank didn't die," Brick said, low voiced.

Thad read the headlines and the story. There was a description of the bank robbery in Las Flores, a detailed account.

"We didn't get near what they said we did," Brick murmured. "We didn't get but about a thousand dollars. We had to run before we got to the vault."

Thad made no answer. The waiter came, bearing the steaks.

The whisky, coupled with their long fast, had given Thad and Brick the appetites of wolves. They ate rapidly, hardly able to restrain themselves and chew the meat. The steaks, the potatoes, canned corn, and the coffee were quickly gone. Brick wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glanced at Thad, who had already finished. At the counter, as he paid the proprietor, Brick jerked his head toward the railroad yard across the street.

"They haulin' much freight?" he asked.

"Pretty good," the restaurant man answered. "That's a westbound drag they're makin' up over there. They—" He stopped. Two railroaders had come through the door, an engineer and a fireman evidently.

"Put me up a lunch, Tom," one man directed. "Make it snappy, will you? You want a cup of coffee, Jack?"

The other nodded and the two went to the counter and sat down. Thad and Brick exchanged glances. Brick in the lead, they went on out to the sidewalk.

"You go up to the store, kid," Brick instructed. "Get some canned stuff. Get some canned tomatoes so we'll have somethin' to drink. I'll wait for you."

Thad nodded and walked toward the store in front of which their horses were tied. Brick leaned back against the wall. Down the street a short distance a street lamp burned, yellow in its glass box.

THERE was a customer in the store, a woman who required an endless amount of attention. She debated with the proprietor while Thad fidgeted. When, finally, she was satisfied and went out, Thad had already made his selections and gave his order tersely.

Canned tomatoes, canned beans, sardines, a box of crackers, these were shoved into a sugar sack that the storekeeper pro-

duced. Thad paid for the goods, picked up the sack and went to the door. As he stepped out on the sidewalk, he heard the crash of boxcar couplings coming together. He glanced to the right to locate Brick, and at his elbow a man spoke.

"These your horses, bud?"

Instantly Thad sensed danger. He turned, saw that the speaker was a tall thin man with a dark mustache, and that there was a star on his coat. Behind the officer Thad saw another man.

"What horses?" Thad asked, and shifted the sack.

"Right there," the officer said. "I think you rode into town on 'em. The barkeeper down at the Blue Ribbon heard you call a man Brick. Yo're under—"

On the tracks a whistle sounded two short blasts. Thad saw Brick push himself away from the wall of a building and step out into the light. Again couplings clashed and wheels groaned as they began to move.

"Run!" Thad yelled, and swung the sack. The canned goods crashed against the thin man's face, driving him back into his companion. Thad dropped the sack and sprinted across the street. Glancing back, he could see Brick coming after him. He slowed and heard Brick's panting call:

"Go on, kid!"

Cars were sliding past Thad. The black open door of a boxcar was immediately in front of him, moving sedately. Thad flung himself at that black opening. He heard shots crashing into the darkness, felt the edge of the car floor, and with a heave he sprawled into the car.

Scrambling up, he looked out of the door. Brick was nowhere in sight. He must have reached the train. In the street Thad could see men running across the light of the lamp. He cowered back from the door. Under him the wheels were clicking as the train picked up speed. Up ahead the whistle sounded again, and risking another glance, Thad saw a light waving in little concentric circles far down the train. He drew back and squatted beside the door, making himself small.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MELANCHOLY LAWMAN

ON SUNDAY morning Charlie Farrel was busy. A lean, tireless man with a melancholy face, he went from place to place, summoning those men he wanted for a coroner's jury. Later, while the coroner and the county prosecutor questioned witnesses and while the jurymen viewed the mortal remains of Ten High Croates, Farrel held his place, motionless, against the wall of the room and listened to the testimony, his eyes alert as the witnesses appeared.

The jury, after a brief intermission, gave the verdict. Ten High Croates had come to his death by gunshot wounds inflicted by a person unknown. Gus Hoffman, always politic, stepped out with the jurymen, and Charlie Farrel went into the sheriff's office. He was there, sitting at the desk, his head tipped back and his pipe between his teeth, when Hoffman joined him.

Gus Hoffman was fat, and in the heat of the day his skin was oily. He was sheriff because of his politics and because he had married Maria Villareal; the whole clan of the Villareals had voted him into office. Sometimes Gus took his job seriously, but more often he was inclined to let Farrel run the office. Farrel could see that this was one of the times when Gus wanted to be sheriff, so he sucked on his unlighted pipe and prepared to be patient.

"We're goin' to have to do somethin' about this killin', Charlie," Gus said importantly. "We're goin' to have to do somethin' right away. This murder right on the heels of the bank robbery an' that jail break don't look good. In fact, the whole thing's bad. Mahoney tyin' you up an' takin' that kid out of jail, and Ketleman gettin' killed an—"

Farrel straightened in his chair and looked at his superior officer. "I'm an officer, Gus," he interrupted, "but I'm not a damned fool. Mahoney wanted that kid and he had a gun on me. I was mis-

taken about the kid and I'll admit it, but I'm not goin' to be a damned fool when a man's got the drop."

Hoffman waved that aside. "Anyhow we're goin' to have to do somethin'," he said again.

"And what had we better do, Gus?" Farrel questioned gently. "You heard the testimony at the inquest."

Hoffman sat down. He took a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end and lighted the cigar. He did not offer one to his subordinate. "Somethin'," he said around the brown cylinder. "Now I think that Croates was killed by somebody that had a grudge against him. He had trouble with Joe Pierce an' Walt Davis on the train the day he got here. Now I think . . ."

Hoffman's voice droned on. Charlie Farrel had already telegraphed Albuquerque and received reports on the activities of Mr. Davis and Mr. Pierce. Pierce was in jail for disturbing the peace and Mr. Davis was no longer in residence at Albuquerque, having been invited to go further south by the alert officials of that thriving city.

Charlie Farrel had received this information about four o'clock in the morning. Hoffman was an annoyance when there happened to be work to do, and Charlie Farrel wanted to think. He swiveled the chair around.

"Why don't you take a posse and look into that tip we got from Andreas Montoya?" he asked suddenly. "Andreas said that there were some strange horses out at Alfredo Vara's goat ranch and that Alfredo was feedin' somebody. Remember? Maybe Mahoney and the kid are holed up at Vara's."

Gus Hoffman seized the idea, as Farrel had known he would. Hoffman liked to lead a posse, and he liked, when things tightened up, to pass the buck to Farrel's broad shoulders.

Hoffman came up from where he sat, and slapped his leg. "That's right!" he exclaimed.

"I was goin' to ride out to Vara's place today," Farrel said. "Mebbe it would be better if you went. I'll stay here and work on this Croates business."

Gus Hoffman nodded vigorously. "Mahoney!" he said. "If he's out there I'll get him. That would be somethin'. After all, Croates was just a tinhorn gambler. Now Mahoney . . ."

Farrel lost the rest of the sentence. He was tipped back in his chair again, thinking. Gus Hoffman bustled about the office and presently went out. After a time Farrel heard a disturbance outside the courthouse and, going to the window, he saw Hoffman riding away. There were four men with Hoffman, Dale Krespin among them.

"He's got some good company," Charlie Farrel said comfortably, and went back to his chair.

FOR a long time he sat there, eyes closed, meditating. He was a good officer and he kept his county as clean as he could with the help that he had. That was a task. The county was a hundred miles broad by a hundred and twenty long, and Farrel's help was inadequate. Hoffman was a nonentity, and the deputies that Hoffman appointed were picked for the votes they would draw and not for their ability in law enforcement.

Charlie Farrel checked things over in his mind. He knew that there were black spots in the county. He knew that Branch Long would harbor an outlaw, but knowing and proving were different things. He was aware, too, that there were officers in other adjacent counties who were less scrupulous than he, and less efficient even than Hoffman. For example, Farrel had heard rumors of Arch Ratcliff's cabin across the county line. It was out of Farrel's jurisdiction. What could he do about it?

Like all good peace officers, Charlie Farrel had his stool pigeons. The bank robbery had been unforeseen insofar as the sheriff's office was concerned, but a rumor had filtered through to Farrel that Lon Popples and his deputy town marshal had been expecting just such an occur-

rence and had been more or less prepared for it. Farrel expected and got no co-operation from the town marshal. Popples was on the other side of the political fence from Gus Hoffman.

Then there was the killing of Kettleman. Dolf McBride was the deputy sheriff in that district, and Farrel had long suspected that McBride was seeing some Kettleman money. But Gus Hoffman would listen to no word against McBride who was foreman for the J Cross T and controlled a lot of votes.

Now had come this murder in Las Flores itself. Someone had thrust a gun through the window of Tony Lazolli's dance hall and pulled the trigger three times. Ten High Croates was very dead and there was no reason for his being killed, as far as Charlie Farrel could see. The gray-haired deputy shook his head. He picked up his hat and walked out of the sheriff's office. He was going out to ask a few questions.

FARREL took his way along the plaza and turned at the east corner. Following down that street, he came presently to Lulu Black's establishment. Las Flores had a Sunday closing law, but Farrel found Buster presiding behind the bar. Two customers drinking beer at the bar recognized the newcomer and departed hastily.

"Where's Lulu, Buster?" Farrel asked.

"Out back," Buster answered surlily. "Look, Charlie, everybody opens up on Sunday. You ain't goin' to—"

"I want to talk to Lulu," Farrel interrupted. "Go get her."

Buster went out a rear door of the long room, and Farrel seated himself and waited.

Lulu was not long in answering the summons. Seeing Farrel, she smiled placatingly and came toward him.

"Hello, Sheriff," Lulu said affably.

Farrel nodded. "How are you, Lulu?" he answered. "I saw you at the inquest this mornin'. I thought I'd come around and talk to you a little."

Lulu's blue eyes were hard and wary. "I told all I knew about Ten High at the inquest," she announced. "He was stayin' here an' last night he went out an' said that he was goin' to Tony's. The next thing I knew Lou Popples was here tellin' me that Ten High had been killed and that I had to come to the inquest. That's all I know, Sheriff."

"Let's visit awhile," Charlie Farrel suggested. "I haven't seen you for a long time, Lulu. You've stayed out of trouble pretty good."

Lulu assumed a virtuous air. "I won't stand for drunks in my place," she said. "I run a nice respectable beer parlor an'—"

Farrel waved a hand. "I know what you run," he said grimly. "There's nothin' a man can't buy in your place, from cards and bad whisky to marijuana. Did you ever hear of Leavenworth, Lulu?"

Lulu's eyes grew wide. "Leavenworth?" she demanded. "Are you tryin' to scare me, Charlie? Leavenworth? Why, that's a Federal penitentiary. That's where the Government sends people."

Farrel nodded. "Let's sit down an' talk about Leavenworth a little," he said.

Lulu flopped into a chair. "Leavenworth!" she said again.

Farrel took off his hat, put it on the table. "Yeah," he drawled. "Leavenworth. I haven't cracked down on you, Lulu. Popples runs the town and I know that you pay Popples for protection. That's his business.

"Oh, maybe I can't prove it." He spoke hastily, forestalling the words that were on Lulu's lips. "I'm not out to reform the world, Lulu. I'm not a parson. The business between you and Popples is between you and Popples; but this other is murder and I'm interested. Now what do you know about it?"

Lulu's lips set in a stubborn line. "I told what I knew at the inquest," she answered again.

"All right." Farrel reached for his hat. "There'll be a U. S. deputy marshal callin' in on you pretty soon now. Of course

he's goin' to be interested in the fact that Benny Tafoya and Salomon Garcia an' that bunch got their marijuana here. He—"

"But I never sold it to 'em," Lulu shrilled. "You know I never. It was—"

"They got it in your place," Farrel interrupted. "The deputy marshal ain't goin' to go any further than that. Particularly when I tell him—"

"Now look." Lulu leaned forward across the table. "Now look, Charlie. You know that I shipped Juan Selas out of here as soon as I found out what was goin' on. You know—"

Mentally Farrel filed the name Juan Selas for future reference. He had not known about Selas. Farrel's voice was dry as he said: "Tell it to the deputy," and put on his hat preparatory to leaving.

"Wait, Charlie!" Lulu's voice rose high. "I don't want a U. S. marshal around here. I never done nothin', I don't know who killed Ten High."

FARREL settled back and took off his hat again. "What was Ten High into, Lulu?" he asked conversationally. "He talked to you, didn't he?"

"He had some trouble with Joe Pierce an' Walt Davis on the train when he came here this last time," Lulu said.

"And one of them is in jail and one is in El Paso," Farrel said. "It wasn't them, Lulu. Ten High talked to some of his friends about how much money he was goin' to get. Where was the money comin' from?"

"I don't know," Lulu answered. "I'll tell you what, Charlie. I'll take you down to Ten High's room. You search it. Maybe you'd find somethin'!" There was a cunning gleam in Lulu's China blue eyes.

Farrel's lips twitched sardonically. Lulu was going to make sure that he found something.

And that was all right.

Lulu padded down the hall. Wanting to give Lulu time to make her plant in Ten High's room, Charlie Farrel stopped to speak to Buster who was returning to the barroom. Lulu knew a great dea that she wasn't going to tell in words: of that Farrel was certain. And he wa lucky to get any information at all. The talk about marijuana had been a bluff and Farrel was surprised that it had gone over so well. He left Buster and went on. Lulu was inside the door at the end of the hall. She gestured as Farrel entered.

"His grip is under the bed," she said. "All his other stuff is in the closet. You look around, Charlie."

"I'll do that," Farrel agreed. Coming down the hall, he had heard a ringing sound as of something striking against the brass bedstead.

Lulu stood by while Farrel casually looked around the room. At length he approached the bed and pulled out Ten High's grip. The room had been searched before by one of his deputies. But now he expected to find something.

When he opened the grip his expectations were realized. There, on top of the tangle of soiled clothing, was an envelope. Farrel picked it up, noted that the return address on it was that of some lawyer in Wyoming, and read through the papers that the envelope contained.

Lulu watched the officer narrowly, but Farrel's face was inscrutable. "Did you find anything, Charlie?" she asked.

"Not much," Farrel answered, returning the letters to the envelope and placing it in his coat pocket. "Not much, Lulu. I guess it was just one of those things. I'll go back to the office."

"About that United States marshal . . ." Lulu began.

"I don't expect one in for quite a while," Farrel said. "Don't put too much confidence in Lon Popples, Lulu. He doesn't always do what he says he will."

"Popples!" Lulu spat the word. "I wouldn't trust that man as far as I could throw a bull by the tail. Why, you know what he done—"

"You take it up with Popples," Charlie Farrel said. "So long, Lulu. Stay out of jail."

He walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

NEVER ARREST A VOTER

BACK at the courthouse again, he once more read the letters through. When he had finished he tapped thoughtfully on the desk with the folded papers and considered facts.

Charlie Farrel knew that Jake Breathea had died intestate. He knew that Dale Krespin claimed the estate and that Krespin was almost sure to get it. Farrel had first been an officer under old Jake, and while Breathea had been a hard taskmaster, Charlie Farrel bore a lasting affection for the old man.

Now, here in his hand, was proof that the youngster whom Mahoney had broken out of jail was old Jake's grandson.

"Well," Charlie Farrel said musingly, "it was worth killin' a man over. Old Jake had three thousand head of cattle and the Lord knows how much land." Again he tapped with the letters on the desk top. Krespin! that was the man. Dale Krespin! He stood to lose a fortune, and Ten High Croates had used these letters.

"But hell!" Charlie Farrel said aloud, sitting bolt upright in his chair. "Dale Krespin was in here when Ten High was killed. Right in this office."

He slumped down again and thought further. Lulu was not telling all she knew. He had to get a little more from Lulu. He had to find out. . . .

Charlie Farrel got up and reached for his hat. This time he went around the plaza and down another street into a respectable section of the sprawling little town. Along the street he went until he reached a dwelling house and there he paused. Grinning faintly, he went up the walk and knocked at the front door. A man in shirt sleeves came to the door and Farrel jerked his head toward the porch. The man came on out, a portly, gray-haired citizen.

"What's on your mind, Charlie?" he asked.

"I'm after a little information, Colonel," Farrel answered.

"Anything I can do . . ." the man said.

Farrel nodded. "Lulu Black," he said, and noted that the portly man's ruddy face paled, "is holdin' out a little information we need. I'd sure like it if she came in and talked to me."

"I'm sure I don't . . ." the portly man said.

"You've got a lot of influence, Colonel," Farrel said significantly. "I hope you'll use it."

The colonel was suddenly affable. "Won't you come in, Charlie?" he asked. "It's hot and my daughter's made a pitcher of lemonade. Come in."

"No thanks, Colonel," Farrel said. "I'll go along. Stop in at the courthouse and see me when you're down that way." He nodded then, and went down the steps and back toward the plaza.

It was not pleasant, being an officer. A man learned a lot of things that weren't particularly agreeable. Sometimes he had to use his information. The colonel was a respected citizen, a widower, and he had a couple of fine kids. If the colonel only knew it, he was as safe as he would be in a church; but the colonel didn't know it.

In the sheriff's office Farrel produced the envelope once more and studied its surface. Presently he grunted and brought out paper, a bottle of ink and a pen. The ink was dried in the bottle, thick and heavy, and the pen scratched. Charlie Farrel, squirming occasionally because this was hard work, wrote a letter and addressed it, referring to the envelope that he had found in Ten High's grip. He had just finished that task when he had visitors.

TONY LAZOLLI was a fat man and excitable. The man with Tony was disheveled and dirty; he was Roy Morrison, Las Flores' official drunkard. Mothers, wishing to frighten their children into paths of rectitude, said: "Do you want to be like Roy Morrison?"

"Come in, boys," Charlie Farrel said

to them. "What's on your mind, Tony?"

"Tella heem!" Tony exclaimed, shoving Morrison forward. "Tella heem wa't you tell me!"

Morrison, battered hat in his hands, stared at the floor. "Well," he said hesitantly, "I was drunk last night, Charlie. I'd got some money for haulin' a load of wood to old man Apple's an' I went to Tony's an'—"

"Never you minda that!" Tony shrilled. "You tella heem!"

"I am tellin' him, ain't I?" Morrison demanded. "Just as fast as I can. I—"

"Get along with it, Roy," Farrel commanded, forestalling another outburst from Lazolli.

"Well," Morrison continued, "anyhow I was drunk. But I wasn't clear passed out. Tony put me out when the dance started. He said he didn't want me around. So I went outside an' I was layin' down by the buildin'. I thought I'd go back. It ain't fair to sell a man whisky to get drunk on an' then throw him out when he gets drunk. I was goin' back in, but that barkeeper that works for Tony is a tough customer an'—well, I lay down an' I guess I went to sleep."

"Tella heem," Tony insisted. "You go alla round an' you don' tella nothin'."

"Go on, Roy," Farrel said quietly.

"Well," Morrison said, "there was some shots woke me up an' I looked around an' I seen a man runnin' away. I got up an' started to foller him, but I tripped over some wire an' fell down. Tony don't clean up around his place. It's a wonder I didn't break my neck. Anyhow this man run—"

"Did you see him?" Farrel asked.

"Kind of," Morrison admitted.

"Who was it?"

"It looked like Ben Prince," Morrison said. "I know Ben an'—well, it kind of looked like him."

"I tella heem he's crazy!" Lazolli clamored. "I tell heem that he'sa droonk an' he'sa crazy. You tell heem, Charlie. He'sa droonk, huh?"

"You must have been drunk, Roy," Charlie Farrel said. "I wouldn't go around spillin' talk like this to anybody if I was you. Nobody'd believe you an' you might get into trouble."

"I guess I was drunk," Morrison said contritely. "It was dark anyhow. Yeah, I guess I was drunk all right. It couldn't of been Ben Prince."

"That's right, Roy," Farrel said. "And now, Tony, I'll tell you something: Roy's right. You got no business sellin' a man liquor to get drunk on an' then throwin' him out. The sheriff's office don't have much to say how things go in Las Flores, but if I was you and wanted to keep my place open, I'd stop that. I sure would."

All the wind went out of Tony Lazolli. He glared malevolently at Roy Morrison, seemed about to say something, and then stamped out of the office. Roy Morrison twisted his hat. "Did you want me for anythin', Charlie?" he asked.

"Not a thing, Roy," Farrel said gently. "Just don't talk too much and if I was you I wouldn't take a drink at Lazolli's place. I wouldn't go around there."

"I ain't goin' to," Roy Morrison declared. Turning, he shambled out of the office.

CHARLIE FARREL put his feet on the desk after Morrison was gone and thoughtfully surveyed his boot toes. "An' Ben will have an alibi a mile long," he surmised. "Well, there's no use in gettin' Roy killed. I guess I done the right thing." He scowled at the boot toes. "I'll ride down and check on Ben a little anyhow," he said. "Just as soon as Gus gets back."

Gus Hoffman did not get back until noon, Monday. He came into his office walking with feet wide spread, sore from his ride. He carried information and excitement with him. They had, he told his chief deputy, jumped Brick Mahoney and the youngster with him, at Alfredo Vara's goat ranch.

"The kid rode right down to see who we was," Hoffman said. "Boldest thing I ever saw. He rode right out toward us."

"An' then?" Farrel prompted.

"There was an arroyo between us," Hoffman continued, looking around at his companions for corroboration. "Krespin took a shot at the kid. He just sat there. Krespin took another shot an' the kid turned his horse an' run. Mahoney come out from behind the house and hooked up with him. They went east. We followed them but their horses were fresh an' we lost sight of 'em. When I get rested up, I'm goin' to get hold of Vara. He—"

"Come here a minute, Gus," Farrel nodded his head toward a corner. The sheriff followed him.

"About Vara," Farrel said, "I wouldn't be too hard on him, Gus. You know all them Varas live together up above Pacheco, an' well, likely Mahoney an' that kid held a gun on him an' scared him to death an' made him hide 'em. I wouldn't be too hard on Alfredo, Gus."

Fat Gus Hoffman grunted, but Farrel knew that the words had gone home. There were a lot of Varas and they had a lot of votes.

"Anyhow," Hoffman said, "I'm goin' to talk to Alfredo."

"Sure," Farrel agreed. "What became of Krespin, Gus?"

"He went home," Hoffman answered. "There wasn't any need of him comin' to town so he went home."

"I see," said Charlie Farrel. "Yeah, I see. He went home."

CHAPTER XVI

BOXCAR BY NIGHT

GRADUALLY Thad's eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the boxcar. He remained beside the door, staring out into the night. The last lights of Concha had flickered away and now the dark expanse of country stretched out beside the train.

Somewhere back of him, in another rolling car, Brick Mahoney was hidden. Thad was sure of it. The feeling strengthened him. Despite his recent experiences, despite the hardness that had grown in him. Thad Breathea was still a kid, borrowing from Mahoney's mature strength.

The car rocked and jolted and Thad spread his legs out and leaned against the door. From the far end of the car a jocular voice came from the darkness.

"We got company, Chink. Come on back an' be sociable, sonny."

Instantly Thad was alert. The jocularity in the voice alarmed him more than harshness would have done. "Who's there?" he demanded.

"Now is that nice?" the voice asked. "We didn't go askin' you who you were when you piled into our carriage. Come on back, sonny. We ain't goin' to hurt you."

Thad remained beside the door, staring toward the source of the voice, trying to pierce the blackness. There was a rasping sound as though someone scraped a foot in moving, and Thad's hand went to his waistline, reaching in under his shirt and clutching the butt of the Bisley Colt.

"Aw what's the use of foolin' with him, Red?" another voice rasped. "Let's look him over."

"Now Chinky," the jocular voice said, "you wouldn't go an' be rough, would you? He's a nice little boy an' he's got money in his pockets an' tobacco for us to smoke, an' he's goin' to give it to us. Ain't you, sonny?"

Still Thad said nothing. The rasping sound came again. The car lurched and a man grunted. "Damn hoghead's tryin' to shake the liver out of us," Chink exploded, and cursed the engineer's ancestry.

"Well, kid," all the jocularity was gone from the first voice now, "are you goin' to pony up? Me an' Chink seen you an' yore friend eatin' in the restaurant. Yore friend didn't make the train. They was shootin' at you, wasn't they? Me an' Chink won't shoot. We'll—"

Thad had pulled his feet under him. The door opposite the one beside him was closed and there was a wedge of faint light stretching across the car. Thad with a single motion pushed himself up and

leaped, striking against the further door.

"What good is that, sonny?" Red scoffed. "Do you think you can dodge me an' Chink in here? Why sonny—"

The Bisley was in Thad's hand. A switch stand flashing past threw a red glare into the car for an instant, and then came darkness again. The red light winked from the dull blue of the gun, and Thad, finding his voice commanded:

"Stay where you are."

"Hell!" Red muttered, "he's got a gun, Chink!"

"Stay back," Thad warned.

The train was round a curve, gradually picking up speed as the engine struck a down-grade. Thad braced his shoulders against the car door. At the end of the car there was an indistinct murmur. "Listen, kid," Red said, his voice whining, "we was just foolin' with you. We're just a couple of harmless bums."

"You stay where you are." Thad gained assurance from the wheedling voice. "I've got a gun."

"We know you got a gun. We ain't goin' to do nothin' to you. We was just—Take him, Chink!"

THE whine of the flanges against the rail, the rock and rattle of the train had made hearing difficult. Thad caught a glimpse of a black bulk lunging toward him. Instinctively he ducked, dodging aside, and in his hand the Bisley crashed.

A man squealed, high and frightened but with no pain in the yell, and then Thad was caught by an arm that swept across his chest. He swung the Colt, the gun in his hand thumping down against bone, swung another blow and felt the encompassing arm drop away from him. Wheeling, then, Thad lifted the gun, the hammer pulled back, his finger tense on the trigger.

"You killed him!" Red's voice was shrill. "You killed Chink!"

Shoulders against the car door, Thad slid along toward the rear of the car, feet braced, eyes searching. He could see in the partial light that came through the open door a bulky bundle stretched on t car floor. Out of the dimness now and complete dark, Thad stopped. On the flo the man who had attacked him stirred.

"Come up to your pardner!" Thad o dered. "Come up to him or I'll cut loo at you!"

"Now, kid," Red whined, "we wasn goin' to hurt you."

"Come up!" Thad's voice was ine orable.

There was movement other than tha of the car and a second figure appeare beside the man on the floor. "See if he hurt," Thad commanded, keeping the gu trained steadily. "Look at him."

The man who had come from the rea of the car, bent down. Presently h straightened, pulling up the body of th other. "He ain't shot," Red announce surlily.

The man who had been prone groaned shifted in Red's grip, and braced himsel with his hands.

"What hit me?" he demanded.

"I hit you!" There was a ring and snap to Thad's voice. "I've got a gun o you now."

"Listen," Red was pleading, "we didn' mean nothin'."

"Pull him up," Thad ordered. "Get hin to his feet."

Red hauled at Chink's shoulders. Chink came up, took a lurching step and seized the edge of the open door for support "Now get off!" Thad snapped. "Jump!"

Red's voice was a wail. "We're goin too fast. You'll kill us."

Indeed the train was speeding now, the car rocking and lurching as the engineer made time down the slope of a sag. Thad could see the blackness of the landscape flashing past, and relented a trifle.

"Jump when he slows down," he ordered. "I don't trust you."

The speed of the train lessened as they passed the bottom of the sag and began the ascent of the other side. The tattoo of the wheels diminished. Up ahead the engine labored.

"Now!" Thad commanded. "Jump!"

"Listen, mister," Red whined. "We got our turkeys at the end of the car. We didn't mean nothin', honest. We was just havin' a little fun—"

"Jump!" Thad ordered.

"We'll be killed," Red wailed.

Thad moved swiftly out of the darkness into the gloom of the door. The Bisley was shoved forward, pointed at the two. It was not hardness but rather fear that drove Thad, that made his vice savage.

"Jump or I'll—"

Chink, at the car door, let go of the edge and leaped. For an instant he was a flying blur against the dark sky and then he was gone. The train was barely moving now, panting up the grade.

"Jump!" Thad ordered again.

"Damn you!" Red snarled. "I'll get even with you. I'll—" He, too, took a step and jumped into the night. Thad, listening, could hear nothing but the beat of the engine's exhaust and the rattle of the car. He sat down, his back against the door. Had he killed them? he wondered. The train was moving slowly out . . . The Bisley Colt lowered, rested against his leg. Thad sat trembling.

THEY passed the top of the climb and hurried down the other side, rocking wildly. Occasionally the engine wailed. Thad held the gun in his lax hand and stared at the square of dimness that was the open door.

How long he sat there he did not know. There was no way of measuring time. Then the speed slackened and there was a grinding sound beneath the car. Again the speed was checked, the jerk throwing Thad back, and then with a great clanking the train stopped.

Thad sat still. A jerk almost threw him to the floor as slack went out of the couplings. The car moved ahead, stopped, and from the engine came the muffled thudding of the air pump. Thad, gathering himself, got up, went to the car door and peered out. Away down the track he could see a lantern bobbing, and the lights of a switch stand. He sat down on the door edge and lowered himself to the cinders.

Moving back along the train, feet crunching in the ballast, Thad called cautiously: "Brick . . . Brick . . ." Beside each car he called vainly.

If Brick was on the train he must be behind the car Thad had taken. Thad knew that. He went on back toward the lighted caboose, still cautiously calling, still stopping to listen. Somewhere to the south a whistle wailed, faint and far away. At the car in front of the caboose Thad paused.

"Brick . . . Brick . . ." No answer.

Turning, he went forward again. There was a rumbling roar coming now, growing stronger. Again the whistle, shrill and clear. Thad hurried. There was a lantern coming toward him down the train. He reached the open door of his boxcar, hoisted himself up and sought the security of darkness. Sound and vibration beat against the sides of the car, the roar grew, swelled to deafening pulsation, and then died away. At the car door the lantern winked.

"Come out of there, you bum!" a voice called harshly. Thad, the Bisley hidden, moved forward.

"Think you can ride without payin' for it, do yuh?" said the man on the ground. Thad peered out. A brakeman stood in front of the car door, lantern lifted, brake club gripped threateningly.

"Come down now!" the brakeman ordered. "If you want to ride you got to pay or else you get off."

"How much?" Thad asked.

"How much you got?" the brakeman snapped.

Thad felt in his pocket. "I've got half a dollar," he said.

The brakeman lowered the brake club. "Hand it over," he ordered. "I'll let you ride, but if the brains or the hind shack comes along they'll throw you off. Come on. Gimme."

Thad dropped the half dollar in the brakeman's open palm.

"You'd better get up in the end of the car," he railroader announced. "Stay there where it's dark."

His feet crunched against the ballast again and the light was gone from the door. Thad retreated to the end of the car. His boot struck something soft, and bending down, he felt a blanket-wrapped bundle. Was this what they called a turkey? Thad sat down on the bundle.

His back was braced against the end wall when the engineer put slack into the train. The jerk when the slack went out almost knocked Thad unconscious. He did not know what was coming and his head snapped back against the wall.

The freight pulled out of the siding, stopped while the switch was closed, started again and once more the rattle of the car, the clack of the wheels, seemed to beat through Thad's body. He sat on the bundle, which slightly lessened the jolts of the train. Gradually his head drooped forward on his chest only to be snapped erect again. Droop forward . . . snap . . . lift the head . . . droop . . .

"Come on outa there, bum! Come on now!"

THAD opened his eyes. He was sprawled against the end of the car. There was a blanket under his head, torn and filthy. Another bundle was under him pressing against him.

He sat up stiffly. Daylight was flooding into the car, and thrust through the door was a broad red face that held a pair of snapping black eyes.

"Come on outa there," the man ordered. "This ain't no passenger train."

Stiffly Thad got to his feet. The black eyes in the red face widened. "Hell," the man said, "you ain't nothin' but a kid. It's a good thing I found you, kid."

Thad walked to the car door.

The man on the ground was as broad as his face. Broad shoulders, thick neck, short thick arms. He stared at Thad and Thad stared back, then suddenly the black eyes twinkled. "Where'd you get on?" the trainman asked

"Back there . . ." Thad said.

The broad shoulders shrugged. "W here's where you get off," the trainm said.

"I gave a man fifty cents," Thad to him. "He said I could ride . . ."

"That damned Ryan," the brakem growled. "Knockin' down on bums agai Was that all you had, kid?"

Thad made no answer. The trainm gestured with one broad, flat hand. "Y get off," he ordered. "We're outside t yard limit an' it's lucky for you. The got the toughest railroad bull in Alta the is this side of Franklin. Git off, kid, a take to your feet; an' don't let Sloan Whi less get hold of you."

Thad slid down to the car floor an dropped to the cinders. "Thanks," he sai "I—"

Again the broad hand waved. "Beat i kid," the trainman ordered. "Here. Something flashed through the mornin light. A quarter tinkled on the cinders a Thad's feet. "Cake money," said the brake man. "Now, g'wan an' beat it!"

Thad stooped to pick up the quarte then walked on along the train.

"Get off the right-of-way," the train man yelled after him. With an answerin wave of his hand Thad turned to the lef and dropping down over the little em bankment, left the tracks.

On down the tracks, a wagon road paral leling them, there was a town. Thad de bated about going into a town. It wa early morning and the sun was half hidde in a cloud bank. Across the clouds th sky was clear and a deep blue. Hunge overcoming caution, Thad trudged dow the road. As he walked, the train jerke into motion and rolled smoothly past him On the steps of the caboose the broad shouldered man lifted a hand in a partin gesture. Thad returned the wave.

He found a restaurant close to the edge of town and went in. The counter man eyed him curiously but went back to the coffee, bacon and eggs that Thad ordered. Thad looked at himself in the mirror that was behind the counter. He

s dirty, disheveled, his eyes red-rimmed. ıe counterman brought the order and ıad ate ravenously and paid for his meal. "You don't want to stick around town, l," the counterman advised. "The town ırshal is tough on hobos."

Thad nodded his thanks and left the staurant. He went on down the street d finding a store open, went in and ught a clean shirt. He had to give merchant a twenty-dollar bill and the ın eyed the bill, then glanced sharply at ıad before he made change. Carrying the rt, Thad went on his way. The town s awakening and he knew that he had tter not stay. He wished devoutly that ick were with him. Brick would know at to do.

CHAPTER XVII

WELCOME TO OUR HANGING

ON THE further edge of town where the houses gave way to prairie, there s a clump of trees. Walking past the ckyards, Thad made his way to the lit- grove.

There he found water and he washed, bbing his fingers over the stubble of ard on his chin. When the pool cleared, used it for a mirror and combed his ir with his fingers. His hair was long d unkept. When had he last had a hair- t? Thad remembered: It had been in rt Blocker, just before he took the in south. He leaned back against a e and moodily stared at the unpainted ards of the stockyards and at the roll- g green country that was all about.

Thoughts raced through his mind as he there. Uppermost in his thinking was ick Mahoney. Thad had not realized w much Brick meant to him. Now Brick s gone. Thad was on his own.

He wondered if word of the bank rob- ry and the killing close by Las Flores d come this far. This town was Alta and bbably the law in Alta was an anxious see him as the law in Las Flores or in ncha.

Wagons going by, headed toward town, attracted Thad. There were three of them, men sitting beside their wives on the spring seats, youngsters crowded into the wagon boxes. Thad stared after those wagons. There was only one thing for him to do: Go on to Franklin and find the Palace Saloon and Arch Heibert, and ask for Brick. Brick would not be there; Thad was sure of it. But what else could he do?

A little party of men rode by, going to Alta. There were lots of people on the road, all headed in the direction of Alta. Thad wondered what the attraction might be in town.

The sun climbed on up and the shade around the water lessened. Three milk cows, evidently belonging to people in town, came down and stood some distance away, afraid to come in to the water because Thad was there.

A train, going south, paused at the Alta yards, chuffed and puffed a good deal and then pulled slowly past Thad. He looked with longing at the red boxcars. He wished that he were on that train but he was afraid, afraid to run out and climb on. Anyhow it was going too fast.

More people passed along the road, going to town. The sun was full above and it was noon. Thad stood up. Certainly with so many people in town one more would not be noticed. He was hungry; he had missed a great many meals recently.

The outskirts of Alta were deserted. Thad went on toward the center of town. A two-storied, red brick building was at the town's center and as Thad neared it he encountered the crowd. There were no women in it, only men, and they blocked the sidewalks about the red building, filled the streets.

Thad hovered on the edge of the crowd, staying back. Men came up behind him, surrounding him. He heard voices, words that were meaningless, and then he was standing beside a smooth-faced young fellow of about his own age.

"What's going on?" Thad asked.

"They're hangin' Rusty Dunneman," the smooth faced boy answered, and pushed forward. There was an eddy in the

crowd that carried Thad along. He came to the edge of the sidewalk and stopped. The two-storied brick building was a courthouse, and there on the grass beside the courthouse the raw, yellow, wood scaffold stood.

"What they hanging him for?" Thad asked.

The smooth faced youth looked at him curiously. "Rusty held up an S. P. train," the boy answered. "Him an' his gang. The conductor and the express messenger was killed. You just come to town?"

Thad nodded. The youth, pleased with a fresh audience, retailed information. "Rusty got caught," he said. "One of his gang told the officers where he was. They had a big fight an' Rusty was brought in an' tried. He appealed the case but they finally turned him down. He's goin' to be hung at one o'clock. They . . . Here they come!"

THERE was a stir in the little clump of men beside the courthouse door. Another, compact crowd pushed through, closely surrounding a tall, hatless fellow who held his head defiantly. At the steps of the scaffold the group broke and the hatless man and three others began to climb the steps.

The men behind intrigued Thad. One of them, short, heavy-set, was carrying a sawed-off shotgun. Another was clothed in ministerial black, and a third, long and lank, with a bony face and a huge nose, wore a derby and was smoking a cigar with quick, nervous puffs.

"That fellow with the derby is Sloan Whitless," Thad's acquaintance murmured. "Railroad officer. He's the one that caught Rusty."

On the platform of the scaffold the three men were busy about the fourth. Quickly the rope loop that dangled from the heavy crossbeam was placed about the hatless man's head. The man in the black hat stooped and buckled a belt about Rusty Dunneman's knees; then, straightening from the task, he turned Dunneman until he faced the crowd.

The preacher was talking, low-voice and Dunneman shook his head. The ma in the black hat stepped forward, held u his hand for silence, and drawing a pape from his pocket, he read the sentence t the tense crowd, his voice rolling flatly

"First hangin' that Kleg Peter's eve had," Thad's companion murmured.

As the reading finished there was a sti and mutter from the crowd. Thad felt me behind him pushing him forward an braced his shoulders against the move ment. In front of the crowd men turned spreading out their arms, holding bac the surge. These were special deputies.

"Lots of folks liked Rusty," Thad' companion mu mured. "If they'd—"

The stirring in the crowd ceased. Peter the sheriff, had held up his hand once more. He was half-turned, looking at the man on the trap. "Have you got anything to say, Dunneman?" he asked.

There was utter silence in the crowd.

On the scaffold Dunneman touched his lips with the tip of his tongue. His eyes looked to right and left. Thad had seen that same hunted, frightened look in the eyes of a trapped coyote. Dunneman's voice was curiously light and clear as he spoke.

"Yo're hangin' me," Dunneman said. "All right. Yo're hangin' me. An' I'll see you all in hell. I'll be at the door waitin'. Turn loose yore wolf, Sheriff."

He stopped then, his lips closing firmly, only the jerking of a muscle in his cheek showing his strain. The sheriff, fumbling in his pocket, produced a black bag which he placed over Dunneman's head, and then stepped back.

For a moment there was absolute quiet and then, sudden as the fall of a plummet, Dunneman's black-clad body shot down and was lost to sight beneath the scaffold. From the crowd a high-pitched sound arose as men who had held their breaths expelled them.

Again silence. For perhaps four minutes the silence remained unbroken save for the stamp of some horse or the movement of booted feet on the board sidewalk. Then

sharp voice exclaimed: "I pronounce this ıan dead!"

Instantly bedlam broke loose. Behind had a man was suddenly ıetching. Thad ɔund that he was holding his throat with is hand and that he was sick, terribly, ıainingly sick. He fought down the sen-ıtion; rising on his toes, he saw a pudgy ed-faced man standing in front of the dan-ling body beneath the scaffold. From the ossbeam the rope hung tight, vibrating little still.

The pudgy red-faced man was turning way from the body.

"Who's that?" Thad demanded, and ɔund that his acquaintance had been ushed away by the movement of the rowd. Someone else, close beside him aid, "Doc Flarity's pronounced him ead."

Gradually the crowd thinned. Men, sick ith what they had seen, excited, eyes ide and their faces white, passed by Thad, tumbled against him, pushed him. Saloon doors flapped and banged. One man, already drunk, was crying and his companions surrounding him drew him away. Still Thad waited. He saw a knife flash against the rope and heard the thump of Dunneman's body as inept hands dropped it.

And that was about all; the hanging party was over.

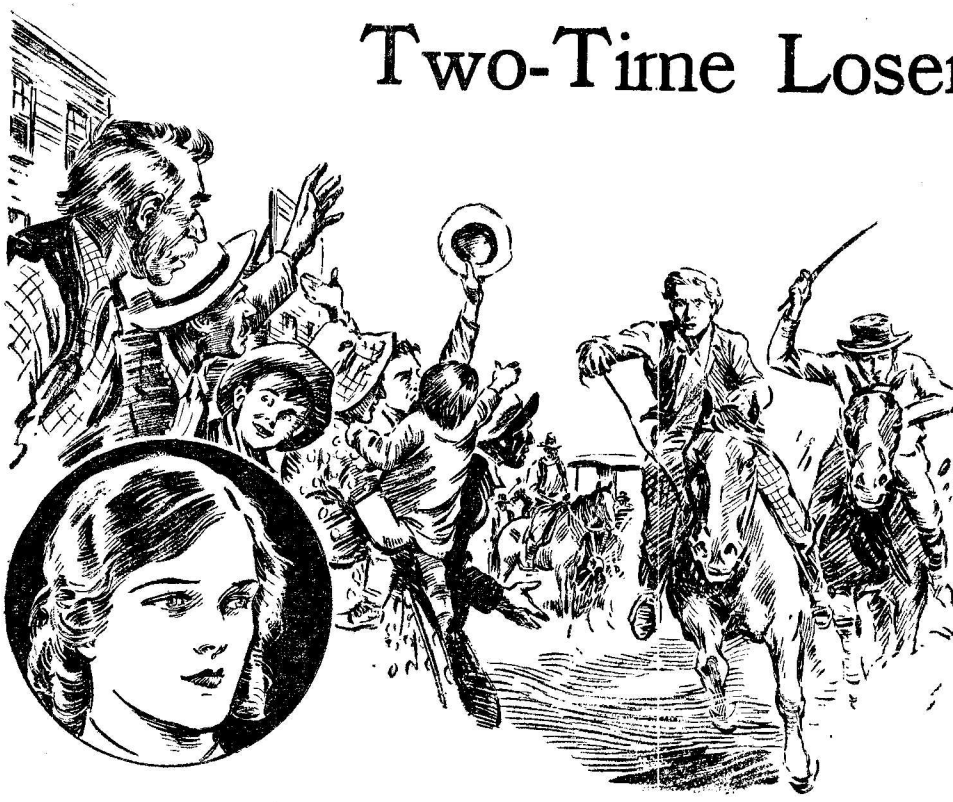
Thad shoved himself back until his shoulders touched boards. He leaned against the building, bracing himself. The crowd thinned further, and then there was a stir and a disturbance.

Thad could see men carrying a body, limp, hanging from their hands like a meal sack. He turned until he faced the building, braced an arm against it and leaning his head on the arm fought down the sickness that was in him.

Behind him feet tramped on the boards of the sidewalk and voices babbled. Thad did not look. He knew what was being carried past.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Two-Time Loser



Everybody yelled like crazy. Pardner was a neck in the lead a hundred feet from the finish, then stumble

A man who loves horses may not be very eloquent in the parlor, especially when he gets the bird every Saturday night at twelve. But it takes only four good words to say goodbye

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Christmas on Ice," "Pinch Hitter McGee," etc.

MAYBE you read in your newspaper the other evening about a horse named Pardner winning a fifty-thousand-dollar purse in a West Coast handicap race.

Pardner was a twenty-to-one shot and when you read that his owner, Cliff Jessup, didn't have a dollar on his nose you probably groaned in acute pain and called Cliff a short sport because he didn't have enough faith—or enough love, which is worse—to back his horse.

About the same time you heard funny choking sounds coming from your wife who was reading the society section. She had just read that Cliff Jessup's granddaughter Lois had eloped with a young rancher who was practically broke because he had backed a colt he had raised.

You observed your wife's blood pressure was hanging around the danger mark because Lois could have had any one of several young fellows whose social standing was of the highest on the West Coast.

A moment later, when your wife read that Cliff Jessup had aided in the elopement, she gave every indication of suffering from embolism. She called Cliff things that surprised you and predicted that Mrs. Clifford Jessup, who was something of a

social dictator, would do something about it. She might even divorce Cliff.

But maybe your wife and you wouldn't be so hard on Cliff if you knew he had backed a horse named Pardner fifty years ago; and that he had once been a busted young rancher who loved a girl so desperately he hurt all over. Her name was Marta Ryan.

IN THOSE days Juniper City was the trading center of several mines, several large cattle ranches and a number of small ones. Saturday night, of course, was the big night and the boys all came to town.

It seemed as if most of the ranchers were blessed with sons instead of daughters, and the few girls who did live in the country were sparked until they were dizzy.

The prettiest girl in several thousand square miles of country was Marta Ryan. She lived with her mother who ran the Ryan House—a small, but mighty neat hotel. You could get a bed for a dollar; breakfast and supper for two bits; and dinner between eleven and two o'clock for four bits.

Partly because of clean beds and good grub, but mostly because they were sparking Marta, or hoped to, the young fellows all put up at the Ryan House. Sometimes there were so many guests she had to set up cots in the hall. Mrs. Ryan prospered.

Juniper City was in the high country and the rare air makes for fast horses and hot tempers. It wasn't long until the boys were throwing lead and fists over Marta.

Mrs. Ryan put a stop to that in a hurry, I can tell you. She explained she had raised her daughter to be a fine lady, and to marry a gentleman and for love. She insisted on that combination and left the idea that a little money might help along, too.

Most of the boys could be gentlemen by stretching a point, and all of them were in love, but the money was something else. The unmarried ones owned little spreads they were just starting, or nothing at all.

Sometimes the boys would forget the gentleman business and start working on each other; then Mrs. Ryan would remind them by bashing them over the head with a wet mop she had used on the floor. There's nothing sillier looking than a full grown young man who has just been walloped with a wet mop.

Several of them discovered that.

Usually they had to drink a lot of strong liquor to get back their self-respect, then go out and beat up several tough men to make others respect them. Juniper City was right lively at times in those days.

Gradually the boys behaved themselves and sparked like gentlemen. Those that fell behind in the race got roaring drunk and called it a day. When Marta was nineteen the field had narrowed down to Al Dunning and Cliff Jessup.

Al was what the town called a cool proposition. He didn't trust to luck, but figured out ways of coming out ahead on a deal. He was patient, too, having learned from experience he got what he wanted in the long run.

There was nothing crooked about him —just smart and very smooth. He had blond hair and pleasant blue eyes that turned to ice when he lost his temper, which wasn't very often.

Al's little spread was called Circle D and he had bought it after figuring out he could grow towards government range, and later when he got somewhere in politics, he might buy up the range cheap. Any girl in the country could tell you Mrs. Al Dunning would never want for anything within reason, because Al would be a wealthy man.

And don't think for a minute Marta and her mother didn't realize it, because Al talked over his plans with them. Besides, ranchers putting up at the Ryan House when in town talked over the good and bad points of the young fellows, and Mrs. Ryan wasn't one to go around with cotton in her ears.

CLIFF JESSUP was different. He was curly-headed and dark, and had a hankering for bad horses and spirited women. He believed in luck and took long chances. He laughed more than Al did and wasn't inclined to take men apart to learn how to beat them in a deal like Al did.

Cliff was the only one who believed he was born under a lucky star. Marta didn't believe it. "He's a chump and I hope he has a lot of bad luck just to bring him to his senses—if he has any," she said.

People began to form their own conclusions on the situation. They figured that Marta realized Al was a hard one to catch, and that his interest might lag if he thought he had the field to himself, so she let Cliff hang around.

Believing that, folks were certain he was unlucky. And on top of that he tried to defy bad luck for all time to come by buying the Bar 7 ranch. He thought he was lucky because he got it for a song, but the owner was glad to unload.

Everybody who'd bought the ranch had had bad luck. The first owner had called it the Lucky 7 until his wife ran off with a whisky drummer. The second owner lost most of his cattle in a blizzard, the third was killed in a gunfight, and the fourth had unloaded the place onto Cliff when he heard of the previous owners' grief.

Marta was smart enough not to let Al think he had won, nor Cliff feel that he had lost. She was a high-spirited girl and she would have been less than human if she hadn't enjoyed the clumsy efforts of Al and Cliff to eliminate each other. I am certain she thought that regardless of the outcome, the experience would be good, and have a maturing effect, for all three.

Al and Cliff arrived in town regularly each Saturday night and put up at the Ryan House. They sat in Marta's parlor and tried to outstay each other. Every hour the cuckoo clock would cuckoo.

They should have known that outstaying each other wasn't in the cards. At eleven o'clock Marta would serve coffee and cake. They would sit there smirking at Marta—and glaring at each other—while trying to balance a cup and saucer on one knee, and a plate of cake on the other.

At twelve o'clock the bird would pop out and cuckoo twelve times and pop back in again, leaving them in an awkward silence. Two minutes later Marta's mother would come downstairs, wearing a silk wrapper and her hair done up in tea-lead curlers. She would says, "It's time respectable people were in bed."

The boys would take the hint and say, "Well, s'long, Marta." Then they would go upstairs, each thinking it was one awful way to say goodnight to a pretty girl. And it was.

Al Dunning naturally made the first move to get rid of Cliff on Saturday nights. Al, it seems, put a lot of thought to out-foxing Cliff while Cliff was thinking up schemes to make life on the ranch easier for Marta when he won her.

Women broke their backs in those days, packing water from the well to the stove so they could heat it for the Monday morning washing. They broke their backs over rubbing boards, and put the final kinks in their spines rinsing the washing.

When Cliff hauled pipe and a hot water tank a hundred and fifty miles so his cabin would have hot and cold running water, other women for miles around sat up and took notice. And made pointed remarks to their husbands.

Some of them advised Marta to let Cliff down easy and get it over with. It was all right enough to make things interesting for Al; but for all Cliff's harum-scarum attitude towards life and luck, they thought he was trying to do the right thing.

And Marta answered to the biggest gossip in town, knowing it would be carried to all women, "Don't waste any sympathy on that jackanapes; I'm not."

NEVER dreaming of the talk going on, Cliff put coils in the kitchen stove firebox and connected them with the tank. The tank would always be threatening to blow up, but Cliff reasoned that a woman would rather blow up in one chunk than to be broken up slowly in a series of Monday mornings.

He hauled loam thirty miles and made rose gardens around the house, and did other things he heard women liked. He listened a lot when he was around women, particularly the complaining kind. He hated complaining women and wanted to learn what made them complain.

But while Cliff—like most fellows that age—was telling himself he would never love any girl but Marta, not even if she refused him and he eventually acquired more wives than Solomon, Al devoted himself to the business of getting rid of Cliff.

They met early one Sunday morning in Johnson's livery stable where they kept their horses when in town. "They tell me you've got right smart of a quarter horse out on your ranch, Cliff," Al said.

"I guess everybody's got a quarter horse in this part of the country," Cliff answered. "Seems like you make sure you've got a quarter horse, then you stock up with a good brand of whisky. If there's anything left, you consider bacon, beans and shoes for the children."

"How fast is your quarter horse, Cliff?" Al asked. He picked up a stick, squatted down with his back against the livery stable wall and commenced to whittle.

Cliff, recognizing all the signs of some kind of a horse deal coming up, followed the ritual. He opened his knife, found himself a stick, squatted down and commenced to whittle. "My horse is fair to middling fast, Al," he answered.

Al cut himself a long, thin shaving and watched it curl. "Seems like the race for Marta has narrowed down to a dead heat for you and me, Cliff," he said. "I find a man can't make his prettiest speeches to a girl when the other fellow is sitting in the parlor, all ears."

"I guess you're right there," Cliff agreed. "I've thought of some right poetic things to say. I'd get 'em all ready, then there you'd be, right on the sofa beside me —all ears. It seems like a pretty speech must be said at the right time to do the most good. They aren't something you can send in a letter the next day."

"MY QUARTER horse, Highwayman, isn't the fastest horse in the world, Cliff," Al said after a while, "but he rates honorable mention in good circles. I think he can beat your horse."

"Now that's a question that can be settled only one way," Cliff contended. "My Pardner horse isn't used to eating dust."

Cliff found his blade a trifle dull and honed it on the heel of his hand. Al waited politely until he finished honing, tested the blade and found it sharp. He knew Cliff wasn't through speaking.

"Had you any kind of a side bet in mind? No fun racing unless there's a bet."

"We couldn't put Marta up as a prize," Al said, "because we are gentlemen."

"Yes, we're gentlemen," Cliff agreed. "And anyway, Marta's mother would bash us over the head with a wet mop if she found out about it."

"Suppose the loser agrees not to show up the following Saturday night?" Al ventured.

"Mrs. Ryan would smell a rat," Cliff predicted, "and bash us with the mop anyway. But I'm willing. Lord knows I'd like an evening alone with Marta, and my Pardner horse isn't one to let me down in a pinch."

"We'll go over to Juniper Saloon and argue about which horse is best," Al suggested, "and we'll put up a hundred head of cattle as a side bet. It being understood the winner has the choice of a hundred head of the loser's beef. And the loser is to keep out of town Saturday and Sunday."

"Fair enough," Cliff said, "but the

loser is to have the field to himself the following weekend. And so on, turn about, until Marta promises herself."

It wasn't what Al wanted, exactly, but he agreed to it, and Cliff saw the confidence in his eyes.

. . . There was little that went on in Juniper City that wasn't common knowledge. Everybody knew that Cliff Jessup was fixing up his cabin, with a woman's problems in mind. Everybody knew Al and Cliff were going to race quarter horses; but nobody knew Al had bought a special horse for the race and had been training and timing it.

Juniper City didn't find that out until later.

When Mrs. Ryan heard about the side bet, she sniffed. "A hundred head of cattle. That is more than either of you can afford to lose, if you're thinking about marrying and settling down," she told them both. And for a moment it looked as if she might use the mop on them anyway.

THE afternoon of the race everybody was on hand. Even the drunks had sobered up. The main street was rutted from more wagons, so they cleared a quarter-mile stretch back of the long row of buildings that made up the town.

Ranchers, punchers, and miners, riding everything from fast horses to mules and burros, lined up near the finish. The town girls, looking fetching and proper, sat on side saddles and modestly kept their long skirts down.

There were plenty of fast men in Juniper City who'd turn their back on a horse race any time to look at a neat ankle, and a girl couldn't be too careful.

Marta was there, with the lazy afternoon breeze rippling her brown curls. In the excitement she had forgotten her sun bonnet, but she wasn't afraid of a freckle or two. The crisp air wasn't entirely responsible for the soft flush on her cheeks. She had her own ideas about the race.

Deputy-sheriff Church had his forty-four pointed in the air and was trying to get Pardner and Highwayman nose to nose. He knew neither man would complain if he got off to a poor start and for that reason he wanted the horses lined up proper.

A yell went up when Church fired his revolver and down the course they came, nose to nose. Pardner was a neck in the lead a hundred feet from the finish, then he sort of stumbled and caught himself. He lost his stride and the race.

All eyes turned on Marta. Everybody thought her face would tell how she felt about the outcome—and give a hint how she felt about the riders. As Cliff Jessup shook hands with Al Dunning, he looked over Al's shoulder and into Marta's eyes, but there was nothing to comfort or discourage him in them.

He said, "Come up any time next week, Al, and pick out your hundred head."

. . . Al showed up early Tuesday morning with three of his riders. "Nice place you got here, Cliff," he said. "You've put in a lot of time, planting and painting." Cliff could see that he liked it and coveted it. "Better'n mine, Cliff."

He didn't mention Marta's name, but each knew the other was thinking about her.

"Yes, I've done some needed work," Cliff admitted. "Come on, I'll help you cut out your beef."

Al looked around curiously. "Where's Pardner?"

"Took him over to Old Man Swanson's," Cliff answered. "Having his shoes changed."

Their eyes met squarely. "That should make him faster," Al said. "A lot depends on a horse's shoes."

When Cliff didn't show up in town the following Saturday night, everybody in Juniper City knew the boys had raced for more than cattle.

Every time Mrs. Ryan looked in on Marta and Al sitting in the parlor Al squirmed. Having a guilty conscience he

was afraid she might read his thoughts, then give him a working over with a wet mop.

She was polite, but when twelve o'clock came, and the cuckoo popped out of the clock, Mrs. Ryan trotted down the stairs as usual, holding her wrapper around her ample bosom and broad hips.

The following Saturday night Cliff arrived in time to take Marta to a dance. They didn't get home until two o'clock and there wasn't much time for pretty speeches in the parlor; but for all the luck Cliff had, Al might just as well have been sitting on the sofa with them. His face was eloquent, but the words stuck in his throat.

TWO weeks later they sat in the parlor most of the evening and not much was said, because Cliff's throat was dry and his lips seemed about ready to crack.

The ticking of the clock and the padding of Mrs. Ryan's feet on the floor above as she got into her wrapper warned him time was flying.

"Marta," he gulped, "you fill me plumb full of poetry. Things that sound mighty sweet inside, but stick in my throat when I try to say them."

He gulped again. "I guess I'm a man of few words. I love you so much I hurt all over. I've got my place fixed up so you'll like it, and . . . well, there are others who can say it better. . . ."

He stopped again. He was hurting all over and so was Marta. Then it came. "Marta, will you marry me?"

And right then, Cliff knew the curse of the Unlucky 7 ranch was on him. The blasted bird popped out of the clock and screamed *cuckoo* twelve times.

You might have thought Cliff would have blown the lid off. No man wants to be ridiculed by a mechanical bird. But it struck him funny.

He looked at the cuckoo just as it finished and popped out of sight and yelled, "Get out of here, you buzzard." Then he laughed his head off.

Marta's eyes were dancing and her lips were curved in a smile. She choked back her laughter until she was sure how Cliff was going to take it, then she joined in. Mrs. Ryan came into the room. "What in the world is so funny?" she asked.

"It is a horse on me, Mrs. Ryan," Cliff said, "I was just popping the question and your infernal cuckoo hooted me down. Lord knows when I'll get up nerve enough to ask Marta again."

He looked hard at Mrs. Ryan, half hoping she would give him a hand, but she didn't. She only said, "Dear me."

Al popped the question the next Saturday night. He almost swept Marta off her feet, kept her head in a whirl and didn't give her time to think. "You'll be the wife of the biggest rancher in the country some of these days," he predicted. "I know what I want in this world, and I know where I'm going. It has boiled down to Cliff or me. Which is it?"

"Hush, Al," she said. "Give me time to think. There are so many things to consider. We are all so young, so untried. . . ."

"Sure, I see," Al said. But he didn't. He thought she meant he hadn't proved he could get the best things in life—the land and the cattle that would spell more than comfort. She was thinking of other values. Either Al or Cliff could take care of her with their present ranches.

Al rode into town the Sunday after that. It was Cliff's turn and he was too smart to be seen around the Ryan House. He waited at the livery stable until Cliff showed up, then he got out his knife, put his back against the wall and commenced to whittle. "How'd Pardner like the new shoes, Cliff?" he asked.

"Seems to like them fine," Cliff answered. He looked at Al a long time, got out his knife and commence to whittle.

"Is he faster?"

"Seems like."

"Wouldn't like to run another race,

with a good side bet?" Al inquired. "I always aim to give a man his revenge."

Cliff was such a long time studying the proposition, Al was having a hard time to stay cool. A man had a lot of faith in his horse in those days and Pardner was Cliff's weakness. "What kind of a bet did you have in mind?"

"Sky's the limit, if you want," Al offered. "My cattle against yours. Bunched, they would make a big herd."

Neither was a short sport, judged by the standards of the times. You didn't get anywhere in those days by playing safe, and a fellow's self-respect and manhood forced him to accept a challenge, if his hot, reckless blood didn't.

Cliff's blood was hot, reckless. "Why not?" he asked softly. "Why not?" Then he sliced off a long shaving with a decisive gesture. "I'll race you, Al, winner to get both herds."

Al whittled awhile, then said, "The loser will have a spread and no cattle; the winner more cattle than his range will hold. It seems like there should be a land lease in the deal, unless we want to bet the land, too."

AL HAD been a long time in coming to the point, but he was there. He'd have a big ranch now to lay in Marta's lap. Yes, and he'd have the house, with the running hot water and the roses Cliff had planted.

"I've never seen a better horse than Pardner," Cliff said, commencing to whittle again. Then in a sudden sense of fairness he asked, "Sure you want to go that strong?"

"I've got faith in my horse, Cliff, or I wouldn't bet. That's why men have always run horses. And that'll be the reason as long as they run 'em," Al answered. "Everything goes into the pot, if you want it that way."

"Whatever is all right with you, Al, is all right with me," Cliff agreed, "and no hard feelings."

"No hard feelings," Al echoed. "We're both dead game sports, I hope. But as it stands now, there's one item of unfinished business."

"What?"

"Marta," Al answered. "Now keep your shirt on. We're both gentlemen, and I'd take a swing on your jaw if you suggested she be tossed into the pot. And I'd expect the same treatment if I suggested. But the loser can agree to leave town. He will be busted and there'll be nothing for him to stay around town for. No girl in her right mind would marry a man who'd lost his shirt."

"Sounds reasonable," Cliff agreed. "Then it is understood, the loser is to leave town. What of his belongings can he take with him?"

"Two horses, blankets, camping outfit, spring wagon," Al said, "and his quarter horse. It isn't much, but it is the necessities of life, and it'll keep the breath of life in him until he can get located. Better add a keg of whisky, too."

"That about covers everything," Cliff said, whittling thoughtfully. "Seems like the loser should have the chance to say goodby to Marta, though. It wouldn't be very gentlemanly to drift without a word of farewell, specially after the way Mrs. Ryan has tried to make gentlemen out of us."

"How long a farewell have you got in mind?" Al asked suspiciously. He wasn't expecting to say the parting words and he was all for economy.

"Hmmmm," Cliff reflected. "What do you think's fair?"

"No need of dragging it out," Al answered. "You can say goodby twice in four words and that should be enough."

"Four words, four words," Cliff mused: "now that I think of it, all that need to be said can be said in four words. We'll race next Sunday afternoon. I'll have the deeds and bill of sales on my property in the stakeholder's hands by Saturday noon. How about Doc Shumate being stakeholder? He's fair, and he's got a stop-watch and can be timekeeper, too."

Al agreed to that and so the whole thing was set.

WELL, the word got around town and when Al and Cliff showed up at the Ryan House, Mrs. Ryan gave them a piece of her mind. And a fair-sized piece it was, too, with plenty of trimmings.

"Young fools!" she stormed, "live and learn. Die and forget it all. Why don't you stop this, Marta?"

"Because, I'm curious to see how it all comes out and what happens," Marta answered. "Are you going to the race?"

"Of course I'm going to the race," Mrs. Ryan snapped, "don't be silly. And if I were a betting woman, I'd bet on Al's horse to win. Al's a smooth one. He isn't planning on losing and he'll make plenty before he dies. Mark my word."

"If Cliff loses this race, I'll bet it will be the last bet he makes," Marta said. "The very idea, too, of limiting himself to a four-word farewell after all the months he has cluttered up the parlor. What kind of a farewell would that be, anyway?"

"You'll doubtless find out in due time," Mrs. Ryan darkly predicted. "Even if Al has to doctor Cliff's horse to do it."

"Mother!" Marta was indignant. "You know Al wouldn't do such a thing. He can probably win without much trouble, though nothing is so uncertain as a horse race. That's why I love them so."

The folks in Juniper City couldn't tell how Al and Cliff felt when they lined up at the start. Their faces told nothing.

The spectators who couldn't find a place near the finish got into trees and on the tops of the buildings. There were bartenders in flour-sack aprons, gamblers wearing green eyeshades, ranchers, and just about everybody who worked for 'em.

Pardner almost beat the gun and he was a length in front before Highwayman really got going. He increased the lead by two lengths and the crowd went crazy.

Then Al gave his horse the whip and he drew up even. Mrs. Ryan was screaming, "Come on! Come on!" And so was Marta, but nobody could tell which horse they were yelling for.

Neck and neck those horses neared the finish, giving everything they had. Pardner's nose got out in front again a hundred feet from the finish, then Highwayman turned on a blinding burst of speed. He seemed to leap across the line with a head and half a neck to spare.

They ran some distance before their riders got them turned around. Cliff leaned from the saddle and shook hands with Al. "I'll pull my freight the first thing in the morning," he said. "Some time this evening I'll drop in on Marta for my four word parley."

"No palavering," Al warned. "Four words, and no more."

Doc Shumate was still muttering over his stopwatch when they got back to the finish. "Twenty-two seconds," he exclaimed. "Twenty-two. You've got a lot of horse there, both of you. The official world's record is twenty-one seconds."

Cliff couldn't bring himself to look at Marta as he rode over to the livery stable to cool out Pardner; but Al smiled understandingly at the girl, sitting flushed but collected on her sidesaddle, denying the crowd even a hint of her thoughts.

The cuckoo clock was cuckooing eight times when Cliff stepped into Marta's parlor that night. Cliff waited politely until the bird finished, then he took Marta's hands and used his four words.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

AS CLIFF and Marta headed west the next morning he began to get really acquainted with her, and understand what kind of a bride he had won.

She had been fairly sure from the first that Cliff would lose his shirt, because she learned Al had sent East for the fastest quarter horse money could buy. She was kind of curious about Cliff —she wondered what kind of a loser he would be.

That was important to her, because her hard-headed mother had taught her to expect losses as well as winnings.

And he learned, too, she had never wasted any sympathy on him because he didn't need it. She got across the idea that there was a lot of room for improvement, but that a man who'd think about a girl's Monday morning washing and rose gardens around the house was worth working over.

She told him if there was any more betting on horses, she would do it, as he had lost his shirt for the last time.

That's why Cliff didn't bet on the new Pardner's nose when he was a twenty-to-one shot. But Marta bet five thousand.

And that isn't all she did. She helped Cliff help the busted young rancher to elope with her granddaughter, but only after she whispered a few sage words of advice into the girl's ear.

Marta's still busy.

She's been making improvements in Cliff for fifty years now and it doesn't look to me as if the job ever would be finished. I should know, because . . . I'm Cliff.

Nice Headwork

CAN you spare a part of your brain? The answer, strangely enough, is yes—and very nicely too. Take away half the brain and no harm done. Remove less than half, though, and you find yourself in a mess of difficulties right away.

It's like this. The seat of human intelligence in the higher brackets—embracing imagination, thought, and memory—lies in the two frontal lobes of the fore part of the brain. Here, then, the individual's personality is centered.

A number of brain operations performed by Dr. Byron Stookey, of the Neurological Institute in New York City, have involved removing just one of these two frontal lobes for the eradication of brain tumor. The results in each case have been satisfactory. And more than that—

In some cases there were noticed actual improvements in personality and thinking processes. One man's employer reported that his work had improved. Another patient noted a speeding up of the learning process. Others found themselves with an ability to make decisions more quickly and a persistence in carrying them through.

But on the other hand—

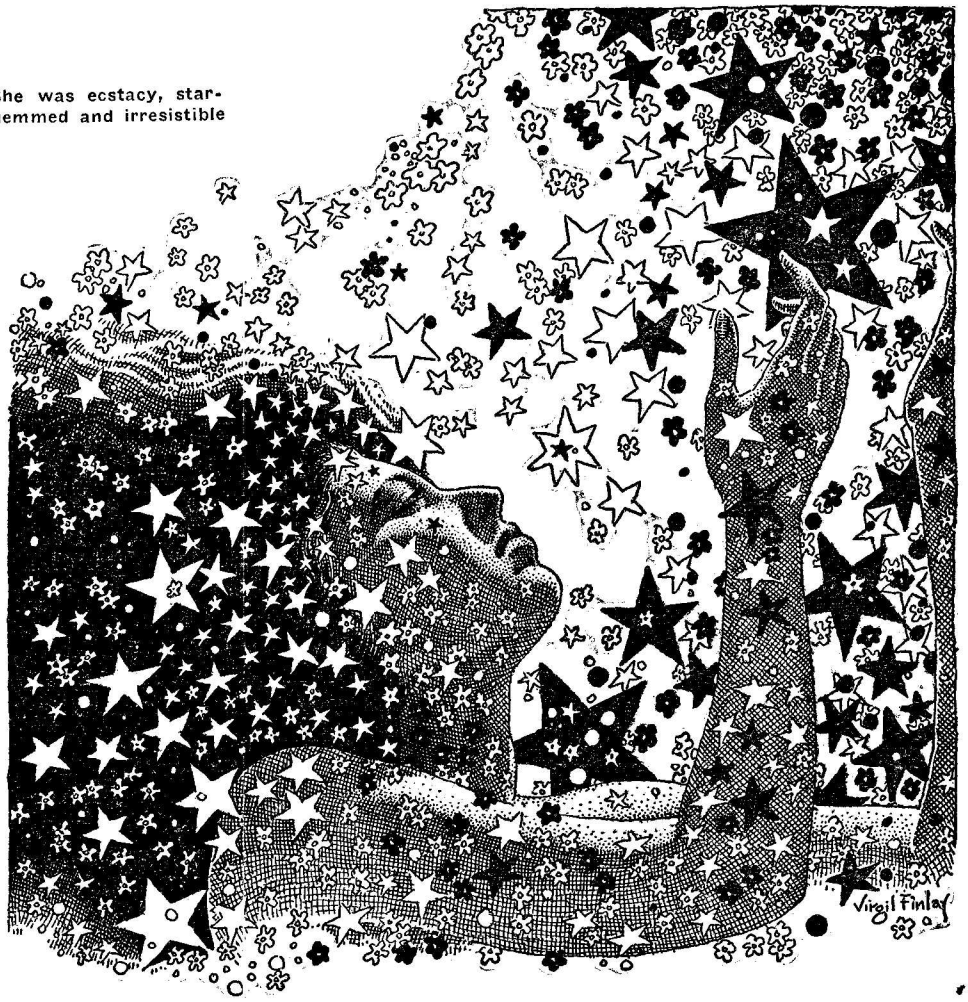
Brain operations in which one lobe was damaged, or only partly removed, resulted in distinct personality impairment, often taking the form of inability of the patient to adjust himself to other persons. Among the results in some cases was the commiting of grave social errors, which the individuals tried to excuse with irrelevant explanations.

Now the reason for this curious business seems to lie in a kind of balance that exists between the two frontal lobes; or, as Dr. Stookey might more exactly phrase it, "a bilateral representation of personality and mental processes" in the lobes. The two parts work in harmony, sending their impulses as it were in the same wavelength. Take away one, and the other functions as before.

But if one lobe is damaged and left to carry on, its functioning is no longer synchronized with that of the other. Something like static results, and it is not surprising if the personality goes haywire with emotional instability, listlessness, indifference, and inability to adjust to any but simple situations.

—*Dr. Charles Ticknor Tolson*

WOMEN of DARING by STOOKY ALLEN



She was ecstacy, star-gemmed and irresistible

Maker of Shadows

By JACK MANN

SUMMONED to an eerie corner of Scotland by Miss Margaret Aylener, Gregory George Gordon Green, confidential investigator and dabbler in the occult, finds himself confronted by an insoluble problem. Miss Aylener wishes Gees to liberate her niece Helen, the last of the family, from the spell of one Gamel MacMorn.

MacMorn, Miss Aylener insists, is a living, actual survival of pre-Druidic times, his existence prolonged by "the making of shadows"—sacrificing his acolytes, absorbing their life-essences, and setting the souls free as shadows to inhabit the fog of his creation. Already MacMorn has begun to spin the web that binds Helen to him, in preparation for the final sacrifice.

Gees investigates for himself and discovers that, incredible as these things may seem, there is reason to believe that Miss Aylener may be speaking the exact and ugly truth.

HELEN AYLENER obviously *is* under some hypnotic control, and her fiancé, Ian Kyrle, tells Gees of warning whispers that come to him in the night. MacMorn's house is a gloomy mass of stone, standing in

This story began in the Argosy for December 9

a ring of monoliths that may well be the remnants of an original circle of the thirteen stones of life and death. And if this is so, the house itself, directly in the center of the circle, occupies the spot where once the ancient altar was raised.

Gees admits to Miss Aylener that he is almost convinced of her story. "Then set Helen free," she begs.

"But," Gees protests, "there is only one way to do that."

Miss Aylener nods calmly. "I know," she says. "You must kill Gamel MacMorn."

But Gees refuses to commit what could only be regarded as cold-blooded murder, and returns to London. Several strange attempts on his life make him realize that MacMorn is aware of what Gees knows and regards him as still dangerous.

SHORTLY thereafter, Helen Aylener disappears from the London hotel where she has come with her aunt. "He could summon her from the ends of the earth," Miss Aylener declares bitterly, "and she would go to him—or die on the way. And you refused to help me."

Gees determines now to save Helen at all costs. Neatly he avoids MacMorn's decoy plan that would send him chasing off to Brighton and, accompanied by Ian Kyrle, makes a mad dash to reach Brachmornalachan before MacMorn and Helen arrive.

But the presence of the fog when they reach The Rowans tells Gees that MacMorn has got there first. The next morning he and Kyrle call upon MacMorn.

He receives them cordially and shows them through his house, coolly denying that Helen Aylener is there. He offers them a drink of the strange potion that Helen and Kyrle had drunk once before and Gees finds its effect all but overpowering.

"Come with me," MacMorn suggests. "I will prove that your suspicions are wrong."

Gees gestures toward the half-stupefied Kyrle. MacMorn shakes his head. "Not Kyrle. *You* are the one I must convince, Mr. Green." And he smiles. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THROUGH THE MAGIC DOORS

HE LAID his hand against the door that Gees had found immovable, and it swung outward with, apparently, no more than a touch. Gees lifted his hand to his forehead momentarily in puzzlement, and again saw the dial of his wrist watch. Half past ten!

And not more than five minutes before, he would have sworn, he had drunk the crimson fluid! But, unless the watch was misleading him, an hour and twenty minutes had passed since he had put the glass down.

They were in the bare corridor again, and the door closed of itself, quite silently. Again the humming of the gale outside was audible, and there, by the outer door, lay the automatic pistol Kyrle had put down. MacMorn almost paused as they passed it, as if to see whether Gees would move to pick it up, but he did nothing of the sort. His sane self remembered that he had another pistol in an armpit holster inside his shirt, one that MacMorn had not suspected.

The bare floor of the corridor was soft and rubbery, and gave back no sound as they walked on it. So much strangeness in this place and in MacMorn called for explanation, but there was no time to ask for it. Coming to another doorway, MacMorn knocked and listened, but if a reply was given Gees did not hear it.

Then MacMorn thrust the door inward, and stood back for Gees to enter just such a dim, sensuous-looking apartment as he had left. It was twin to the other in every way, except that its fabrics and cushions all had a silky luster of paler green, shot with silver.

In the very middle of the room, where the light fell least, stood a girl with night-black hair and dark, soft eyes. One slender-fingered hand was laid on her breast, her other arm revealed its perfect modeling through a semi-transparent sleeve as it hung beside her, and the ankle-length, antique-looking robe she wore betrayed the lines of a perfect figure.

With her dark eyes directed full at Gees, and a half-smile curving her lips, she waited for one or other of the two men to speak.

"I have brought my friend to see you," MacMorn said, still speaking in the language Gees knew and yet did not know. "Will you tell him when and how you came here?"

"Yesterday, with you," she answered, glancing momentarily at him, and then returning her gaze to Gees.

HE FELT that, if she had not spoken in the language which made all this fantasy still more unreal, he would have recognized the voice. Yet he knew that he had never seen her before. She was one with that strange scent, one with the crimson drink—she was in the incarnation of them both, ecstasy embodied.

"That is all," MacMorn said. "Rest again, now."

"May your friend not stay awhile?" she asked, and her half-smile grew to completeness as she gazed at Gees. He knew he would have responded to the invitation, but MacMorn said:

"Not now, child. Later, it may be," and drew back from the room. Gees had no choice but to follow him.

The door closed noiselessly. Again the gale outside sounded, a roar of driving fury, now.

For a moment Gees remembered the hour and twenty minutes of which MacMorn had somehow robbed him, and was about to question him, when MacMorn spoke.

"This inner wall that you see," he said, "is that of the central tower of the castle which stood where the house stands now. It is old, so old that the wood covering was needed to preserve it."

"Wood to preserve stone?" Gees asked incredulously.

"I did not say the castle was built of stone," MacMorn answered.

"Then—?" He left the question incomplete, and realized that he was speaking his normal language again. Some of the spell was passing, evidently, for while MacMorn and the dark beauty had talked, he himself had thought in that other tongue, understood without need for translating.

"We built with what came to our hands," MacMorn said.

"So?" Gees laughed. "You know what you have just said?"

"Only we two know that I said it," MacMorn retorted. "And if you repeated it, who in this age of fools would believe all that you and I know as real?"

He took a couple of steps toward the room in which they had left Kyrle, and faced about again. The gale outside, strengthening as the day advanced, rumbled in deep-toned anger, and though there was a floor above this on which they stood, the faint hiss of hard-driven rain on the roof was audible. MacMorn looked at Gees and smiled.

"Have I convinced you?" he asked.

"Convinced me?" Gees echoed. "We talk in circles, arrive nowhere. You show me an impossible woman for a minute, and try to convince me Helen Aylener is not here, because that woman says she came here with you yesterday. Before that, you made some spell that took an hour and more clear out of my memory—"

He saw MacMorn's eyes dilate momentarily at that accusation, and knew he had not been intended to realize the passing of the lost time. "And how do I know what you did in that hour, or what instructions you gave the woman we have just seen? For all I know, she may be one of your shadows made visible, not flesh and blood at all."

"No." MacMorn was still smiling. "She is not yet a shadow."

"You mean you would—take *that* life?" Gees almost gasped.

"To convince you that I have no need of Helen Aylener," MacMorn answered, "there"—he pointed back at the room they had just left—"you saw for yourself is greater vitality, life more intense—"

"But you're contemplating murder!" Gees broke in. "This is the twentieth century, not the fifth—"

"Are you *sure* it is not the fifth, inside these walls?" MacMorn interrupted in turn. "Or a thousand years before the fifth? And to weld another life to my own is *not* murder. I tell you, you are blinded by modernity, though enough of memory of things past survives in you to waken in you the knowledge of the old language

—as I wakened it in the hour that you forget. And tomorrow, if you or any other make the accusation against me that you make now, I shall laugh."

"Where is Helen Aylener?" Gees demanded grimly.

"How can I tell?" MacMorn evaded the question, and still smiled. "Go back to The Rowans—when I let you go—and ask there."

"What do you mean—when you let me go?" Gees fired out sharply.

"You came here in your own time, you go in mine," MacMorn told him. "Your knowledge is too great—I cannot let you go till my time of renewal is past. Your will is too strong for me to break, but in the hour I took and you forget, I bound it—bound you! See for yourself if I did not—strike me, full in the face, as your will bids!"

He leaned forward, his wax-white face within easy reach, and Gees wanted to strike at the point of his chin and smash him to the floor. But he stood as still as stone; he could not lift his hand.

"YOU see?" MacMorn spoke with quiet confidence, not mockingly or as if he wished to vaunt his superiority.

"What is this—a madhouse or a dream?"

"I should have wakened more of your memory," MacMorn said. "Man, you might be one with me, not an enemy! No one thing you know or have, could give you such a summit of life as I gave you in one little drink, and I can take you up to greater summits, set you on the way to powers and pleasures such as your little modern self has not dreamed. I will open gates for you—"

"And the price?" Gees interrupted him.

"Is for others to pay. Come with me, and see!"

Not because he willed it, but because some power greater than his will impelled him, Gees followed past the door behind which he had left Kyrle, and turned left at the angle of the outer wall to find that the inner, old wooden wall continued the corridor along to the back of that house.

A kilted figure—the man Partha, he guessed—vanished at the far end of this second corridor as Gees turned into it, but MacMorn did not go as far as the end. He turned inward, to the middle of the house, through even deeper gloom until he opened a door and revealed daylight striking down into a circular, central court, open to the sky, round which the house had been built.

Overhead, the wind roared, but the upward slant of the roofs prevented it from striking down to their level, and Gees stood beside MacMorn and knew he was looking at one of the altars of a very old people, the exact center of the ring of standing stones.

An oblong of basalt, twice the height of a tall man in length and of a width half as great, rose a foot or more above the ground. The floor was a crazy pavement of granite blocks, originally rough-hewn, but worn smooth by the many who had trodden about the altar since it was laid, bedded on a block of granite which extended beyond its edges for a foot and more.

There was a shallow channel in the granite, extending all round the black stone, and continuing at a slight upward angle to the edge of the wall, opposite the point at which MacMorn and Gees stood. It appeared that some fluid was intended to flow down and circle round the basalt block, but only the rain that fell thinly wetted the channel now.

The circular wall, some forty feet in diameter, was of weathered planks to a height of ten feet or so, and then of stone to the level of the roof, and in the planking were two more doorways, one toward the front of the house and one giving on the back.

"Little enough to see," Gees observed, keeping his voice level. For he knew the significance of the stone, and knew too, beyond question, that MacMorn had seen and shared in the sacrifices made here, and that all the blood shed on such altars was no more than a cupful by comparison

with the floods that had drained away from this terrible stone. Still more, at the very fount and center of the shadow magic he was conscious of thronging presences, a host of shadows pressing in on him, though outside the range of mortal sight.

"*They* are shadows. *I* live," MacMorn said, with a note of exultation. "They, not I, paid the price."

"I will not pay, and none shall pay for me," Gees told him, and found that he had difficulty in speaking his defiance. "You have me in one way, but my soul is still my own." He would have added: "Which makes me your master," but kept back the words.

"So," said MacMorn. "You will not enter my kingdom? I offer you entry, new life with me with the new moon today."

"And I refuse. Take off this spell of yours and let me go."

"After my hour is past—after sunset," MacMorn rejoined calmly. "You see, I do you the honor to be a little afraid of you."

"Then take me back to Kyrle."

MacMorn faced about without replying, and led into the corridor they had left. The door which gave access to the circle closed of its own accord as soon as they had passed it, and, since MacMorn made no apparent move to close it, the secret of these uncanny doors was still outside Gees' knowledge.

They went back the way they had come, and MacMorn merely pushed at the door of the room in which they had left Kyrle. Gees entered unthinkingly, and, realizing that Kyrle was not there, turned and threw all his weight against the closed door.

It yielded no more than if he had breathed on it.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE USELESS JOURNEY

SOMEWHERE about that time, Miss Brandon opened the door of the flat in Little Oakfield Street and saw facing her a slender, tall girl with pale gold hair, dressed in a gray flannel costume with pinstripes, below which showed stockings more orange-hued than flesh color, and shoes of white kid patterned with black strapping.

They faced each other, slightly hostile, in silence for nearly a minute. The caller spoke first.

"A Mr. Gees said he'd like me to call here," she said.

"Ye-es." Miss Brandon concealed her hostility. "Is your name Betty?"

"That's right. Then you know he was expecting me?"

Miss Brandon drew back. "Come in, please?" she asked. "I am his secretary, and he told me you might call. In that case, he said, he wanted me to interview you and hear your story of the Bristol journey."

"Pretty rotten, it was." Betty followed into Miss Brandon's own room, and stood looking about. People like Miss Brandon were not in her line.

"When did you get back?" Miss Brandon asked, crisply.

"Last night. I hung about there all day, and he didn't turn up—the gentleman that asked me to go, I mean. It all seemed a bit fishy to me, and still I think it is."

"I hope you got your twenty pounds, though?" Miss Brandon asked.

"Oh, he handed me that when he fixed it all up with me in the beer parlor. That was—but you know that part of it, though."

"I don't know anything, except that Mr. Green—Mr. Gees, I mean—took you down to the pub and left you there. And that you told him about this man offering you twenty pounds to go to Bristol. So if you go on from there—what happened after Mr. Gees left you?"

"I see. You want the whole story." She lit a cigarette. "Mr. Gees didn't tell me why he wanted to know about all this, but he said there'd be something for me if I came and told him. I s'pose you know about that?"

"Four ten-shilling notes—I have them here," Miss Brandon answered coldly.

"In exchange for the full story." She opened a notebook on the desk, and took up a pencil.

"Oh, you're going to take it down, are you?" Betty surmised. "I don't mind." She smiled.

Miss Brandon's tone was still frosty. "If you will go on please."

"Well, it's rather a long story. It'd be just on closing time when my gentleman comes down the stairs and across to me, but there was time for him to order more drinks when the waiter turned up, and he got me one too. And he said he wanted me to go early next morning. I told him I never got up early, hated it, and he sort of fixed me with his weird black eyes and said it wouldn't be any trouble, I'd find. Something like that—I don't remember his exact words, but it meant that, and I knew I'd have to get up, too."

"Do you mean that he threatened you?" Miss Brandon ceased her rapid penciling and looked up.

"Oh, no, nothing like that! He was quite pleasant, but it was more like that what you call mesmerism, isn't it? I just felt I had to do what he said, and not anything else. I was to have told Mr. Gees about it—come here and told him—before I started, he said, but I just couldn't. Not only because there wasn't time, but because I *couldn't* do anything at all except what that man with the black eyes said I must. I reckon it was mesmerism, wasn't it?"

"Will you tell me what he told you to do?"

"HE'D got a parcel with him, and he said it was the clothes I was to wear, and if the shoes didn't fit I could stop the taxi and get another pair on the way to the station out of the twenty pounds. He'd allowed time for that, he said. It got to be closing time, and I took him round to my place. There wasn't time for him to instruct me in the beer parlor. When we got there I opened up the parcel, and he showed me how the handkerchief was to go under the fur—it looked quite a good fox fur, in that light, but I'll never forget what it was really. Makes my flesh crawl now when I think of it—"

"Then don't think of it," Miss Brandon interrupted.

"Well, I was to dress in those things, and I had to wear the gray suede shoes till I got into the taxi. He insisted on that especially. I don't mean he said it over and over again, because he didn't. Only once, and quite quiet he was, but somehow he made me remember every word he said till I'd done what he told me to do. Then we went out again, and he took me to Grey's hotel.

"He showed me exactly where I was to go and stand the next morning—yesterday morning. Then I was to move forward so I could be seen from the hotel doorway and hail a taxi, and tell the driver to take me to Paddington so somebody could hear me give the order. As it happened, one of the hall porters from the hotel came and opened the taxi door for me, but I didn't look at him or thank him, even, because I thought he was just being officious and wanted a tip, which I wasn't going to give him. He told me all that, and how he'd meet me at Bristol half an hour after the train got in, and then went off and left me, just as if I mightn't have run off with his twenty pound and nobody the wiser for it. And he couldn't do anything to me if I had."

"But you didn't," Miss Brandon suggested in the pause.

"I *couldn't*. I went back to my place and went to bed, and sure enough I waked up as he'd said I would. And though I just hate getting up early I got out and dressed as he'd told me to. It seemed as if I couldn't help myself. I could almost see his uncanny black eyes boring into me and hear his voice telling me what I had to do, and I did it all as if he'd been there driving me. And the shoes nearly crippled me. I got to outside the hotel and told myself there wouldn't be any taxis crawling at that hour of the morning, but one come along just as he said, and I stopped it and the porter opened the

door, just as I told you. I got to Paddington and knew I couldn't stand those shoes another hour, so as there was plenty of time I found a shop which was just opened and bought these I'm wearing now, and changed in the train. The others was a poor pair, and my feet being too big one of 'em begun to split across the top. Only just begun, but I left them under the seat. They were no use to me."

She broke off and stubbed out her cigarette end.

"Are these the stockings you were wearing?" Miss Brandon asked.

"No. He said I was to wear the gray ones—this pair was in his parcel too. I wore the gray ones, but when I changed my shoes I saw they'd laddered as if I'd been through a hedge, and the shoe heel had rubbed a big hole in one, too. I changed them for these before I put these shoes on. But that wasn't the worst of it. That beastly old fur. Ugh! I can't forget it! I feel all crawly now."

"Moth?" Miss Brandon suggested.

"IT WAS after I'd finished putting on these stockings and shoes, and I was thinking how much better they looked—sort of give a finish to the outfit—the contrast, if you know what I mean—and then I felt something on the back of my neck. I reached up and grabbed it—I just thought a fly or something had got there—and it was a maggot!

"I can tell you that fur was off my neck and down on the floor before you could say Jack Robinson, and the sight of it just about made me sick. I turned it over with my foot, and the inside was fairly crawling. How it was I hadn't felt anything before I can't think, the state that fur was in. Maggots, and—and lice! Little white lice, dozens of 'em.

"It must have been the warmth waked 'em all up when I put the thing on. I snatched the handkerchief off my neck and looked at it, and there was lice on that too! I can tell you that window went down and the fur and the handkerchief both went out like lightning.

"Well," she went on, "I was thoroughly disgusted, and felt half naked with this low-necked blouse I'm wearing now, and not so much as a string of Woolworth pearls round my neck, and I knew what I was going to tell that black-eyed beauty when he met me at Bristol, landing me with rotten things like that.

"Well, the train got in, and I made straight for a hotel and got a bath. I went over every inch of this costume, but you can see for yourself it's quite new, and there wasn't anything got on it."

"And then?" Miss Brandon asked.

"Then I went back and looked for him as he'd told me, but there was no sign of him. I waited about there till a station policeman began to look at me all suspicious, so I went to him and asked him if he'd seen anything of my uncle who'd told me to meet him there. Of course I described him, black eyes and hair and chalk complexion, but I think that policeman had an idea I was pulling his leg. Then I went and had two double whiskies in the refreshment room, and felt a lot better, and when I come back the policeman said my uncle hadn't turned up, but would he do instead when he went off duty? You know, they're all alike—but no—*you* wouldn't know."

Miss Brandon's color heightened a little. She looked up from her notebook and smiled. "So you didn't see the uncle again, then?"

Betty shook her head. "I gave it up," she answered. "I was near on eighteen pound and this costume and a pair of shoes to the good, and if he couldn't keep an appointment it wasn't my fault, was it? I hope I never see that black-eyed blighter again. There was something uncanny about him. I reckon it was mesmerism, don't you?"

Miss Brandon opened a drawer of her desk, took out four ten-shilling notes, and handed them over. "There is a good deal of mesmerism in twenty pounds," she said reflectively.

"Thanks for this," Betty said coldly, "and you can think it was the money if

you like. P'raps it was, some of it, but not all. The way he made me move about and do exactly what he wanted, and not think it a bit odd till I was in the train coming back. I didn't think at all—I just acted as he said I was to act, as if he was the ventriloquist on a stage and I was the dummy."

"Thank you for coming," Miss Brandon said. "I am sure Mr. Gees will be very interested in your story, which I expect I shall send on to him."

Betty stood up, understanding the implied dismissal. Again she took in the furnishing of the room, and, for a moment, its occupant.

Then she turned and went out very quickly.

MISS BRANDON went carefully over the story, in which the post-hypnotic suggestion was clearly evident—and MacMorn was a master hypnotist, at that. A chemist, too. Some compound had been used to render the shoes unwearable as soon as her feet warmed them; the stockings, too, had probably been treated so that a brief period of wear would rot their fabric. But over the fur and scarf, post-hypnotic suggestion alone had been brought to bear on the girl.

MacMorn had etched on her mind that she would see maggots and lice after she had got in the train, and feel the maggot on her neck, and she had both seen and felt, though in reality there was nothing of the sort on either of the things. Thus she had arrived at Bristol, as he had intended, so different in attire as well as in looks from Helen Aylener that, if an alarm had been given, she would have passed unquestioned.

Like Gees, Miss Brandon felt that something other than mere coincidence was working on Gees' side, for coincidence was not enough to account for Betty's meeting him and telling him her story. From the moment of his arrival at Brachmornalachan the first time, everything had been preposterous, unbelievable. If all that Gees had told her were to be credited, then MacMorn had had lifetime after lifetime in which to acquire and store knowledge, and had worked along lines which, although almost discredited today, resulted in powers that had produced strange effects in the past.

And Gees, with only a decade or two of knowledge, had set himself against this being, this maker of shadows . . .

After two years of association with Gees, Miss Brandon had faith in his ability and strength of will. But he had gone alone against one who controlled abnormal powers. She discounted Kyrle, whom she had seen for a few minutes: an average young man, not a bad sort, but quite useless ranged against MacMorn, who would blind him with illusions as easily as he had Betty. No, Gees went to his battle alone.

Suddenly she frowned. Suppose MacMorn had meant him to follow to Brachmornalachan, get entangled in the web of shadows, and held until it was too late to save Helen—

CHAPTER XIX

SATAN'S PACT

SO KYRLE had gone, either of his own accord or by compulsion. Gees reflected, it was no great loss; the completeness with which Kyrle had yielded to the influence of the scent, his response to MacMorn's cordiality, and his intermittent forgetfulness of their purpose in coming, proved him of little use. As to where he had gone or been taken, it might be only a few feet away; whatever sounds he might make would be inaudible, since the room was so far soundproofed that even the roar of the gale went unheard.

A dozen times or more Gees tried the door, but it remained immovable. He tested the floor and walls, but could find no hidden spring. Then, seated on one of the divans, he realized that he had a headache. The effect of that crimson drink, probably.

That self in him which had talked in and understood the language he had never heard before he entered this house, the

self which had almost yielded to MacMorn's promptings, lost its hold on him. He felt that if MacMorn invited him to strike him now, he would, and powerfully, too.

Yet there was the hour and more which he had lost. Aided by the effect of the scent and the crimson drink, MacMorn had hypnotized him, and what suggestions the man had planted in his mind during the period of complete control were outside his knowledge. He must keep watch on himself, suppress any abnormal impulse.

Meanwhile he was a prisoner, and MacMorn had won the first round. By his watch, it was just noon; there were six and a half hours or thereabouts to go before new moon.

In what form would the Maiden present herself when, at the crowning moment of the ritual which MacMorn must observe to summon her, she became visible to human eyes? Rhea, Astarte, Isis, Tanit —they were all one. Koré, or that earlier and more terrible Unnamed, who brooded over such blood-washed altars as the black stone he had lately seen?

Futile questionings, these. He was a prisoner.

Had MacMorn told truth or lied when he said that he had no need of Helen Aylener, because the dark-eyed girl in the green and silver room was the life he meant to blend to his own? Or was Helen a prisoner somewhere in this house? MacMorn had spoken with every appearance of sincerity but he was holding Gees until search would be useless.

It came back to Gees that MacMorn, after leaving him and Kyrle, had reappeared from somewhere while he, Gees, had been attempting to reopen the door. Whatever MacMorn's powers might be, he was human enough, incapable of dematerialization, and therefore there must be some other means of ingress to the room.

With this, Gees set to work to examine all the walls. He tapped and tested and passed his hands over them vainly, until retreating to the middle of the room to consider where MacMorn had been standing after his startling entry, he noticed that about three feet of the shelf at the back was clear of glassware, and damned himself for not observing it before.

At a light push, the bare section of the shelf swung outward and took with it a door in the paneling of the room, revealing a practical and modern fitted lavatory, white-tiled from its plain, smoothstone floor to the ceiling of black wood.

The lines of cement between the tiles were unbroken everywhere, as Gees found on inspecting them. Faint though the available light was, it was enough to determine that there was no possibility of a join, no means of entry except that on which the section of shelf was fixed. After an examination as thorough as it was futile, Gees gave it up and got rid of the last of his headache by splashing double handfuls of water over his face from the basin.

Ten minutes to one, now. He began to feel hungry. There were plenty of drinks on the shelf, but he let them alone for the one drink MacMorn had mixed for him was quite enough.

Time dragged on. He tried the door again and found it as immovable as before.

He would not believe that Helen's disappearance was in no way connected with MacMorn; the object in keeping him, Gees, here was plain enough. For, if she disappeared completely, nobody (except Margaret Aylener) would believe the fantastic story by which he would account for the girl's vanishing. Let him, Gees, remain prisoned in this room until tomorrow morning, and MacMorn could laugh at any story he might tell.

Then Gees remembered the weather-worn inscription on the gateway stone—the symbol of Koré. For her entry, or for that of the Unnamed from whose rites the cult of Koré had developed, *all doors must be opened.* Whether opened for a minute or an hour, Gees did not know: little record remained of these old mys-

teries: even the nature of the visions shown to the devotees at comparatively modern Eleusis was unknown now.

MacMorn, of course, must know it all, or else he would not attempt what he had virtually owned as his intent. But, at the time of the moon's new birth, the culmination of MacMorn's purpose, there was a chance—

If he could keep his wits about him, take advantage of the open doors, he might yet save either Helen Aylener or that dark beauty he had seen, and by defeating MacMorn release the shadows now bound in a state as drear and desolate as the fields of asphodel.

Yes, there was still a chance.

IN AN ordinary-looking, comfortably-furnished bedroom on the upper floor of the house, Kyrle lay on the bed while MacMorn stood looking out from the window with his back to the room. Being in the front of the house, he looked down on the loch and saw how the force of the gale splashed waves on the lee bank and tore at the thatch of a house already partly unroofed, one of the cottages near the post office.

Even some of the solid peat turves were dislodged from the stacks, for this was such a wind as Brachmornalachan, sheltered by its surrounding hills, had not known for many a year. MacMorn smiled his pleasure as he looked across at The Rowans, and saw a bough of the mountain ash tree in front of the house hanging broken, swinging as gusts struck it. If only the wind would last until it had crashed all four of those trees to earth!

Margaret Aylener was on her way here—he knew it—but she would not attempt the drive from the station, thirty miles across unsheltered country, on such a day as this. She was growing old, past the time of enterprise and endurance, and for her there was no renewal of vitality, no barrier against the weakening thrusts of the years. *He* would not grow old!

Through all the lives he had lived, he had never grown old.

A sound of movement reached him, and he turned to stand beside the bed, looking down at Kyrle.

"You feel better now, I hope?" he asked with kindly solicitude.

"Much better," Kyrle answered, and slowly raised himself on his elbow. "I can't think what it was made me turn faint like that. Was it you who carried me up here? I don't remember clearly."

"It was Partha, my man," MacMorn told him. "I felt—there is more air in this room than the one you were in. I felt you would recover more quickly here, and Partha brought you up."

"That's a quaint old name. It was good of you to take so much trouble over me. But I think I'm steady enough on my feet now to go back to Gees—Mr. Green, I mean. I ought to go, too. He will be wondering what has become of me, if I don't."

"He will," MacMorn agreed, with an irony that was lost on the younger man. "But I am not sure—let me see your eyes, will you?"

Kyrle leaned up still more and looked into the black eyes, and they took and held him, bound him to MacMorn's will, while his own eyes grew fixed and staring, all in the space of a minute. At MacMorn's bidding he lay back on the pillow, and now the black eyes were directly over his own, gazing down at him, compelling, unescapable.

MacMorn spoke slowly, evenly. "Sleep. Sleep soundly, know nothing except what I tell you. Do you know that you must obey me, that there is no one thing you may do unless I order it?"

"I know," Kyrle answered, and his tone told MacMorn even more surely than the words that he was completely controlled.

MacMorn reached down a forefinger and with it closed the eyes unable to avert their gaze from his own. He spoke again.

"Sleep, and forget all things until all doors are opened, when you will waken and wait for my order. You will obey any order I give you. You will give and do what I order, and at my word will give your life."

Breathing quietly, apparently lost in sleep, Kyrle made no response.

"Tell me, you will give your life if I order it," MacMorn repeated, speaking with quiet, confident insistence. "Give it where I will."

"If you order it, I will give my life where you will," Kyrle said tonelessly, and scarcely moving his lips.

"Now sleep, to waken only when all doors are opened," MacMorn bade. "Then, you will waken, and will not leave this room until I bid you leave it. Obey only me. Sleep and forget all things, now."

FOR a few minutes he sat over the still figure, watching it unblinkingly, by his presence and will strengthening his hold. Then, satisfied that he had bound Kyrle in chains from which there was no escape, he went out from the room and, closing its door, descended to the corridor that ringed in the inner, wooden wall of the house.

There he opened another door by a touch, and entered the room of green and silver.

The woman stood in the center of the room, where the light was least, so that she was little more than a column of green shot with silver against the blackness of the farther wall, with the whiteness of her face an indistinctness above the column as she stood faced toward the door. MacMorn made an odd, swift gesture with his fingers, and she sat down on one of the divans and interlaced her slender fingers before her knees.

Thus she sat silent for a time, gazing up at him, while he looked down at her steadily.

"You remember the circle and the altar?" he asked at last.

"Could I forget them?" she asked in turn, in a tone which declared that the memory was one she had no wish to waken.

"We will speak in the old tongue," MacMorn said, "for you will need to speak it, soon." And, changing into the language of which he spoke, that of the dark men who had raised the stones in old time, he went on. "When you saw the altar last, you paid a great price, for nothing. But now, I come to you to offer. Equality with me, life as I live, and there will be no price for you to pay. I bring you this as a gift, in return for all you have done—and been."

"That is a dark saying," she told him, also speaking the tongue of the dark men—quite easily, in his presence and under his influence, for, as the color of her eyes and hair told, she was of the dark men's begetting. "For there is always a price that must be paid."

"Paid," he echoed, "at the turn of the moon today, and it shall be the younger of these two men. I have him in hold, promised to give his life where I will and when I will. A new life, for you."

Fear looked up at him. "There would be an accounting," she said. "If that were done, how would I—or you—escape, after?"

"The *Duoine Sidhe* leave nothing, no trace," he answered coolly. "If he is not anywhere, except for a shadow that comes and goes as I command, there can be no accounting. You think, I know, of the man you saw. But I tell you, when *he* goes out from this place tomorrow, you need have no fear of him. I will make him so that his word has as little power as that of the shadows who can no more make themselves heard by human ears."

"By that you mean—?" She did not end it, but looked up at him as she sat, knowing she need not complete the question.

"Not as a shadow," he said, "for if he too were not anywhere there would be an accounting. No, but with his will so bound that he is subject to shadows, his strength given to them, all that he may say derided, and with that the gift to you will be safely given."

"That is a very dark saying," she said somberly.

"He set himself to pull me down," MacMorn retorted harshly. "He has knowledge—how much, I do not know, but he has knowledge that he sets against mine. I

offered him equality with me, but he refused. I would have no pity on him. Now, I make the offer to you as I made it to him, and if you accept it he must go out as I say, powerless to harm either you or me. Stand beside me when the new moon is born, and take back such a price as you paid—for me."

She brooded over the proposal awhile, and looked up at him again.

"It is too great a risk," she said. "I wish, but it is too great a risk, and—too great—a price."

"That man?" Incredulity sounded in the question. "You have seen him only for a moment! You have not so much as heard him speak!"

"I have both seen and heard him, before today," she said. "Also, for years after that other birth of a new moon when I paid a price for nothing, I was afraid there might be question. No. It is too great a risk, and I will not take your reward, Gamel MacMorn."

"Think," he urged softly, temptingly. "To be as I am, kin to the *Duoine Sidhe,* having no fear of time and its power over common men, storing knowledge of things hidden from of old, growing in power life by life and, greatest of all for a woman, adding beauty to beauty—"

"No!" The interruption was a cry, as if she were afraid to hear more of what he would offer. "I will not!"

"The choice is with you," he said, and his disappointment was evident in his voice. "I can offer, but you only among living people I cannot compel. But I ask —because of the life I hold as part of mine, because of all that has been between us two, I ask your aid."

She looked up at him questioningly.

"The man you saw," he said in explanation. "The other, the younger one—this is the second time I have made him drink and then controlled him. He is asleep until the doors are opened, completely under control, and then he will give life itself if I order it—"

"He will not give it—I said I would not!" she exclaimed.

"That is finished—you have made decision, I know. But this other—even when I persuaded him to drink and then dominated him, there was something of him that would not submit, something that escaped me. I saw it when I brought him here to you. Something in him that fought, remained unconquered—I hastened him away from you lest he should see with his own eyes, instead of with the sight I gave him."

"Can I fight what Gamel MacMorn cannot conquer?" she asked derisively, and her clasped fingers about her knees tightened on each other.

"For a time," he answered the question seriously, "with the scent and the crimson drink as aids, you can bind him. Because of the opening doors he must be bound. While I prepare, as all must be prepared before the fires are lighted round the altar—I cannot remain with him to hold him bound. But for you, there is a way."

"Tell me the way," she bade.

Minutes later, she laughed and said: "Yes, I understand."

"And agree? You will do as I ask?"

"You are great, Gamel MacMorn, a great one among the dark men who were my fathers too. I will do all you ask."

"I have told Partha—he will do the rest. You have only to wait until this man comes to you, and take him back into the scent. I have many things to do before the fires are lighted round the altar—"

Abruptly, realizing how little time remained to him for those things, he left her. As she sat alone, waiting, she smiled to herself.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN ALL DOORS OPEN

HALF past one. Gees put the watch to his ear, and listened to its healthy ticking. Time passed so slowly in this prisoned inaction that he feared the watch had stopped.

Beelzebub. MacMorn had said it was a name not to be spoken lightly in this

house. The road to Winchester and the swarm of flies. Beelzebub, the Carthaginian god of flies.

"Damn you, Beelzebub," Gees said softly.

The commination was useless, though, as he realized. Beelzebub wouldn't care, for he was already damned.

At a thought Gees got up from the divan, took a strong, two-bladed knife from his pocket, and opened the larger blade. He picked up one of the stools and examined it from all points, turned it upside down, and tried the wood with his knife-blade.

But it was useless for his purpose, and he put it down again. Looking all round the room, he eyed the shelf on which the bottles and glasses stood, and then went to one end and tried it with the knife blade. Although of hard, old oak, as a sliver revealed, it was not so hard as the stool. He had no compunction over damaging it; given assurance of his own and Kyrle's and Helen's safety, he would cheerfully have set fire to the place.

Working carefully along the grain of the wood with the knife, he pared off the end of the shelf a lath about four inches long, and rather less than half an inch thick, with which he went back to a divan and, seating himself, cut the lath into unequal lengths.

He trimmed both pieces carefully, after which he took the raincoat which he had laid over a stool near the door on first entering this room, and by the aid of the knife's small blade got out a strong thread about a yard in length. He laid the shorter of his two pieces of oaken lath crosswise to the longer one, and bound them together with the thread, winding it tightly and finishing off with a few half-hitches. Then he looked at the result of his work as it lay in his hand, a neatly-made cross.

"It can't do any harm, and it may do good," he observed to himself, and then sat up, suddenly alert. The scent he had smelled before was beginning to fill the room again. There was no mistaking its heady fragrance.

Gees put the cross in his pocket, closed the blade of the knife, and returned it to security. The scent was growing stronger—did MacMorn mean to drug him?

But why should he?

Yes, though, there would come the time of opened doors. But that was hours away—it was now two o'clock, and new moon was not until half past six.

Like nothing on earth, that scent. The phrase, so often used carelessly, was completely apposite now. It *was* like nothing on earth, but rather was a breath from and almost sight of some elysium of dreams. Scent of a golden-lighted lotus-land, peopled by such houris as the one he had seen robed in green and silver—green and silver . . .

The language MacMorn had caused him to understand came back to his mind, and he could think in it again.

It was like the scent, appealing and direct, simpler and less capable of fine shades of expression than his own language, but persuasive, forceful. And if MacMorn had told truth, the dark girl in green and silver would be no more than a wandering shadow, soon. MacMorn would take the rest of her, blend it to himself as another period of life in which to gain more power—

Gees started up.

A FAINT sound had reached his ears from the corner of the room opposite the door. A very faint sound, as if a mouse might have moved beside the paneling, or—

It was at that point MacMorn must have entered the room, while Gees had been trying to open the door. *Was* the other door there? He had tried the wall at that point, even more thoroughly than the rest. There would be no harm in trying it again.

He went into the corner and began there, thrusting at the wall with his hands to see if any part of it would yield. Some two yards out from the corner, at right angles to the shelf, what had been solid

before gave way with little effort on his part.

The sound he had heard had indicated the release of a catch of some sort, and now a section of the wall the size and shape of an ordinary door fell back at right angles to the rest, quite silently, revealing a passageway gloomy even at its entrance, and hidden in black, utter darkness after only a few feet of its length. If its visible beginning were any indication of its direction, it led parallel with the corridor along the front of the house.

A trap, of course. He was intended to explore the passage—and find what ugly end in the utter darkness toward which he gazed?

If so, though, why the scent? The catch of this hidden door might have slipped by accident. Stepping just inside the passage, he felt down the edge of the door, but could find no latch nor bolt, no inequality of the surface, even. Nor was there any sign of a fastening on the edge to which the bronze hinges were screwed, he assured himself.

He backed into the room, out of sight of the passage, and, getting his automatic pistol out of the armpit holster next his skin, slipped it in his hip pocket with a round in the barrel chamber and the safety catch on. For he meant to explore the passage, whether it was a trap or not.

Anything was better than sitting here, waiting MacMorn's time to release him. And, back in the full influence of the scent, he had no scruple over telling himself that the passage *might* lead him to the green and silver room and the girl within it.

In a straight line, it must take him there.

He entered, and moved slowly and with short steps along the smooth floor. The ceiling was within his reach overhead, the walls so close to each other that he had only to extend his hands a little to touch them both. No glimmer of light showed ahead, and he went more slowly and yet more slowly, feeling his way lest some shaft should be open to take him down and out of the sight of all men for all time.

After what seemed a long time he looked back. Yes, so far the passage was quite straight, for he could see the oblong of light framing a part of the room he had left. Again, in six-inch steps, he went on, bending each foot as he advanced it to assure himself that the toe was on firm support. The floor remained smooth, unbroken.

Until he sensed solidity close before him. He reached out and touched it, solid wood, a smooth, unbroken surface wherever his hand moved. He thought to use his cigarette lighter, and the flame showed plain hard wood. With the light still on, he pressed lightly, and the panel gave a little. He capped the lighter and put it back in his pocket, and, looking back again to estimate the distance he had traveled, felt that he knew what was beyond this door.

A stronger thrust, and it swung open and stayed. Facing him stood the girl in green and silver, and he knew as he looked at her that though Margaret Aylener might be and still was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, this dark girl was the loveliest. With wide eyes and parted lips she faced him, startled, but scarcely afraid, a face and figure so ethereally fine as to seem only half of earth.

"Who are you?" he asked, with the bluntness of sudden embarrassment.

She shook her head and smiled, as if she did not comprehend the question. Then he remembered; MacMorn and she had spoken, and he had understood, another language. It came easily to his tongue, he found, and in it he asked again—

"Who are you?"

"I am named Gail," she answered, and the name as she spoke it, half separated into two syllables, was like a caress. "And you—have you found a way to freedom and come to set me free?"

"Ah! Like that, then." He reverted to his own language for the comment. Then, so that she could understand. "I am not sure, but we may find a way. If, as I think, the doors must be opened."

CHAPTER XXI

WARNING IN THE SHADOWS

THE girl moved close, and her soft, dark eyes questioned him, sought to know how far she might trust him. "Then you too know of the opening doors?"

For a moment it appeared to him that the fine lines of her face were confused with other lines, but as she drew back the illusion disappeared He said: "Yes, and we may escape then."

She looked toward the passage entrance. "Until you came, no door was there," she said. "There is light—I see light a long way off."

"Another room, like this," he explained. "But—"

"Let us go there!" She turned toward him, interrupting him with the exclamation. "Let us go there and close this door, so that he may not know where to find me. I am afraid—let us go there."

He hesitated. There was nothing against the suggestion, he decided. She was already at the passage entrance, looking back at him, waiting for him to follow.

"I shall not fear the darkness with you," she said, and at that he hesitated no longer, but entered the passage and drew the door closed behind him, placing them both in black darkness. Before moving on, he gave a thrust at the closed door, and found it immovable. Useless to regret leaving the green and silver room, now. But not until he had found and grasped the girl's arm did he realize that they were going back into the scent, of which her room had been free.

With the open doorway at the far end, and his knowledge that all the length of the passage floor was smooth, he led her confidently along into his room, as he thought of it now. The scent was stronger than when he had entered the passage, or else return into it made it more perceptible. He saw it as a faint, very thin haze, a slightly greenish tinge on the air of the room.

While he stood, staring with mixed surprise and suspicion at a tray of food that had appeared on one of the little tables in his absence, Gail reached back into the passage and pulled at the door, which swung back level with the rest of the wall. As it came to rest, Gees heard again a faint sound like a mouse in the paneling, and, moving back to try the door, found that it had latched itself and was immovable as when he had first tried the walls.

Well, it made no difference, since the door at the other end had closed solidly. If all doors should open, as he believed, this room was as near the front entrance of the house as that other.

He faced about to look at the girl as a sudden suspicion assailed his mind. Possibly that trick of the opening doors—for now Gees felt certain it was a trick—had been contrived so that food might be placed in this room in his absence, lest he should attack whoever brought it and try to make his escape.

But was that all, or did MacMorn intend to throw this girl and him together for some other purpose? Was she leagued with MacMorn, rendered accessible as aid to some purpose of his?

The question lasted in his mind only until she gazed up at him, and he saw in this stronger light the full loveliness of her eyes. Utter truth was revealed in them: such a one was incapable of treachery, an embodiment of the sweetness that he breathed with the scent—and she trusted him to free her from MacMorn.

Adam's decisions about Eve, when she seduced him from Lilith, were probably formed on rather similar lines.

"There is food," Gail said simply, "and I am hungry."

"I too," Gees agreed, and took off a cover to reveal sandwiches—which might be poisoned, for all he knew, but he felt he would risk it. "While we eat, you shall tell me of yourself, Gail."

IT WAS the scent, a warning consciousness told him, that made him incline to belief in an easy escape at the appointed time. As he placed two stools opposite

each other with the tray between them, he tried to keep in mind that he must not relax from vigilance for a moment, but the need for care and restraint was difficult to remember. More and still more difficult.

He found himself reveling in the increased perceptiveness that was one of the attributes of this haze, and told himself that oxygen, which has a like effect, burns life itself away if increased to too great a strength. He must watch, resist, keep a clear mind—

"Of myself," the girl said as she seated herself before the tray. "Today, but for you, I should end, no longer be myself."

"I am not sure that I can save you," he told her. "Not quite sure."

"When the doors are opened, you will take me away beyond his reach, beyond the limits of his circle," she said, with complete confidence. She took up one of the sandwiches and began to eat, smiling at him.

"If possible, I will take you away," he assented. "You know of the doors opening. What else? Why are the doors opened?"

"That she, the Unnamed, may enter," she answered, with as little apprehension over it as if she had spoken of an ordinary human visitor. "All ways must be made clear for her, else the invocation brings no answer. Only when all ways are clear will she reveal herself."

"And then?" he asked.

"Then, though the ways are clear, she has no need of them," she answered. "Yet they must be clear, lest any who would win sight of her are held from her presence. There must be way for all."

It was accepted fact, Gees knew. In every circle raised on earth by the very old ones who believed in and gave strength to their Unnamed, the stones that guard her altars stand apart from each other, so that approach may be possible to the people on every side.

Thus, now that MacMorn had built his house round an altar—and had been careful to leave the altar itself open to the sky—every line of approach to the altar, every door in the house which might hold back a possible visitant, must be opened before any invocation could take effect.

He took his third sandwich and began on it. "And her way?" he asked a little later, before taking another.

She smiled. "What is the way of the shadows?" she asked in reply. "Could you stay them when they pass, or confine them to a way?"

For awhile they ate in silence, and Gees reflected on the many who had tried to evoke this Unnamed or some later form of her, even in historic times. The hecatombs of Carthage, the children of Retz, black victims in Haiti, white girls—especially girls!—in closed houses from Paris to the farthest East, sacrificed in attempts at reawakening the object of a worship conceived in cruelty, kept alive only by gifts of human life, and a devouring rather than beneficent power.

MacMorn followed it to his own ultimate extinction in it, blindly, helplessly. MacMorns had been kings; one of them —this one, perhaps—had very nearly raised himself to rule over all Britain. So far, given the human lives it demanded, had their Unnamed led them upward, but with inevitably lessening fees for its consuming at their command, they had dwindled from kingship until Gamel MacMorn was an unknown man in a tiny, remote village. The moon god or goddess—for to them it was female—was cold as the moon, unresponsive to human needs as the moon.

"You dream? Forget me?" Gail asked.

"No man could forget you," he answered. "I thought of ways of escape. A few hours, less than four hours, and we shall go."

She stood up, and he followed suit. She said: "I need drink."

"There is a door where the shelf is bare," he told her. "You will find water there. Wait, I will get you water."

"No," she dissented. "Another drink. When Gamel MacMorn brought me here, he came with me to this room and made

a drink there." She pointed at the shelf. "I will make it again, and you shall taste it with me. It brings great happiness."

She was a shining wonder as she stood, and the scent was in his brain, clouding reason. Instead of passing him on her way to the shelf, she stood before him, almost touched against him. Inevitably he held her, unresisting, as inevitably kissed her and saw her eyes close under his own, felt her yield to his hold.

"I trust myself to you," she said. "When the doors are opened, I will trust myself to you."

Then a shuddering took her, and he held her away from him with a sudden thought that the food had been poisoned. But she smiled, and stood quite clear of him, erect and slim. "I will make the drinks that bring happiness," she said, "and you shall drink with me."

She leaned toward him momentarily and her lips touched lightly against his own, but when he would have held her again she slipped away and went to the shelf while he turned to watch her.

BESIDE her, and behind her range of vision, he saw a shadow hovering. He could not gaze at it directly to determine its form, for as he shifted his line of vision the shadow shifted too, always escaping him. Others appeared to either side of her, but of them all he could not pin one to definiteness, could not fine his sight directly on it.

Then he saw that Gail was compounding the drinks with as sure a hand as MacMorn's. The two glass-stoppered bottles from which he had poured stood out in front of the rest, and she half filled two glasses from one bottle, to complete the filling from the other and stand to watch while in both glasses the blended fluids foamed, gained color, and stilled to crimson clarity.

It occurred to Gees that the change must be real rather than apparent, for MacMorn was not here now to compel a hypnotic belief in it. There was only Gail—and the shadows.

"What need has MacMorn of shadows?"

She turned from the shelf to face him, apparently startled by such a question. She said—"He has no need of them. They are lives yielded on the altar, for each life a shadow, because they died to give strength to the Unnamed. He can command them, but in this place he cannot escape them. They crave release from being, but while the Unnamed has power they are bound to existence. Need of them? If he could, Gamel MacMorn would drive them away, but that may not be."

There they were, ever moving just beyond his line of vision, but he knew that Gail did not perceive their presence. To MacMorn, who served his Unnamed, they must appear as accusers—and though he could command them he could not drive them away! There was, then, a heavy price that he must pay for his continuing human existence. He must be—was—entirely conscienceless, or he could never endure these reminders of lives he had taken, in what fashion Gees could not yet tell, to renew his own. Drifting shadows, voiceless, craving release—

Gail turned again and took up the two glasses. She came forward from the shelf and offered one to Gees, smiling, and he took and held it.

The shadows were nearer, more numerous, nebulous shapes on the greenish haze, though not once could he bring one directly before his gaze to ascertain what form these remnants of lives assumed. There was a warning in his brain that he could not reduce to definiteness, an impelling of which he did not know the source.

Something he must or must not do or say, but it was as vague as the drifting shadows. He looked at the clear, crimson fluid in the glass, and again at Gail.

"Where have I heard your voice?" he asked. "Somewhere—"

She shook her head. "There are many voices like mine," she answered, but he detected a note of anxiety in the implied denial. "Mine is like some one of them, but you have not heard me speak until today."

"Yet, somewhere, I *have* heard you," he insisted. "If you could speak my language—is this the only language you understand?"

"I cannot speak your language. Drink with me." She reached out the glass she held and with it touched his.

(Was that—the need of placing her, remembering where he had heard her voice, the vague warning that ticked in his brain?)

"When I drank this drink with MacMorn," he said, "no good came of it." (Was the warning against taking the drink?)

"But I am not MacMorn." She leaned toward him and smiled. "Yet I warn you—when you drink, do not close your eyes."

That must be it. He had closed his eyes—Kyrle remembered closing his eyes when he had first drunk this stuff, and both Kyrle and himself had lost periods of time in which MacMorn had done what he would with their minds. But still there was an uneasy sense of something he must or must not do or say, a consciousness other than his own warning him of danger from—what? Closing his eyes?

Kyrle had said, when he told of his uneasy dreams: "It isn't whispering, but as if they thought at the inner me, not in speech at all." So now, something was thinking at the inner Gees, striking at the influence of the scent, trying to tell him—what?

He ought not to have come back here: the green and silver room was free of the scent, and away from it these impulses which drove him now would have had no power. He saw Gail, not relaxing her gaze at him, lift her glass to her lips, and knew that he too wanted to drink, wanted to experience the ecstasy the crimson fluid had already given him once. If he did not close his eyes—in that lay the danger. He drank.

Gail's glass, emptied, thudded unbroken on the carpeted floor. For a moment, as he too drank, he knew again the illusion that other lines confused the contours of her face, and then the wonderful, vital life of the fluid flooded him. His glass fell unheeded from his fingers, and he reached out—Gail's dark eyes were so near his own that he had no remembrance of the shadows, nor any reasoning sanity left . . .

Her arms clasped round his neck, and she drew him down . . . the dark eyes looked up into his, and closed . . . she whispered—"Yes. Hold me—" and her whispering ceased. The elysian enchantment of the scent was one with her night-dark hair and willing lips, a sweetness . . .

CHAPTER XXII

THE WIND'S DELAY

THIRTY miles away, the wheel-flanges of an engine and three corridor coaches ground noisily against the lee-side rails as, resistant to the force of the gale, the train drew to a standstill at a wayside station. Callum, waiting on the platform, hurried to a doorway of the middle coach, from which Margaret Aylener descended to face him. He looked past her, but no other descended with her.

"You are alone, madam."

"Have you seen anything of Miss Helen?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, madam. Mr. Green and Mr. Kyrle came last night, and said she had disappeared. I thought—perhaps—" He did not end the sentence, nor was there any need. It was the expression of the very faintest of hopes that he knew all the time as a futility.

"They are at Brachmornalachan now?" she asked, while an aged porter, who had raked her luggage out of the van, approached for instruction as to what to do with it.

"They went to MacMorn's this morning," Callum answered. "I put Mr. Green's car in the garage for him, because he left it out last night. When I came away, madam, they had not returned."

"Why did he leave the car out?" She disregarded the waiting porter to ask the question.

"He—Mr. Green—told Elizabeth there was fog," Callum answered, "though it

was quite clear when I went to bed. But—" Again he left a remark incomplete. Again, with Margaret Aylener as his auditor, there was no need for him to state his conclusion.

She turned to the porter—he had loaded and unloaded baggage here for her long enough to know the lady from Brachmornalachan.

"Put it all in the car," she bade. "In the back—we shall not wait to strap any trunks on the grid. Go and help him, Callum."

She gave up her ticket and followed them into the little booking office, toward the exit from the station. When Callum released the latch of the outer door for the porter to wheel his barrow through, the door swung wide with a crash, and the wind that drove it struck Margaret Aylener and forced her back a couple of steps before she could regain balance against it. She struggled through the doorway and on to the car.

Until the car turned to face the wind, the body rocked on its springs as gusts struck at its length. Blue-gray, high-riding clouds raced from west to east, and the land was dark under them. Within a quarter-mile of the station, they passed a great gash in the earth, and at its side a wall of soil that still clung among the roots of a newly-uprooted larch.

The driving gale roared past them, and the car shook in it. Vague in the farthest distance before them, the hills that ringed in Brachmornalachan squatted, gray under the blue-gray clouds.

"What time was it when Mr. Green and Mr. Kyrle went to MacMorn's this morning, Callum?" Miss Aylener asked when they had traveled a mile.

"Very early, madam. Mr. Green asked for breakfast at six, and they left very soon after. I was out after Mr. Green's car, and saw them go into the house. It would then be not seven o'clock, I think."

"And until you left, you saw nothing more of them?"

"Nothing, madam," he told her soberly. "It would be about two o'clock when I left, and I think they were still at MacMorn's."

"And it is new moon this evening." She stated the fact, did not ask a question. Callum inclined his head in assent.

"By Greenwich, six-thirty-three," he said.

For awhile, gazing through the windscreen at bending trees, broken branches, flying wisps of straw and hay, and here and there a flung-down mass of foliage—the wrack of the great gale—she sat thoughtful. All her love for Helen, all that she had given, was futile, ran her thoughts. Within his circle of stones, MacMorn was master of old enchantments, priest of old gods and user of their powers—and the two men had not come back! He had worsted them, laid his warlock spells on them and made them helpless. And Helen—

She must not despair: there was still time, still hope.

THEY topped a rise, and the car slowed and shook in the full force of the wind. With a crash that was the sound of its death-agony a tall tree, no more than a score yards distant from the road, fell.

"This is an awful gale, Callum," Margaret Aylener said.

"Aye," he assented. "I mind no worse. But yon tree stood exposed to the worst, and t'was spaulty wood. Else it would have uprooted, not broken as it did."

"Is that the corect time?" She looked at the clock on the dash.

"Fairly correct, madam. Maybe five minutes fast—it gains a wee bit." He depressed his accelerator as he spoke, for, though they had topped the rise, the wind's force slowed down the car.

"And another hour will see us at home," she suggested.

"Not today, madam." He shook his head. "The wind holds us back. Nearer an hour and a half, I'd say, with the last nine miles little more than a cattle track as it is. And that only if the road's clear."

"Clear?" she echoed, not comprehending.

"A tree might fall and block it at any moment, madam."

A slant of grayness charged toward them: drops of the rain rattled on the wind screen like small shot, and then the shower was behind them, racing to the east, while Callum set his wiper in motion for a minute to clear the spattered screen, and stopped it again.

They rounded a bend, and he released the accelerator, disengaged gear, and pulled on the hand brake. "I feared it," he said.

A high-roofed truck lay on its side, the wheels toward the ditch, the strutted tarpaulin top extending so far into the road as almost to block it. Two men, the driver and his mate, stood gazing at it.

"I'll go and see, madam," Callum said. "There may be just room to pass. On this curve, we are diagonal to the wind, and an inch too little might throw us into the off-side ditch. I am not sure—"

He got out and closed the door. Alternately she watched him and the inexorable clock on the dash, while he went to where the two men stood. The lorry driver nodded at him, cheerfully.

"We've sent for the nearest towing outfit, mister," he said. "I reckon another hour'll see it here. She's threatened to capsize half a dozen times when the blasted wind hit her full, and by gum she's done it at last. But you *might* get past." He measured the clear width of road with his eyes, and then looked at the stationary car. "It's a shave, if not more'n a shave, but you might do it."

"We will see," Callum said calmly.

With his back to the tarpaulin at the point where it projected farthest into the road, he set his heel against it, and then, heel touching toe with every step, paced to the edge of the ditch.

"What d'ye make it, mate?" the truck driver called to him.

He came back from the edge of the ditch and shook his head. "Six inches too little," he said. "And I *must* get on."

"You mean—real serious?" the driver asked.

Callum looked him squarely in the eyes and said: "Life or death."

"Well, that's good enough, I guess," the man observed. "The old barrow's wrecked, anyhow, an' I doubt if I'll ever drive her to Manchester again. You say life or death, so wreckin' the cover's no crime."

He detached a scout's jack-knife from a swivel on his belt, opened it, and thrust the point through the tarpaulin covering. With a downward thrust he made a long slit, parallel with the strut on which that part of the cover was braced. Then, reversing the knife and thrusting upward, he carried the slit as far as he could reach.

"Jumbo"—he addresed his mate—"open the tool-box careful, though I guess everything'll fall out however you open it. Fetch out the hacksaw. If we cut away a couple o' struts about a foot down, I reckon it'll give that six inches o' roadway. Get a move on!"

"I'll go and explain to the lady in the car," Callum said.

She watched his return, glad to see any movement but that of the merciless clock hands before her. He explained why they must wait, and she took a pound note out of her bag and handed it to him.

"Give them that," she bade, "and tell them to hurry. *Make* them do it quickly, Callum. There is so very little time."

"I'll do my best, madam," he promised, and went back.

BY THE time he reached the truck again, the driver had finished slitting the tarpaulin, and Jumbo had taken the top off the rearmost strut with the hacksaw. There was no need, Callum knew, to tell the driver and his mate to hurry. Five minutes more, and between them the two men carried aside the cut-away part of the cover. The driver eyed the resulting distance to the ditch, and again looked at the waiting car.

"Think that'll do it, mate?" he asked cheerfully.

"I am quite sure," Callum answered, and held out the pound note. "Your front

end is so much farther off the road that it won't interfere with us. Give me clearance against you as I drive past."

"I will that, an' you're a toff, mate." The driver took the pound note. "Ten bob apiece outer the sky, as you might say. Thank the lady for us, mate, and tell her we wish her luck."

She needed it, Callum reflected as he went back to his seat and started again.

Now, slowly, with a tight grip on the wheel because of the thrust of the tearing, roaring wind, Callum set the car in motion. The rear mudguard scraped against the ragged edge of tarpaulin where the driver had cut it away. They were clear! Callum pushed down the accelerator, and Margaret Aylener smiled and inclined her head to the two men as the car passed them, gaining speed momentarily.

Clear, but with twenty-two minutes lost.

"Callum, did you have a good lunch before you started?"

"Why, yes, madam." Surprise at the question sounded in his reply.

She said:

"Then, if we get back by six, I don't wish you to stop for tea. Go straight to MacMorn's—don't trouble about the trunks or putting the car away, but go straight there. You understand?"

"Yes, madam."

"You will have no difficulty about getting in, I feel sure. My father told me how the door stood open for a new moon, at the time of Margaret Grallach's disappearance. You will have no difficulty over that part of it."

"And the rest of it"—Callum spoke as much to himself as to her—"well, I shall find that out when I get there."

"Helen—" Margaret Aylener said the one word, and no more.

Callum said: "I understand, madam," and drove on, into the roaring wind, neutralizing its pressure with his tight grip on the steering wheel.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Looking Ahead!

ARCHERS TO THE FRONT

War banners fly over England today. The knights don their casques and buckle on their long swords; the forest men seize their bowstaves and pack their quivers full. For King Edward summons his subjects to arms; and tomorrow they cross the Channel—to battle a hundred long years in France. An exciting short novel of Robin the Bombardier, by

ROY DE S. HORN

WHEN NO DOGS BARK

Let the stranger in China beware when the dogs cease to take loud notice of him. So said the Japanese commander; and, in a manner of speaking, he was right. Except that he failed to give proper attention to his own advice. A short story about a white man who knew all the answers and carried a boxcar full of rabbits' feet, by

ALFRED BATSON

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COMING TO YOU IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JANUARY 6, 1940

Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

VERY shortly the New Year will be upon us, and as usual we aren't ready for it. We speak as human beings now, not as editors; the latter have to be prepared for anything that comes along, including 1940. But the unprofessional side of us is dismayed at the thought of another year arriving so quickly. Here we are caught off-guard again; we have not had a chance to ponder deeply on the meaning of Time, to sum up our lives to date, or to make resolutions for the future.

It is perfectly obvious to us, and to Hamilcar, Ottokar, et al, that our behavior could stand plenty of alterations. But we don't know where to start, and it's getting late, very late, in 1939. In a little while now the New Year will be here, and we will be wandering vaguely around in it, without having saluted it fittingly, and unreformed. It's a sad thing, but all we can think of to do is to buy one of those toy tin horns and blow it very loud on midnight December 31st. 1939 is dying and we are growing old. . . . Office boy, bring us a horn.

The dispute over religion in fantastics, which Mr. Corydon Snyder may wish he had never started, is continuing apace. Further fuel is cast to the blaze by

F. M. TURNER

Well, at last we have the religious crank who wants to turn ARGOSY into a Bible. And Mr. Snyder doesn't like fantastics because they are not based on facts and therefore are lies.

Well, Mr. Snyder, how do you take to the Bible fantastic of Jonah and the Whale? Of course, you accept the explanation that in those days whales were immense fish like unto the other prehistoric animals and had side-entrances for stranded gentlemen; the whale just backed up to the beach and opened the doors, and Jonah walked in and turned on the lights and hung up the old fashioned motto, "There is no place like home."

Then there was another fantastic built around a feller named Daniel and a dozen starved lions. Say, Snyder, did you ever see a starved lion? Well, they are bad, bad kitties—no table manners to speak about. When they are hungry, they don't argue about what there is to eat but just sneak up to jumping distance and don't pay any attention to the keeper. According to the picture painted by Marrat, the lions just sat down after they heaved Daniel into the Den, and did nothing worse than look. I have always believed someone interested in Daniel must have taken out an injunction.

Then there is that beautiful, touching fantastic about the Ark. Two by two, up the gangplank they go. From all the corners of the earth, those beasties just knew when to come to be saved. Touching if true. Every kind that existed—fierce lions, gentle deer, savage poisonous snakes and timid little rabbits. Then there was the food supply that just seemed to be there. Hum! I s'pose there were two lice and two bedbugs and I always wondered why they took those pests on board.

Then there was the fantastic about the Seven Times Hotter Furnace, in which a goodly man was to be burned. They just threw him in and the furnace was so hot it killed the fellers that opened the door. Somehow that hot fire failed to annoy the victim.

I wonder, Mr. Snyder, did you ever read ancient history—about the time of the Crusaders? Did you ever discover how those wars were conducted and for what purpose? Did you gather the information that thousands of innocent people were butchered by Christian Knights? Did history ever tell you of the inquisitions and the horrible tortures that were used in place of missionaries to convert the infidels?

Mr. Snyder, more innocent people have been butchered in the name of your religion than in all other wars. If you don't know about these small matters, you can be informed, providing you are not so narrow-minded that you *won't* see all the picture.

Louisville, Kentucky.

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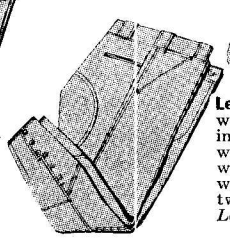

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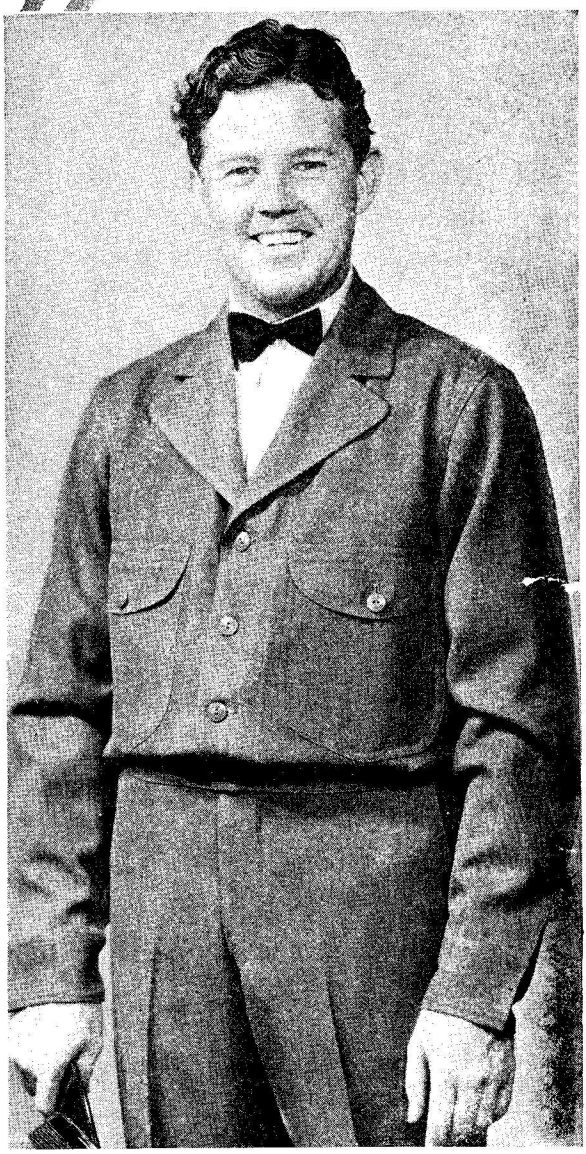

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